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Surviving the Virus: The Decline of the Individual and the Collective Subject

Summary:

The empirical experience of surviving the virus inside the body is inseparable from its effects on the mind. I feel an urgency to write how these effects are working inside of me; at the same time this is my umpteenth attempt at writing it out, and I feel each time that I re-read these lines, that they appear too rhapsodic and fragmentary, so this represents my final attempt. I apologize to the reader for my inability to be exhaustive and clear about my thoughts and feelings. I suppose it derives from the intensity of the experience. Thoughts and affects are overlapping and this essay is a mixture of the two, and the text has the appearance of variations of writing: the first part being more conceptual and the second more literary, partly with the style of stream of consciousness.

The first part deals with the philosophy and psychology of the virus. Does the virus have something to do with philosophy and psychology? I will try to answer this question. Eventually, the second part of this text is the interior and intimate analysis of what happened during the days when my body and mind were affected by the virus.

In synthesis: first of all, I need to unfold some philosophical and psychological premises, then a stream of consciousness enters the text, a mixture of thoughts and feelings, spontaneously coming to mind, including what I wrote when I was in the hospital and still at risk of dying.

I have been affected by the experience of facing death in consequence of covid-19 and the experience of recovery during the days that followed. Nonetheless, my thoughts and feelings are not mine, they are within the collective subject. I am trying to sound the possibility of connecting this subjective experience to a wider meditation.

Some Elements for a Philosophy of the Virus

Existential phenomenology

What is a virus from the philosophical point of view? Can philosophy deal with something as concrete and contingent as a virus, how can philosophy create concepts around an accident, such as the phenomenon of a virus? One philosophical question from which one can start, could be the one posed by existential phenomenology (Sartre, 1943): is the virus an *essence*, like an inkwell, or does it have an *existence*, like a

Being?

Jean Paul Sartre, in *L'Être et le Néant* (1943), makes an important distinction between *essence* and *existence*. Such a distinction permeated the way of thinking in post-war philosophy. It was the last remnant of *humanism*. An object, like an inkwell, claims Sartre, is an *essence*. It does not change. It remains the same as it always has been, forever, or at least for the entire time of its presence. In a manner different from an object, a human – what Sartre calls “*Être*”, with a capital Ê – is endowed with *existence*.

What does Sartre mean? He means that humans are divided, cleft, inhabited by *nothingness*. This issue has been unfolded by French existentialism in different ways, both in literature and in philosophy. One of the most important literary works in connection to a virus is the novel *La Peste* (1947), in English *The Plague*, by Albert Camus. To read *La Peste* these days provides some idea about what is going on. Covid-19 and other previous viruses are nothing, but actual repetitions of *La Peste*. Particularly interesting, here and there, is the ineptitude and delays by the authorities in isolating the infected community. Why are the authorities, both in Camus's novel and in the world of today, so inept? Does existentialist philosophy provide an answer to this question? An answer that is not the usual political litany?

An important aspect of Sartre's philosophy is dedicated to the analysis of *bad faith*. Bad faith has a peculiar structure, which differentiates it from a lie. In a lie, I lie to the other, and the other does not know that I am lying. In bad faith I lie to myself, which means that my existence is constitutively inhabited by the action of hiding some part of me from myself, a part that at the same time I also know.

In Camus's novel, the authorities respect what Doctor Bernard Rieux claims: the urgency of isolating the area of Oran. However, their response is slow and because of this, they contribute to the spread of the plague with wrong actions.

It is by virtue of bad faith that, for Sartre, the *Being*, the human being, is free and open to any choice, but at the same time – as in the plague – any choice, chosen by the human being, has its destiny: it is inexorably destined to fail (Sartre, 1943).

Sartre's way of philosophizing recalls what the ancient Greeks always focused on, particularly in the Attic tragedy: the tension between destiny and freedom, always showing the illusion of free choice, always stressing the primacy of necessity, and the catastrophes of *hubris*: when the illusion of freedom crosses the border of destiny: the *Moirai*.

Now we can see the plague, the plague in Camus's novel, as well as the plague unfolding today, as the result of Sartre's analysis of bad faith, not just as a phenomenon of interiority, but as a collective phenomenon, as Camus describes in his novel. It is not only the individual Being who is inhabited by bad faith, it is the Being, as intended by classical philosophy that grounds reality, from Plato's Being as “essence” to Aristotle's Being as “substance” (Ricoeur, 2013).

Ontology

Gilles Deleuze extended Sartre's phenomenological analysis of Being from humanity to ontology.

In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze (1968) reframes the bad faith attributed by Sartre to human interiority, as “*univocity of Being*”, where Being is no more intended as *Human Being*, but, as in classical ontology, as the *Entity*. As in Sartre, although with the extension from *Human Being* to *Being-as-Entity*, Deleuze reverses philosophy, he calls the *Being: Difference*.

Difference in such a conceptualization, *substitutes for Being*. The concept of “Difference” creates the same tension envisaged by Sartre, between destiny and freedom, deeply embodied within Greek tragedy.

Nonetheless, the tension between destiny and liberty in Deleuze is not only connected with the finitude of one personal existence, it becomes an empirical problem of life on Earth.

