

Thoughts for the Times on the Global Pandemic

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“If you want to endure life, prepare yourself for death”¹

The Fall of Illusion

Freud famously wrote, in *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death*, that two factors significantly contributed to mental distress in wartime: disillusionment and the altered attitude toward death. He specifically references “non-combatants” in this regard, who, in spite of not being directly involved in the fighting, are nonetheless left bewildered, disoriented, inhibited, and deeply affected by the experience of war.² These days, the threat of the viral pandemic is often referred to as a version of war: a battle against an unseen and deadly enemy to which we can offer little by way of defense except social distancing and remaining as sterile as possible. That we refer to the viral pandemic as a war is an enunciation of a knowledge about the mortal limitations of the human body, the fragilities of the social order, and the fight for life that is our existential endowment, even if we try very hard to forget it. In three and a half short months, more than seven million people were infected worldwide and 412,000 died, many of them in the richest countries in the world.³ The virus has exposed the terrible divisions and inequities in societies that had, hitherto, been easier to conceal—our societies are not good for everyone. The virus kills the poorest and most vulnerable and it does so without mercy. Different state responses tell an abysmal truth about what some of them think about their citizens, especially the vulnerable and marginalized. The UK, for example, decided to apply herd immunity to managing the virus in the population. According to this approach, when enough people are vaccinated against a disease, it is more difficult for a disease to spread to those who remain susceptible.⁴ It works

when the majority of the population are inoculated. In the case of coronavirus, this inoculation can only occur through acquiring the virus and gaining immunity. It soon became clear to policy makers in the UK that such an approach would not work and would result in tens of thousands more deaths as it was not possible to “get ahead of the virus.”⁵ Using virus transmission to build immunity was a risky strategy and one the UK government found was unpopular among scientists generally as well as the public.⁶

Governments have mainly dealt with the pandemic through carefully managed phases of corralling populations and isolating and restricting the movement of people. Phases or stages are deployed to accustom populations to a “new normal” and prevent panic and social disorder. In Ireland, this has worked rather well and is the result of strong, coordinated, and centralized state leadership, and an acquiescent population which still prides itself on having its own government (the Irish Free State was founded in 1922). “Civilization” and social order are thus contingent and dependent on the bonds of agreement, identification, and ethical relations, and are supported by fantasies of national unity and sacrifice for a greater good. As Freud noted, our primitive ego-serving and cruel drives are redirected into the social sphere via processes of reaction-formation and are transformed into altruism and pity, respectively.⁷ These days, we are socially “good” if we stay at home, with endless news cycles presenting opportunities for pathos and pity at the suffering of others.

To further prove our altruistic motives, we were invited to what I refer to as “intel-action”: to clap at our doorways in an act of fellowship and mutual appreciation of brave and hardworking frontline workers who put themselves at risk to heal, help, and support. While no doubt genuine in its empathic intentions, the act of clapping is also the beating of hands in a brief and violent explosion of body *jouissance* and alleviates our guilt at our staying out of harm’s way. This is a social demand that keeps the psychic wolves from the door; the pernicious anti-social drives that are anything but altruistic. Our neighbor is now a potentially

deadly carrier of the virus whom we must treat like a pariah. We, who are secretly murderously inclined towards our neighbors, as Freud noted in *Civilization and Its Discontents*⁸ are now threatened by their deadly proximity and have no recompense but to transform these ill-intentions into virtuous actions, which produces a certain level of satisfaction. Being good, however, has another side. As a psychoanalytic colleague in Dublin recently noted, the other side of compliance is the superego, and the reporting to authorities of those perceived to have “broken the rules” has never been so high.

Freud marveled at the processes by which our darkest tendencies are superseded by ethical, moral, and virtuous demands, and how ego-serving dispositions are replaced by socially-serving ones. “*Homo homini lupus*,” Freud observed, which translates to “man is a wolf to man,”⁹ and we might also consider howling at the moon from our doorways to give voice to the ambivalence at the heart of our love and concern for others. This profound and disturbing ambivalence, encapsulated in the worldwide doorway clapping ritual, is addressed to the Other, a deadly, virally-loaded Other that might pass over our doorways to others less virtuous, bringing to mind the biblical Mosaic parable of the final plague wrought by God on the Egyptians to gain the freedom of the Israelites. Some may even ask if the coronavirus plague is our punishment, or a harbinger of worse to come for tampering with or ignoring the growing imbalance between ourselves and the natural world, between technology and humanity, between community and individual.

