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## Before the Virus (October 2019)

I wrote this piece last fall, in the world that was back then, before the outbreak of the pandemic. It might be strange to say, but today I am nostalgic for that world in which I also lived with anxiety, because it seemed to me that it had been running towards nothing for a long time.

In a disturbed state of mind, and with the sensation of wanting to save something that relates to us and has belonged to us, I perceived an unforeseen topicality of this text, and therefore I offer its images again. It is a way to talk about today with quick “backwards” suggestions, talking “a posteriori” of the *before* the virus in order to be able to imagine an *after*. Hoping that a new beginning for the entire humanity can arise from the ashes of a cultural apocalypse now manifest to all, and in a critical phase.

### Before the virus.

#### *Hydrogen Jukebox: Saturday afternoon in town*

Pietro Pascarelli

I loiter around the center of an old and rich city in the north of Italy, waiting for a book presentation, and even afterwards, towards the evening. We are at the beginning of autumn, there are not many dead leaves yet, temperatures are spring-like, if not sometimes summery.

The farmers' markets offer all sorts of things: tomatoes still, lettuces, pumpkins and zucchini, grapes, plums, black, green and purple cabbage, potatoes, mushrooms (fresh chanterelles and porcini mushrooms), peppers, broccoli, chestnuts.

After the early morning coolness when you need a jacket, all you need is light clothing of which we feel all the comfort.

You could still go to the sea, to see it and smell it, even if only for that.

But I'm here now. The electric wires of the trolleybuses extend through the city air, windows flash, golden and greenish domes shine, invisible signals of communication and virtual realities swarm. Of what is always available, to satisfy the need for consumption of what does not go through the farmers market, and materializes in the images on walls and newspapers, in the windows of *negozi* that have become stores, in the objects we own, in the Joycian eclipse of a sense of language and in the exhausting aesthetics of our times, in which the old fades without being recognized in the new and seems contemporary and “modern”. Consumption and death travel in the arteries of the body and of the city in a movie without soundtrack, humans approach a *thing-like* existence, as Mario Perniola says, and the renunciation of the claim that there

is always a sense in things seems to establish itself in growing proximity and trade with a world of objects.

We need a Homeric epic of modern-day travel. If not *Ulysses* (by Joyce), even better *Finnegans Wake*, and his dream that can be translated into the dream of each of us. May everyone shine their light!

We would need blasting jazz music, like *Kind of Blue*, to introduce into the ether a vital sound with its enchantments, its modal variations. Fresh air, creative thinking.

I observe the initial discreet flow of tourists gathered around a guide in a square dominated by an iconic bell tower located in a sphere of existence completely detached from the rush of onlookers and art lovers. Up there, there is only the sky, doves and small birds for company, sky and singing.

Legions of very young people with homogeneous signs of age and student status occupy strategic crossroads of the streets, they look at each other, face each other, get together at times, and raise laughter and voices, indifferent exclamations directed to nobody that go up towards the greyish sky of the early afternoon, narrowed between the buildings. I look up lifting my head in that rising noise.

I have to cut through the crowd to move, with sneaky and bypassing movements.

The waiters in coffee shops and restaurants are busy going around the tables of their venues, with red and white aprons, already winking at those who pass by – the massive globalized consumption has no timetable – with menus and previews of interiors traveling on rays of weak and yet sensitive light. They look like reckless bullfighters waiting for five o'clock in the evening.

Far away *mayorales de pálida niebla* push herds of heavenly bulls towards the earth, towards the proud men “of hard voice”. Those who “tame horses and master the rivers”, and those with “broken reins” like Ignacio.

Death defies life.

“I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness”, this is how Allen Ginsberg started his “Howl”.

There is a group of women: they look at maps and repeatedly point with their index fingers in a certain direction. Freedom of discovery, travel and culture, new horizons for those who seem to be former embroiderers, housewives, mothers, secretaries, workers, teachers, grandmothers, angels of home and life accustomed to any deprivation all the time. They are the ones who lead the dream into a desolate world, and then look for it, as if to discover it with an unconscious and poetic exhibition of naivety and surprise.

In the streets a thread of a waiting unfolds, of a sad and weak hope, that something new will come and break the boredom and the pain.