Deleuzian extension, from interiority to life, re-evaluates *objects not just as essences* – as in the example of the inkwell by Sartre – but as having, as it were, *their proper life*. This idea is present also in Walter Benjamin's thought (Benjamin, 2002), who spent part of his work writing about the *Paris Passages*, luxury buildings in deterioration, as the main phenomenon of the 19th Century modernity. From Benjamin's urbanistic perspective to Deleuze's concept of assemblage (*agencement*) what counts in philosophy is the disposition of things in space – territorialization and deterritorialization – and the becoming of the difference during time.

We are going to get to the point concerning what this philosophical change of perspective – from Sartre to Deleuze – has to do with a philosophy of the virus. Deleuze, like Benjamin, re-evaluates the life of objects, their materiality, their historical ontology and their singularity. Objects, whatever they are – artifacts or natural products – influence life. The virus works in a manner similar to hashish, under its influence your life is not the same as it usually is, or as it had been until before its entrance in your life (Benjamin, 2006).

In the language of Deleuze (1988), in reference to Leibniz, any object is an *objectile*, something that is observed from different points of view; and points of view, in Deleuze's philosophy, as in Leibniz, are indefinite series of perspectives contained inside the infinite fold of any object.

Objects can be folded and unfolded ad infinitum. Can this definition be applied to the virus?

An object has a *corpus*, it has parts, aspects, features, qualities, attributes and accidents. It is not granted, for example, that an accident, like the green of my pullover, is not relevant for philosophical consideration; on the contrary, it is the accident, the unexpected event, which permits philosophers to create concepts (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994). In my view, this is the core of the univocity of Being. What in Sartre is conceived of as a dialectical relation between Being and Nothingness, in Deleuze becomes the Difference that makes the Being constitutively univocal, the ontology of difference.

The Ontology of the Virus

What is then the virus as *objectile*? How many different series can be created observing the virus?

The virus has an eventuality, it comes, or becomes, from somewhere, or something; it goes toward something else, an invisible part of DNA or RNA, which infects life; an accident that philosophy cannot neglect. The virus deranges all the transcendent philosophical premises: from Plato to Hegel.

Moreover, the virus is an object among the others, it has, for example, a materiality: imperceptibility; it cannot be viewed even inside a normal microscope, it requires an electronic one.

Although the virus is a non-living being, it has an *existence*, and it has the *purpose* of creating a parasitic symbiosis with cells, which is the virus's *destiny*: parasitizing life. In consequence of this, even though the virus is a non-living entity, it affects life, it acquires life by parasitizing cells. Some viruses transform bodies from healthy into ill, or bring death. Although not alive, viruses have the potential to transform life. In consequence of this, there are biologists who suppose that viruses are at the margin of life, between non-life and life, they do not reproduce, but they parasite, they are, in the hypothesis of some biologists, semi-living bodies. Indeed they are composed of DNA or RNA, transmitted from cell to cell in different ways: insect, blood, mucosa, sexual intercourses, feces, and innumerable other ways.

Viruses have a paleo-ontological genesis. They are far more ancient than animals in the chain of evolution. This means for someone, that viruses have far greater biological memory, which could overwhelm the reign

of the animals. The history of medicine informs us that viruses are entities endowed with uniqueness: for any future virus it is necessary to find new vaccines, and, because of the ongoing mutations of viruses, researchers must continually change and renew existing vaccines; the history of science includes investigations that discovered viruses. From the moment in which, at the end of 19th Century, they were distinguished from bacteria and other pathogenic beings, there have been historical investigations on virus spread – in Athens, the middle-ages and 17th Century plagues, to AIDs, Ebola, SARS and covid-19 – from antiquity till the recent close repetition of always new viruses during the last 30 to 40 years.

Then there are institutional reactions to viruses. They consider, for example, the economic aspect of a virus: the neo-liberal societies, in their insistence on privatizing, and, consequently, cutting the budget of health-care, reveal, as in Camus's novel, their inadequacy when confronted with viruses, their bad faith and ineptitude. They know clearly that facing viruses means creating a redundant welfare: more hospitals than necessary, more respirators, more tests, more physicians and nurses, probably more General Practitioners, redundancy instead of restriction, but they won't do it; if they did, they'd earn less profit.

Where do viruses come from? Covid-19 comes from China, it comes from bats, it comes from pangolins, other viruses come from birds, from the intensive raising of animals: chickens, pigs. There is a mathematical perspective concerning virus propagation, not all the viruses have the same rates of propagation, from 0.1 to 2.5 there is a big difference of infection rates among the population. The rate of viral propagation can also vary for the same virus. It can change its rate of propagation. It can be more or less fast. The rate of propagation is connected to the nearness of bodies. The more that bodies are close together, the higher the probability for a rapid and intense transmission.

There are also immune responses from the bodies. Nonetheless immune responses can create other problems. Some physicians think that, in the case of covid-19, the mortality rate is not due directly to the virus, but to a particular kind of immune response to the virus, which creates a different disease, due to micro-thrombosis in the lungs, called Disseminate Intravascular Coagulation (DIC). This hypothesis concerning covid-19, which, if verified, would contradict all the measures of isolation, now effective. Covid-19 kills more elderly people, it follows that, the older a population is, the higher the lethality index. The expert say: China 0.6, the UK 0.9, Italy 1.14. The impact of covid-19 can be under-measured where the screening is incomplete and or late, as in Italy.