This is hardly the dead God bemoaned by Dostoevsky¹⁰ but a terrifying God who, as Eagleton notes does not know he is dead, even if we know it.¹¹ If God is dead and everything is permissible, as said by Dostoevsky and noted by Lacan,¹² then there is no one to take responsibility except ourselves: no corporations, governments, leaders, state agencies, not even history (as in history repeating itself); it is just us who are to blame. It is small wonder, Eagleton continues, that angst, guilt and *mauvaise foi* burden us.¹³ Craven, self-made,

materialistic man is brought to his knees by a microscopic virus and there is no God to hold responsible for it. In this, some awesome truths are revealed: man is a contingent, dependent, vulnerable being who has put his faith in the new religion of science, which cannot yet solve the problem. Science does not know; it is not the complete discourse it proclaims to be, it never was. Rather, it is a discourse that excludes the unconscious and bases its principles on its own undivided “objectivity” as a *sine qua non*.¹⁴ This fall of the idealization of science and the humiliation it brings is disillusioning. What we do with this disillusionment will determine whether we return to how things were or seek to overthrow them.

The Hope of Disillusionment

The social sphere’s fragile bonds are threatened by disillusionment as our support of them masks their constructed and tenuous nature. As well as the disillusioning fall of science wrought by the pandemic, another disillusionment is well in our midst in recent times in the form of epidemics of depression and anxiety, particularly in Western populations. These epidemics of psychological suffering are managed by the psycho-pharmacological solutions of science and medicine and by the myriad appetite-desire suppressants of consumerism. These “dampeners” of human desire are trendy but toxic to subjective vitality, making us consumers “on casters,”¹⁵ causing ennui, procrastination, and burnout. Disillusionment is, in this sense, a protest against these increasingly intolerable and undignified modes of treating human suffering and is a form of protest. Now, living as we are in the midst of a deadly pandemic, there is a certain freedom to recognize and express hopelessness and disillusionment in the state of things and explore truths that lie beyond the statisticians, epidemiologists, virologists, and economists. Our very response to this crisis highlights that this is not just a health crisis but a crisis of confidence in our way of life. This can be heard in calls for deep, sustained change that will upend systems of neoliberal inequality and selfish individualism, to redistribute resources more justly and ethically, re-center ecological ethics,

and re-make the world for the better. The hope for systemic change shows that we have not been annihilated by disillusionment nor overtaken by procrastination. It exposes an unquenched dimension of transformative hope upon which our psychic well-being rests, even if it has taken a deadly viral pandemic for it to sally forth. The pandemic has shown us that the ethos of collectivity, fellowship, and community, which is imbued in our collective hand-clapping, is an alternative to the “Randian man.”¹⁶

Returning to Freud’s wartime thesis, our relation to death has been impacted during the pandemic. Typical defenses against death are challenged by a virally-driven reality of contagious, uncontrollable illness and the indiscriminate annihilation of life. We encounter here double trouble. On the one hand, death is inadmissible to the unconscious, which does not want to countenance its end nor its murderous drives towards others. On the other hand, death is denied by the contemporary subject whose “rational” psyche refuses the unconscious and presumes existential threats are fended off by technology or science. We do not, as Freud noted in *Thoughts on the Times of War and Death*, give death its proper place in reality¹⁷ and, as a result, we are overcome and lost when it occurs. The pandemic has brought it back into our midst and has re-centered human vulnerability and mortality. One solution is denial; to refuse it and fend it off, as it poses too much of a risk to the fantasy of supremacism which sustains the ego. Alternatively, there is a danger that the psyche is overwhelmed by the real, which traumatizes the subject. The proximity of the contagion and the truth it carries is intolerable and these are starkly dichotomous responses. But they are responses, and a response is neither *ennui* nor refusal. As Freud noted, again in *Thoughts for the Times*, “to tolerate life remains, after all, the first duty of all living beings. Illusion becomes valueless if it makes this harder for us.”¹⁸ Psychoanalysis does not hide from the shadow of death nor does it support illusions of supremacy: that is an ego psychology. This contrasts with the analyst’s desire which is a vanishing point that reflects a skull behind the visage.