I see drinkers in the taproom with a kitchen who, rolling around an imaginary center of gravity, endlessly revolve around the repetition of a perpetual refrain, one claiming unknown love with an angry criticism of the world that a counterpart of his welcomes, also staggering.

But life flows on with its simple things that are little wonders. A bus passes and breaks the spell, it is movement, breathing, regeneration, speed. Action!

Some bivouac on strategic downtown lawns well maintained by the local administration, soon reached as if by an inaudible call from others, smooth and sober in appearance or with braided hair and old new-age clothing, with backpacks, necklaces, hats and with their children and dogs. They plant a temporary *axis mundi* on public ground, jumping into the alternative freshness of the grass (perhaps without remembering Walt Whitman's mythical book of poems *Leaves of grass*), from the embers of an impolitic privacy: to land from a non-ecological domestic reclusion to what, given the dominant voracity, we could ironically call the

*garden of the suppli* to paraphrase the poet Vito Riviello (of which the Sapienza University Press has this year published the opera omnia in about 1200 downloadable and free pages, nowhere to be found before).

These are the first and unanimous signs of what I will see later in action: the rapid spread of a collective frenzy everywhere, the flood of people, the rising buzz of the crowd, the nagging swarm of people caught in a labyrinthine web, that crushes them against the glass and concrete walls of the city.

The paradox of the public squares is that everyone is alone, even when they seem to be in company, and there is no escape for anyone in the irresistible attraction exerted by this giant “Hydrogen Juke Box”, “Sexless Hydrogen Moloch”, a monster. In the streets subjectivity seems to evaporate among the wandering bodies in search of something. I feel estranged too.

In the fuss of guts and filled squares, they all become customers in the evening, vertically gathered around barrels, which are unnaturally standing too.

A pretentious tavern has put out two tables with dim lanterns, which seem to be waiting for Nosferatu. I have a doubt, with a thrill, that the few apparently normal people sitting there are the protagonists of an upcoming *Zombie Outbreak*, ready to direct their slow and uncertain, yet unstoppable march towards me. Better stay away.

Nearby, two local police officers, male and female, advance slowly with phosphorescent uniforms in dense shade, and as they move away from the car with its flashing blue, they look like extraterrestrials who have come down from a spaceship as bright as a pinball machine.

Many people sit in tidy, unladen rows of tables, with white tablecloths that look a bit sterile when the person sitting at them is alone. They look like patients of a gloomy polyclinic spread over the pavements and the asphalt, that treats frustration and loneliness with food and drink. I see murky foam on abandoned glasses (or are the glasses actually sensors of alien worlds scanning humans?).

Partially protected by plants and foliage or by wooden colonnades saddened by the poor artificial light, there are many boys, and surprisingly many girls alone or in couples, who do not speak.

They don't take their eyes off a screen they imagine in front of them. Do they seek in the inert neutrality of the plain the peace of nirvana?

But maybe – and so I catch my breath – they also have a house in Berlin, they can cook with green sprouts from Vietnam, they study Byzantine mosaics somewhere, they read Crepax, they know Pindar and Robert Frost, they love painting and music. Maybe their parents bought the *Corriere dei piccoli* as children, they knew the Katzenjammer Kids and the Captain, and they loved Mama. Maybe nothing is rotten in Denmark.

Someone will give them a book and flowers. At the New York subway newsstand, the syphilitic florist to which Hart Crane dedicates his verses, sells violets and daisies, and fresh bunches of hyacinths in spring.

And maybe a sky without angels is not looming over us, maybe we won't have to live a hundred years of solitude.

Blessed be the poet:

*Datta. Dayadhvam. Damiata.*

*Shantih shantih shantih*

(T. S. Eliot, *The waste land*)

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*Translated from the Italian by **Anna Franchi***

**Bio:**

**Pietro Pascarelli**, psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, lives in Reggio Emilia (Italy). His interests and publishing activities are expanded to literature (and to poetry, as a special form of Knowledge) and to interdisciplinary psychoanalytic, anthropological, literary and philosophical essays. [[ppiercloud@icloud.com](mailto:ppiercloud@icloud.com)]