All the above series of perspectives concern the virus's materiality as a natural phenomenon.

Nonetheless, although the virus is part of the matter, there are social and psychical aspects to it; for example, the use of the word "virus" to create myths and bigotries. From the myths of virus descend different kinds of rejected populations: Jewish, Black people, Africans, Italians, Muslims, Asians, Immigrants, Asylum Seekers, etc.

There is also the issue of the *state of emergency*, evoked by restrictions of liberty with the aim of reducing the contagion, with the idea of keeping people under control, which has been envisaged by some radical left and rightwing politicians as restrictions of civil rights, or liberties of actions. Left-wingers claim that the virus is a social construction for testing the restriction of liberties. Right-wingers claim that the economy must carry on with no regard for people who die. Afterall, the ones who die are old, disabled or poor. It is a matter of fact that communitarian epidemiologists (Barzi, 2020) have demonstrated the evidence of the influence of plagues and infections on different areas of the urban territory, since the 19th century: poor people die easily, slums have more infections and so on.

Finally, among the others, we can also add the subjective experience of people who have been infected, which gives rise to literature, movie-making and other works of art, as in the case of HIV and AIDS.

From all these aspects – and probably many others not mentioned here – I will consider the ones concerning psycho-social issues, on the one hand, and my experience as a subject who has been affected by the covid-

19, on the other.

Some Elements for a Psychology of the Virus

The Virus and the Four Privileges of the Unconscious

As Sartre, in philosophy, refers to bad faith, in psychology, the necessary reference is to the unconscious. Differently from Sartre's structure of bad faith, the structure of the Freudian unconscious seems to show that we do not know what we do not know, the unconscious is not a cleft within ourselves, it is rather someone else, a *doppelgänger* who we do not know (Rank, 1989). Nonetheless it works.

The virus makes me wonder about Freud's footnote in the essay *The Unconscious* (Freud, 1915).

In this essay, Freud mentions four privileges of the "system Ucs" (abbreviation of unconscious). The author presents the unconscious as a wild thing: "whose aim is to discharge [...] cathexis[1] (*Besetzung*)" (p.134). The impulses are independent, contradictory and mutually exclusive and, when they are both present and incompatible, an intermediate aim is created; in other words, a compromise: the symptom.

The unconscious is a system, outlined by Freud in its complexity.

In chapter 5 of *The Unconscious*, Freud enumerates its four "specific characteristic", or "privileges":

- *exemption from mutual contradiction;*
- *primary process (mobility of cathexis),*
- *timelessness and*
- *substitution of psychic for external reality.*

It is interesting that Freud calls these four characteristics "privileges". If the psyche can be compared to the economic system, the unconscious is the superfluous part of it, but it cannot be "cleaned" by rationality.

Let us look at these privileges one by one in more detail.

First: the unconscious system has no negation, no doubt, no variations of certainty, everything is unidimensional, it's all the same, it gets lost in the need for certitude, every instance or relation is symmetric (Matte Blanco, 1981).

The second privilege is the intensity of cathexis (*hold*) mobility: "in a far greater degree in this, than in other systems" (p.134); such an intense mobility has two aspects: displacement, when something takes the place of something else – "one idea may *surrender* to another" – and condensation, when one instance takes the place of "several others". In linguistic terms, the system Ucs creates metonymies and metaphors, but the unconscious does not reveal their hidden meaning. As within the oneiric process, described by Freud in the *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), the unconscious is "meagre and paltry"; the difference between metaphor/metonymy and displacement/condensation is that the last ones are not linguistic objects; in dreams, the tenor of displacement or condensation is not revealed, it remains concealed, even free association methods don't reveal something about it. Psychoanalysis is far from being an Enlightenment procedure.

The third privilege is atemporality, as in Beckett's works (Beckett, 1995): the unconscious is just a timeless space, a locus where things are bundled, one beside the other, as in an enigmatic bric-à-brac store, with no schedule. The Unconscious is waiting for things to come, and is waiting for a place to come, and it is waiting for places-waiting-for-things to come. In infinite regression.

The fourth privilege of the unconscious is the non-distinction between two realities: physical and the psychical, what happens inside and what happens outside are confused, mingled with each other, indistinguishable, it is not just about me, my psyche and reality are united within the collective experience.

The Fifth Privilege of the Unconscious

The above mentioned four privileges are our shared everyday life's constitutive parts.[2] Nonetheless, there is still something missing in this analysis, something that Freud recognized, that now, in front of the virus, becomes important in order to decipher the advent of the virus. In Gregory Bateson's conception of the unconscious (Bateson, 1956) there is something which is still more hidden and mysterious. I think that Bateson was just unveiling something that Freud was hiding.

Freud (1915) hints at it in a footnote of the text dedicated to the unconscious: "We are revising for a different context the mention of another notable privilege of the system Ucs" (p.133); the matter is about the psychic influence on somatic processes. In this footnote, one approaches the comprehension of something that, maybe, has to do with the virus.

Does the virus have something similar to the unconscious? Is it, in some way, also a phenomenon of the unconscious? And, in such a case, where is the locus of the unconscious with regard to the virus? The unconscious system contains the possibility for the psyche of changing the body, this is the issue veiled/unveiled in the aforementioned footnote. The unconscious system knows what I (the Ego) do not.[3]

In Freud (1900, 1915), the unconscious is a complex system facing the unpredictable; in today's language: a proper class system, non-enumerable, a thick generator of paradoxes[4].