A Horizon of Disaster

It turns out we are poorly prepared for disaster. We may dream of it, we may even fantasize about it, but when it happens our response is determined by our psychical structuration. This means some of us fare better than others: some may be less overwhelmed by the onslaught of the real of the pandemic, or by the anxiety induced by the failure of words and the disappearance of narrative-framing characteristics of a subject ravaged by the real; this is staring into an abyss and is a terrible calm after desolation. It can induce a madness; this madness is lampooned by rational thought and by the social superego's utilitarian demands to re-order our time into useful blocks, extolling us, for example, to read the full works of Dickens or learn another language or play the violin. Madness, in this sense, is non-scheduled time, and it becomes the space of the abyss and a time to actually be in the disaster which is time without knowledge, routine, or even joy. This is not chosen by the subject and it is terrifying and despairing. Anxiety is its hallmark; it is the position of the praying mantis facing the Other, enunciated by Lacan as an analogy for the anguished subject bereft of its indices of recognition and knowledge. Nonetheless, the analytic possibilities are substantial as this anguish is also the primary anguish of the subject and it is symptomatically and structurally organized. Psychoanalytic practice, directed to what Lacan describes as "logical time," emphasizes the "time for understanding" as the logical time of "working-through."¹⁹ The pandemic-disaster offers the potential for a working-through of the subject's organization of anxiety: how trauma is refracted through signifiers, and how that is an incomplete process; it is not "all" and it produces certain conditions of enjoyment. In other words, the signifying chain is not enough and history, stories, and constructions provide a mythology of the subject but cannot capture and contain every experience in language.

For analysands, moving to "remote" analysis and the loss of the clinic room and the traditional two-body-presence in analytic work has been too much to bear and is one loss too

many: a “presence of mind” is a necessity for them. So, they wait to return to the clinic room, and for the time being practice a silent living as a response to the passivity of being subject to pandemic’s trauma. The silence will not last and the trauma will eventually speak, one way or another. For others, remote work has been a boon, mirroring the loss of the narrative frame that the statisticians, virologists, epidemiologists, and doctors try to prop up with daily counts, charts of upward and downward curves, and predications that are as wildly different as they are fallible. Forgetfulness has been the accompaniment of many during the pandemic and is the hallmark of disaster-madness, another name for trauma that overwhelms and disorders the psyche. We have no memory of this trauma and so we become forgetful, and we will do so until the present is past and we are able to remember. This may take a while. There is, at present, no end to this and no vaccine to defend against the viral real, no limit behind which we can shield.

Yet on the other side of this, new horizons of possibility are opening up, hitherto unthought of. This is an ethical matter. This is different from the moralistic responsibility of conscientious social and political duty that transforms the drive impulses into social good; so admired by Freud as the basis of civilization and community. In terms of the ethical stakes for the subject, the pandemic has revealed the psychic cost of this evasiveness of death. It turns out that life carries a disastrous heaviness, which is the consequence of refusing to accept that death and limit are its companions. We conceal death from ourselves in different ways: in the empty ways we talk about it, in delimiting it to something that happens to others, in thinking of it as something indefinite, what Heidegger calls the “tranquilized everydayness” that we cling to in order to cover it up and console ourselves.²⁰ Now in the pandemic, we are faced with dying on an hourly and daily basis and everyone is under threat of infection. Death cannot be concealed. To put this in Heidegger’s terms, an existential conception of death overturns the factual and ontical tendency of beings to avoid it, and an

ethical stance towards death is an “authentic acceptance” of the certainty of one’s own.²¹ This is, as only Heidegger could put it, its “ownmost possibility”²² or what Lacan describes as “the subjective realization of being-towards-death.”²³ This is potentially transformative. Some people have stopped prevaricating and dithering on their desire and freed themselves of duty and moral sacrifice: one person I know has left the “rat race” and embarked on a new profession, another has unlocked an old hidden desire, one has decided to risk love. In doing so, such people reclaim desire and make it their own; they singularize it and they do so without guarantee. This is hope in action and as such it is ethical.

Blanchot is helpful here and conveys the transformational stakes of the disillusionment of disaster. He refers to the passivity, destitution, and the suffering of the subject in times of disaster. Passivity is measureless, it is the disaster defined not as a past event but as the “immemorial past,” which can return in ghostly form.²⁴ There are two types of passivity: the passivity of quietude and the passivity of non-quietude²⁵ that the general discourse overwrites with the activity of unity, coherence, order. All the same, there is in passivity a semantic movement that includes passion, past, and *pas*.²⁶ This is a passivity bereft of self that is an alterity, a non-dialectical place where being lacks but does not give way to non-being. He refers to the patience of passivity, a time of time’s absence, the time of dying which has no support other than language that is at best fragmentary but gives voice to the ambivalences of being, such as passivity/activity, inertia/dynamism, voluntary and involuntary, that are paradoxical.²⁷ Speaking is “responsible passivity” and it “gives the response, answering to the impossible and for the impossible.”²⁸ We do well, therefore, to think more deeply about the double salvo of patience and speaking in broaching the alterity at the heart of being of the speaking subject.

We understand psychoanalytically that a death has already occurred for the subject in its traumatic encounter with language and its engenderment as a speaking being. As Lacan

puts it, “thus the symbol first manifests as the killing of the thing, and this death results in the endless perpetuation of the subject’s desire.”²⁹ This symbolic death is a necessity for the emergence of a speaking subject who must arise from the ashes of this disaster, but is equipped with metonymies of desire and vicissitudes of the drive which are the motivation for our love for our fellow man, altruism, and social virtue. Into the crack of our subjective division, a new disaster can take up residence. This is not without consequence. If it does not kill us, we may be able to put it to work. As the pre-eminent bard himself, Leonard Cohen, put it, “there is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.”³⁰

¹ S. Freud, “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death” (1915), *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14 (London: Hogarth Press, 2001), 300.

² Freud, “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death,” 275.

³ World Health Organisation (WHO), “WHO Coronavirus (Covid-19) Disease Dashboard” (2020), accessed June 11, 2020,

https://covid19.who.int/?gclid=CjwKCAjwiMj2BRBFEiwAYfTbCnA91hu8sqSn_Xg6hVa5snEuA7hj3xufx_oZ3oG56AhhGu5nirl6-xoCm10QAvD_BwE.

⁴ C. O’Grady, “The UK backed off on herd immunity. To beat Covid-19, we’ll ultimately need it,” *National Geographic*, 20 March, 2020, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2020/03/uk-backed-off-on-herd-immunity-to-beat-coronavirus-we-need-it/>.

⁵ O’Grady, *ibid*.

⁶ E. Yong, “The U.K.’s Coronavirus ‘Herd Immunity’ Debacle,” *The Atlantic*, 16 March, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/03/coronavirus-pandemic-herd-immunity-uk-boris-johnson/608065/>.

⁷ Freud, “Civilization and Its Discontents” (1930[1929]), *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 21, (London: Hogarth Press, 2001), 140-141

⁸ Freud, “Civilization and Its Discontents,” 111.

⁹ Freud, “Civilization and Its Discontents,” 111.

¹⁰ F. Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 2007), 661.

¹¹ T. Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), 158. Eagleton is referring to Žižek and Gunjevic in this.

¹² J. Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII (1969-70)*, (London: W.W. Norton and Co., 1991/2007), 119-120.

¹³ Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God*, 158.

¹⁴ For Lacan, a discourse that is scientific is a homogenous discourse rooted in the rationalist principles of the Cartesian *cogito* which obscure its abstract and explorative origins in modern physics and mathematics. Lacan criticizes contemporary science for basing itself in empiricist assumptions and ignoring the symbolic dimension that underpins human subjectivity and motivation. Thus, truth “speaks” and is not reducible to the dimension of the observable. See “Science and Truth,” *Écrits*, trans. B. Fink (London: W.W. Norton and Co., 1966/2006), 726-745.

¹⁵ Lacan, “On Psychoanalytic Discourse,” (1972), lecture at the University of Milan, trans. J. Stone, originally published in *Lacan in Italia, 1953–78*, ed. G.B. Contri (Milan: La Salamadra, 1978), 11.

¹⁶ The “Randian man” is a reference to various fictionalized characters created by the writer, Ayn Rand, in her novels. Characters such as John Gault (*Atlas Shrugged*) and Howard Roark (*The Fountainhead*) elaborate a version of hyper-driven, selfish, confident individualism that eschews all social and communitarian ideals.

¹⁷ Freud, “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death,” 299.

¹⁸ Freud, “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death,” 299.

¹⁹ Lacan, “Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty,” in *Écrits*, trans. B. Fink (London: W.W. Norton and Co., 1944/2006).

²⁰ M. Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1927/1962), 297.

²¹ Heidegger, 302.

²² Heidegger, 304.

²³ Lacan, “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis,” in *Écrits*, trans. B. Fink (London: W.W. Norton and Co., 1953/2006), 231.

²⁴ M. Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 17.

²⁵ Blanchot, 15.

²⁶ Blanchot, 16.

²⁷ Blanchot, 20.

²⁸ Blanchot, 20.

²⁹ Lacan, “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis,” 262.

³⁰ M. Gupta, “An ‘Anthem’ for Our Troubled Times: Leonard Cohen’s Music Stirs a Range of Emotions,” *The Wire*, 21 March, 2020, <https://thewire.in/rights/leonard-cohen-gautam-navlakha-music-troubled-times>.