In my opinion, Bateson's double bind theory is nothing, but a revision of the notion of cathexis (*Besetzung*).

We saw, above in this text, that *Besetzung* is provided by two aspects, which determine its mobility: displacement and condensation. The first emerges, for example, in dreams as something that stands in for something else; condensation is something that subsumes different instances in one. The two processes, displacement and condensation, are under the regime of *Verdrängung* (repression, or, better dislodgement)[5], which means that there is no way to recover the cognitive memory of the "original material", because of its mobility .

In general, psychoanalysis has been focused on the "primary scene" of infantile trauma. For example, hysteria has been considered as a typical phenomenon of *Verdrängung*, where the body malady does not present any physical, medical evidence, even though the disease is strongly disabling the subject. The first explanation given by Freud (1895) is that the *hyper-cathexis of the traumatic scene* binds the explicit memory of the episode, dislodging it into the hysterical symptom. We can imagine the "primary scene" of sexual abuse like this, for example: the child is going to be abused by her father, she knows him and she expects tenderness from him; nonetheless, she feels that something wrong is going on; the father's reaction is uncanny, there is no tenderness in such a gesture, no interest in the relationship with her, just undue sexual perverted passion felt by him. The child is caught in a psychical double bind, she loves her father, at the same time she is harassed by him, and she cannot get out of the scene.

In Bateson's double bind, the symptom is schizophrenia and the issue is more general, indicating a kind of perversion in communication – rather than sexual abuse in childhood – between mother and child even in

adulthood, and later on. Nonetheless, the structure of such a deception is similar.

At the same time, such a deception also recalls the structure of bad faith described by Sartre and illustrated above in this essay. Later on, Bateson (1972) admitted that double binds are present in human and animal communication, dislocating his theory from psychopathology to a constitutive quality (privilege?) of communication. I suppose Bateson was meaning that what happens in living relationships between beings is a compound of language and body, a system of signs, a semiotics, I call this compound: “acquaintance”, something dealing with *the fifth privilege of the unconscious*.

From a psychological point of view, the virus has a similar configuration: notwithstanding it is a non-living entity, it possesses an ancient *cognition* for affecting bodies (cells) far beyond that of any human consciousness. To use the English title of Carlo Emilio Gadda’s novel, the virus is *Acquainted with Grief* (Gadda, 1985).[6] This is the privilege of the virus, as we saw earlier: it is far more primitive in the chain of evolution, it has much more cognition concerning the universe.

In 1967, Bateson[7] gave a presentation titled *Conscious Purpose Versus Nature*, (Bateson, 1968). Again, in this presentation, Bateson extends the concept of “unconscious” from the individual – as Deleuze does in regard to Sartre – to human activity. Unconscious seems to be, in Bateson’s presentation, a natural phenomenon destined to put in check – again as in Sartre, but in the outside world – any kind of mere awareness, any know-how or technological pretense to put nature under control.

Conscious purpose, Bateson claims, is always anti-ecological.

As Deleuze does, in regard to Sartre’s bad faith, so Bateson does, in regard to Freud’s unconscious. He extends it, beyond the individual, into what the Ego cannot know: the unconscious becomes, in Bateson, a phenomenon of Nature, where Nature is intended in the sense of what Spinoza means when he writes: “*Deus sive Natura*”. The unconscious does not merely deal with human nature, the unconscious is the wild irruption of Nature inside bodies, at the same time, such an irruption does not come from transcendence; Nature, in Spinoza, as well as in Bateson, is a phenomenon of immanence; so it can take the shape of virus.

Bodies from Psychological Point of View, Humans, Viral, Natural, Artificial.

Human bodies, as part of Nature, are series endowed with points of view. Any point of view on the body, has its proper material practice and rituals. The medical point of view, with its scientific-technological approach, has always consisted in the relation between two bodies, more or less mediated by technological devices: visit-auscultation, stethoscope, surgical intervention, bistoury, neuroimage techniques, pharmacology, etc.

What is the failure of medicine in regard to the virus? A virus causes the body’s contacts to disappear. We are facing a long list of physicians who get ill, or even die, contracting the virus themselves when they visit infected patients. Medicine, the science that, among other things, has the psychic effect of reassuring people about the continuation of their biological life, that makes us hopeful about our health, is losing its psychological influence. What does it mean, this failure? The virus demonstrates that technology is not enough. In the very moment when we, as hyper-technological societies, are losing the tender and human factor of the visiting physician, substituted by bureaucratic collection of data via technological exams, the virus comes, and baffles the techno-competence. We need the medical conversation back, the one that has been made impossible by this same virus. It is as if the virus and hyper-technology are conspiring for detachment and isolation.

The body is under attack, by the virus, but also from the point of view of work, maybe the most important aspect of human life. As it is well known, Lombardy, and Bergamo in particular, have been paradigms of work in Europe. Work is one of the most important moral values. One of the main psychological and

relational problems of families and communities in Lombardy is having a job and working hard. The continuation of work on site – factories, offices, farms – for longer time after the viral diffusion has probably been one of the elements of the spread of virus. The virus deranges economy: it increases the number of people unemployed; the virus infects and kills people that gather in work places.

Finally, as in Shakespeare: “the last scene of all”, bodies die, and the virus impedes the consequent funeral, burial, cremation, because of the enormous amount of human remains. Where do the rest of our beloveds go, here on earth, becomes an important issue, similar to what happens in the common burials, or in the sinking bodies of asylum seekers. All our human activities are baffled.

Beside human bodies – their affections and infections – there are other bodies that must be taken into account for a psychological analysis of the virus’s influence, because, through their materiality, they effect our psychical reaction.

Above in the text, in the philosophical part, I mentioned the materiality of the virus: the virus has the quality of being absolutely imperceptible, we can get information only concerning where it can be, how long it can survive on different kinds of material surfaces, what one can do to eliminate the virus. The virus can be anywhere in space, it “survives” – remember the philosophical question concerning virus life, mentioned above in the text – or it is active as a virus as long as it is protected by a stratus of lipid, when the stratus disappears, the virus vanishes: heat, alcohol, foam are antiviral substances, they eliminate the fatty substances. On tissue or wood the virus lasts a few hours, on paper one day, on metal two days, on plastic four days. If you are inside, virus particles can get into your nostrils very easily. The virus has a spectral aspect that belongs to the materiality of objects; however, being invisible, such a materiality affects our psyche, arouses the attention of what we do, it demands that we increase the control of what we are doing, our tiny gestures, our sneezes, our coughs, it demands of us to be more obsessive.

The virus is, per antonomasia, the fifth privilege of the unconscious for the collective subject.

My Encounter with the Virus, a Self-Analysis

What Happened to Me? A Retrospective Account.

What have I written till now is a first attempt to grasp my experience with the virus from philosophical and psychological points of view. Now it is time to write about my direct experience with covid-19. With the aim of transmitting my direct experience to the reader. Sometimes, I will use the present tense, as if everything is happening in the here and now. I am also transcribing, as in a stream of consciousness, some notes I took in my diary during my days in the hospital. I invite the reader to take what follows as a stream of consciousness, rather than a systematic text.

I am, among the multitude, inside the emergency space of Bergamo Hospital, during the very days of the deaths and infected persons, more and more, with no relief and no respite.

In this very moment, Bergamo is the European heart of viral disease, the bosses ordered the politicians that “the show must go on”, as in the tragedy of the soccer game at Heysel Stadium in 1985, with 39 people dead. In covid-19, the show of the concentration of workers in factories has a much wider number of infections and deaths, a hecatomb.

In the emergency room, I see myself mingling with the others. I experience a kind of strange diplopia: I see all together someone walking, others sitting down or laying on a more-or-less small couch; all wearing cotton masks and straying into the space of *Hades*.

The first three days – from the 9th to 13th of March – are a nightmare: I see my face inside the mirror, struggling to breathe, gasping like a fish out of water, before being swallowed by the Titans, like Dionysus. It is the gaze of stupor; the awesome might of death. Am I vanishing into the air?

Then the oxygen comes, and in parallel breath slowly comes back, a little more. I pay for it with a terrible headache, and paracetamol comes.

My voice is also changing: first disappearing, it now turns into a kind of falsetto. I feel the potentialities of my baritone voice vanishing.

Nurses and physicians bend over my bed, in a position as if I would deserve more attention, more care than usual. My mannish voice, “is turning again toward a childish treble, pipes and whistles in his sound” (Shakespeare, *As you like it*, 1599-1600 Act II.7, 160-162).

I know that I am facing the risk of dying: I am diabetic and I recently had surgery.

Nonetheless, I am not only writing about myself. Although within the hospital I am alone – no friends or relatives are admitted – I am part of a multitude, a dis-functional piece of a gigantic body.

I witness – within the bunker of the most ill city in Europe – friends, fellows and their relatives in severe health conditions, or, even worse, disappearing. My cell phone is the only source of news.

I see medical doctors and nurses acquiring the virus and becoming impotent. Others, such as myself – old people with previous diseases – are getting worse or dying, officially not from the virus, because they are not “tested”, but the local newspaper obituary pages swell from one to ten, to twelve.

Statistics, data on deaths and diagnosis are more and more unreliable and the emergency of the city is lazaretto, as in the bubonic plague described by Alessandro Manzoni: here, in Madrid, New York, wherever.

My recovery is not independent from that of others, I am affected, infected, I can affect, infect, we are a dying community, we get infected among ourselves.

We are always waiting for the reduction of the number of new infections and deaths, or at least for the reduction of growth. During these days, the virus works the same way as the unconscious system, the way described earlier in this text.

The virus insists in its obstinacy to stay out of rational human control, to be an anti-economic entity.

At the same time – and this could be one chance to face it – the virus drives us to listen to the voice of antiquity, when destiny was honored as something that matters and which has consequences in people’s lives.

My viral experience suggests to follow the trace of dislocating the unconscious from the individual into the collective subject: the unconscious is a social phenomenon, more than it is individual. Or, if the unconscious belongs to myself, within the virus’ influence, myself becomes *collective*, no longer *individual*. I am losing my personal identity, I become someone else, something else.

It is singular that, at the age of 65, with diabetes and a recent prosthetic surgery, with inflammatory complications on top of that, that I got the virus and I am still here, witnessing such an event through this text. Many plague-mates of mine, in better health or younger than me, with no medical complications, have died.

I have the *privilege* to be a plague-survivor. Meanwhile I am writing this text, notwithstanding the fact that my prognosis is still uncertain, my survival is a *privilege* as I can continue my everyday life. Still I am not exempt from feeling this illness, this disease, as not mine, this is *our* plague, *the plague of the collective*

subject.

What is Going on Now. A Stream of Unconsciousness

Wednesday, 3/18[8]

Thank you, Caterina, the notebook is gorgeous, it is the first real literary object. *I do not know whether to write in English or Italian*, I feel myself agglutinated.

No, enough, I must learn calligraphy, I should remember how I learned the alphabet letters when I learned them. I have nothing to write, I did write nothing on this matter, maybe my friends expect some note from me, but I am at ground zero for writing. I am like the Igbo woman: “Your voice smells”, no! “Your words smell”, the smell of the mint caramel. Why can’t I manage to write in a good script? Many years of typography has wasted my calligraphy, what a mess!

Maybe it is my position in bed, or my vision. There is nothing to write. This word “agglutination”, I learned it from Jean-Paul Sartre, applied to the little *Idiot of the family*. When you really feel, on your skin, in a hospital corridor, with nobody nearby you, in cold sweat, in the dark, flat, “as a frog in winter”. For someone like me, who has read or listened to these things, but never lived them with such an intensity.

However, everything is done in a few rows, and all my efforts at writing are vanishing.

What’s the point?

Thursday, 3/19

Bergomi, li. Now it is better, isn’t it? Today the physician says I have some liver function problems. Any function is always a dysfunction. Organs are there on purpose to work, what are they for? We always ask: “what is it for?”; maybe it is the way we pose the question. Organs without a body, how can they make us survive?

Organs, let us say lungs, as in this case. You feel them, you feel them missing, they do not answer, as if they had withdrawn: instead of expanding, they shrink.

My neighbor is talking about me, that I am diabetic and that they have to test my insulin, then they put red spots on my body; [It’s not true! Who knows what he means!]

My neighbor talks with his relatives by phone, he tells them about me, he watches me as if I came from a different planet, full of red spots, which I do not actually have! He rarely speaks, leaving me alone for a long time during the day. A real Bergamasco: thank god! If he were Milanese, we would be talking all day long.

I should move, as the physician says, but I cannot take off the oxygen mask for a long time, just for a few minutes. The formula here seems to be: more than a few: “A bit more than few”, a crumb of something invisible.

There has really been, I believe, a moment when I saw her face. Maybe she was more scared than I was and it seemed to me so, that I should comfort her, reassuring her. I was looking into her eyes, she had my yellow face, but she was bald and skinny. It was an instant, she was terrorized, but it has not been here at the clinic, it was there, within the hell of emergency, where I was screaming and crying in physical anguish due to a

clumsy nurse who was not able to practice EBG (blood-gas) injection on my arm, several attempts had failed. But this was going on before, when I was in front of this face, I don't know what to call it, yellow, terrorized, which is you, but with no hairs, like a yellow frog. Enough! Enough.

Will it help me? I do not believe so, this work is in vain; just to make the time pass, to make it longer than usual (*allungare il brodo*), this infinite staying inside a room with an open and inviolable door. Today the tilting window, I agreed with my room-mate, should be open, to get some fresh air.

You look out, see clothes hanging, you smell the everyday life in an ancient borough of this hidden city. The San Bernardino area and *via Moroni*, which I won't write about. Years ago, these places had been fatal and precious, but they have been thrown away, in a trick that will never be accounted for.

In a few moments, they serve dinner, now I feel better, but maybe it was just a sensation muted by the amazed gaze of the physician, who gently answered: "Well!", nonetheless, it is clear that my enthusiasm is intransmissible. I have an imperturbable expression, astonished, as a stone. I am scared of going out from here, it seems, to enter into a world deprived of "distinction" (the word does not satisfy me). Primo Levi describes Auschwitz as the Tohu Bohu; when I was a child, I remember the Bao-Bao, a kind of being coming during the night, a sort of implosion: you become absorbed and disappear, with no re-entry.

I want to be positive, I want to be positive, I'd like to be a big goose, full of science, omni-prig. *Like Dithelm, big goose, kind of ever happy Humpy Dumpty.*

Goose Dithelm sat on a Board

Goose Dithelm got a great goal

All the girls' pussies, all the girls' eyes

Started to cry, secret Vaseline

Today, 3/20

Not much to write, only I would improve my instinctive calligraphy and re-learn the way I was writing when I was in elementary school. But I seem to have nothing to write in measure of content (*De Chirico sun*).

For the first time I listen to my son talking about discharge: if, if, if all the parameters are good, in a few days, admitted and allowed that my bio-physical evolution proceeds for the best; then, maybe, they will discharge me. When? Dunno! You know what I say? The issue is not so interesting. I lost my need to work, I do not know what to do in a world, out there, which no longer corresponds to me, maybe which never in fact did, it was me that looked for notoriety, the narcissist. I needed to feel myself to be worthy, and the Academy, what I always ran after, scuttled me, as in Harold Pinter's pianist career in *The Birthday Party*: "They pulled a fast one", which is much better in the Italian translation: "*Me l'hanno voluta mettere nel culo*".

This has always been my feeling: to always be getting dodged, because I present myself as being more than what I really am, I am not worth that much, I am an Arlequin sheet, when I was a child I understood nothing, it was as if I was dull, after the elementary school. When I was at the elementary, I had the impression of understanding something.

First dream, March 20th/21st

We are home, in a familiar house, by the sea, in Liguria, or in the countryside. A wide house with a bedroom that is filled with beds, in such a way that you could not walk, except stepping from one bed to another.

I am driving, the car is the small Lancia we inherited from my father-in-law. I do not know if we are leaving the house, to come back home, or the contrary. I drive taking for granted that my wife and son are inside the car with me, nevertheless, when I arrive (arrive where?) I am alone. Within the baggage is a small blue blanket, where are the others? I put my hand into the pocket to take out my cell phone. The jacket is blue (a jacket I lost a long time ago). What I take out is a white phone, it is not mine, it belongs to a woman...

March 21st 2020

Tonight, the pen tried to impede me from writing down my dream, I wonder why. They are dreams of death, of detachment, as your life continues, but somewhere else, far from the others, aware that they are somewhere, but irredeemably lost, somewhere else. Writing accomplishes nothing... "Nothing will come of nothing" (Lear?)

Here days are all the same. Here days are all the same. Days are all the same, here. Days here are all the same: *non li vedi più manco con gli occhiali*. The oxygen goggles (*occhiali* in Italian) I have in my nose. "*Capita l'Ocialino!*" ... *ta sé chi l'è l'Ocialino? L'Ogre*, the Orc, the Bugaboo. The brute, as Frankenstein, as the Golem, Leviathan, Moloch. A big body inhabited by a vicious snout as in that Sokurov movie (*Moloch*). The one who disgust me most is Goebbels, more so than Hitler, dunno. The look of him, those clumsy movements, the low stature, the childish voice, nearby this tall and majestic woman, who keeps him like a mangy, fickle, puppy-dog, while she is inscrutable. It is immediately clear that in these scenes Eros is death, however it re-emerges from the ashes of an ignoble life, which provides perverted joy.

Here we need God, the only possible salvation.

But was he happy with this cute piece of tail? No! No Nazi can be joyful.

After all she was Leopold Bloom's desire; Poldy a happy and earnest obedient servant. *Earnest*: serious, ardent with Molly, who betrays him for his pleasure. Why Joyce was so interested in this Jew. A lackluster Jew, different, so different from Simon. Leopold, Molly Bloom's earnest husband, their over-determined marriage, he is more a servant knight from Napoli; honest and fascinated by her sinuous and insinuating body, with these round legs ending in gorgeous buttocks. Nonetheless the most intriguing thing is Molly's gaze, and the way she moves into bed when she does her silent soliloquy, so provocative!

Hurry up with tea! *Scolding the teapot, Blazes Boylan. Everything on it... was a time you were!*

Boylan *Là ci darem*. He knew that Boylan was making *the beast with two backs* with her. While he was teaching metempsychosis, we live after death, reincarnation, some remember.

Metempsychosis, Madonna! What is it? *Usucapione* (adverse possession) – from Lina Wertmüller's *I Basilischi* (Basilisks), good movie, *u-su-ca-pio-ne*, with the two u close vowels. Who was the actor, Stefano Satta Flores? "By the way, you should note I noted you!" (*A proposito, Avrànnotatcheil'honotat!*). On September (you bet!), on April 20th I start my lectures, it matters to understand whether there is still any meaning for such a course, or whether one has to change everything.

March 22nd 2020

The worst springtime of my life. I am getting ready for *The Bacchae*. Carlo Sini conference compares Pier Paolo Pasolini, of course with the worst philosophical intention of the Milanese Philosophy of “measuring” the greatness of works of art. Milanese philosophers always have problems of measure.

Ronconi staging, a *scasciato* (out of order), Roman Dionysus: disappointing. Dionysus is a god? A man. Dionysus is a virus, it is this virus who misleads relationships, who reverses them, Dionysus it is not, it cannot be. Sini talks about the mirror, what does Dionysus see inside the mirror? Himself? The Titans? How can he see? What is going on is before he can see, in this moment he is devoured. Only the Bacchae are Dionysus. His virus inhabited the Bacchae, even the pronoun “his” is improper, Groddeck, then Freud, used, properly, “It”. The virus is Dionysus, we are the Bacchae, the Ghost, with the virus inside, “the leperous distilment” (Hamlet).

From inside, the virus is you, yet we do not know how many of us will survive, we who got the honor and privilege to receive the swab. Such a seal, which signifies “positivity” of your being part of the virus. The virus is a collective subject, it is like what happens to the Bacchae, led by some string enchantment (Alighieri), deprived of their own identity.

It is no longer a question of “Am I getting better”, these words lose their meaning! Here, in truth, it is no longer a question of “cure”. Outside, there is a chemical/viral war and those who die from the actual virus are much more than those who die after the declaration: “virus positive”.

Angelo Branduardi recovered a regional Italian melody from Friuli: “*Sciaraçule Maraçule*”, which seems a Dionysiac dance with the Chorus of the Bacchae. The *danse macabre*. *Nachträglich*, how do you explain the trip to Syracuse, where we reserved, for May the 8th, my birthday, the vision of the Bacchae, *The Bacchae* by Euripides, the same Euripides who is the most enlightened of all the tragediographers?

It seems there is no difference between buttocks and buttocks, my favorite ones are the ones belonging to Molly Bloom, I imagine them. Definitely, I have to listen to her soliloquy again and again: “He said I was a flower on the mountain yes”.

However, here, in the meanwhile, the time for my discharge is approaching, I feel the outside hostility. M. has settled down in a certain way and I will be the usurper who comes back and pretends to invade spaces that no longer are mine. As the English Haines at Martello Tower, as the Proci, or as the same Ulysses when he comes back to Ithaca after twenty years of absence. My computer is in Milan, nobody can give it back to me. What am I going to do at home? Going to my clinical studio terrorizes me, maybe it is the only possibility I have.

Second dream, March 22nd/23rd

Again, tonight I dreamt that I am by the sea, in the Santo Stefano house. M. has left the house definitely and I am alone in the house with the child. I am watching from the window of the kitchen when, suddenly I receive a phone-call. The man who calls me is a black African man, he talks in French. He says that M. now belongs to him, she abandoned me to live a life with him, that I need to definitely forget her, I try to answer, but it is difficult in French, and he says he does not understand me. So, I grasp all of my power of expression to say in French: *Je et l'enfant, nous allons à la maison a Bergamo aujourd'hui, avec la voiture, vous pouvez dire à elle que, si elle veut rentrer à la maison, il faut prendre le train*. Then I try to call her directly, but the display on the phone is confused. I only have the option to input her number, but I do not remember it. I wake up with the feeling of being abandoned.

Monday March 23rd 2020

“He died on Monday, poor fellow!” Dignam. It seems to go around the kernel, but never get to it. The kernel of a feeling, sensation, the me that’s not me, the subject is the virus. I am just part of a disruptive process. No! There is aggregation, nonetheless it is pulverized, it is no more important whether you are you, if you are cured or recover, what counts is what happens. When Dionysus brings Pentheus to watch the Bacchae, what does Pentheus see? What do you see concerning the virus? You see the others seized by the virus; you see the virus throughout what is going on with the others. The others, you, the indistinguishable set, which has a precise mathematical diffusion, which follows a necessary, inexorable mathematical law. Is not, such a law, what the wise people tried to teach us? The antiques? The ancient Greeks, Berbers, Youruba machines? Something that radiates, and, in radiating, transforms itself into something else. The Orisha who becomes Saint Benedito, the Chorinho, the Samba, the Candomblé, till when Jimi Hendrix sings, “Well, I stand up next to a mountain and I chop it down with the edge of my hand”. Is this Dionysus? Is she Dionysus? And me, what am I? Just an enraged Bacchae. Nothing but chastity imposed by God, sexuality is just an epiphenomenon, of course! It is matter of cannibalism, mothers who devour children. Giorgio Colli is right, not in the moralistic sense that Dionysus keeps the Bacchae in chastity; what is chastity in front of the falling apart of continents, everyday massacres, viruses.

Tuesday March 24th 2020

Today I wrote nothing till 7:50 PM, local time. Tomorrow I will go home. I am looking forward to seeing M., my great love.

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Notes:

[1] “Cathexis” is the English translation of *Besetzung*, the original word used by Freud (1915). It is absolutely unsatisfactory, as many psychoanalysts have argued. Anyway, for the text I am writing it is negligible, for the comprehension of the non-expert in psychoanalysis reader, the Greek word can be translated with “hold”, “keep”, “hold on”.

[2] Freud creates a science based on the philosophical premises of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, the Enlightenment idea of becoming aware of everything via *sapere aude*, is definitely on the sun set boulevard.

[3] I owe this consideration to a brief essay, written – on the number 22 of the, now disappeared, Italian journal *L'erba voglio* in 1975 – by Elvio Fachinelli. An essay that, during the infernal days of my hospitalization, was on my mind, inspiring me. It seems that Freud was afraid to be considered a charlatan, and he was not wrong at all. Before and after Freud, the world is full of characters who assert that they have the power to cure any sort of body illness, even terminal ones, via psyche, para-psyche, hypnosis, new age intervention and so on.

[4] Ignacio Matte Blanco (1981) and Gregory Bateson (1956) are two authors who described the unconscious as the generator of paradoxes; in literature Jorge Luis Borges (2000) and James Joyce (1939) give the best aesthetic idea of the unconscious thickness.

[5] On the English translation of *Verdrängung* as repression, there is a long controversy, the reader can see Derrida (1995, p. 28), who gives the best philosophical explanation about the opportunity to distinguish *Verdrängung* from *Unterdrückung*.

[6] It is as the character of Don Gonzalo Pirobutirro, always looking for a quarrel and rejections, with the exception of the physician Dr. Higueroa, who visits him and finds nothing wrong.

[7] In 1967, in London, David Cooper organized a conference titled “Dialectic of Liberation”. Bateson made the mentioned presentation on this stage, with other speakers such as Herbert Marcuse, Ronald Laing, Lucien Goldman, Allen Ginsberg.

[8] I wrote a few parts of my diary directly in English, the sections written directly in English are here in italics.