

## Introduction

Why a metaphysics of the plague? Because the plague is a phenomenon that pertains to nature, but cannot be explained on a purely natural basis. There is something fated, in the plague, something like a destiny – this is at least how people thought for centuries that they could interpret this sort of malediction that afflicts humanity. And even when the disenchantment of experience seemed to erode progressively the space of myth, the plague continued to show itself in a transcendental dimension, as if it were looming over the world from beyond it. After biology and medicine have identified the agent, the vector and terminal of contagion, and specified how to prevent it, the plague re-appeared on the stage of the world in an unprecedented form: as sexual infection of the epidemic type. The plague is waiting for us at the narrow passage of the worst scenarios we can realistically propose, the day after a potential nuclear catastrophe. Not to mention the plague capable of contaminating the web, the network that keeps together the relics of a unitary idea of humanity.

Destiny, malediction... Terms one is tempted to censure in the name of the philosophically correct, but once accepted, they would imply the passage from the question about the 'what is' the thing (what is the plague) to a question of being, actually of the meaning of being (what is the sense of being in the world, but above all being such at the time of the plague?). A passage thus to metaphysics. By metaphysics one is to understand neither more nor less than hermeneutic ontology. Not a knowledge, as Kant would say, deprived of a reference to a possible experience that bangs its wings in the void without resistance and without impulse, but a knowledge which finds its own content in the possibility it tries to interpret and question. Asking for instance if being has a sense or none.

This possible experience is the plague which becomes object of metaphysics when its symbolic value coincides with the very fact of its irruption on the stage of the world. What is there to say about the plague, when it is not there, other than it is not? A fact, really. But a fact that tears out a cry. Nothing more than this cry has the power to deliver one to the naked truth of life, before which all the modalities of comprehending the incomprehensible stand. It's not a case that the plague is always accompanied by a pageant of masques and allegories. All this is naturally amenable to that nakedness, left to fall, to be emptied. The plague is the plague and nothing else, the plague does not refer to anything but itself, the plague has no sense. But this confirms that the plague needs metaphysics. To say that the plague has no sense is already questioning the sense of being. And so it was from the beginning.

In the first book of the Iliad (vv.10sgg) we read that the plague is devastating the camp of the

Achaean. No less than war. The poisoned darts Apollo shoots from his cart mix with the arrows on the battle field, disseminating death. The god had been offended in the person of one of his old and venerable priests. The offense and the profanation have to be punished, as injustice was committed and injustice is a laceration of the cosmic texture that knots the life of the mortals to the life of gods. One needs to amend, that is to expiate. The plague is the revenge, the punishment and the expiation of the guilt.

Through the plague a real *tanatodicea* takes place. Death is in itself the greatest evil, but before anything else, it is the destiny nobody can elude, a human destiny *par excellence*. So then: what is the sense of coming to the world already and always condemned to death? An aberration, a malignant absurdity, which appears even more so to the eyes of the sun god: as infinite darkness, as unredeemable negativity, abyss that swallows the living. But in this Homeric fragment, death smacks of catharsis and redemption, it discloses even a sacrificial function: so that the Achaeans celebrate it with a funerary banquet. The calamity stops. In the darkness of death there is a breach which allows us to catch a glimpse of the sun god in action.

Immediately this idea which connects plague, punishment and sacrifice will be contested and rejected as aberrant superstition, but in the name of a higher knowledge that saves. It is to Thucydides' description of the plague in Athens Lucretius refers to, but with a grandiose empowerment of the symbolic value of the calamity. What in Thucydides remains untold, becomes the crux of the discourse in Lucretius, which is a philosophical discourse, a discourse on the truth, abstracted as: the plague is the plague and nothing else. Yet precisely because the plague is the plague and nothing else, one must look this nothing in the face and free thought from the phantasms of superstition, hunt down the larvae and the treacherous simulacra, counterpose to mythology the philosophy and the true knowledge.

Therefore: the fact that the plague has no further or transcendental sense is the only sense ascribable to being, as Thucydides proves with facts and Lucretius by unmasking superstitious religious interpretations as philosophical fallacies, making the plague a natural reality explainable *iuxta propria principia*, that does not depend on the will of gods, nor belongs to a semantic constellation of a superior order. Yet, precisely because the plague has no sense, resistant as it is to a logic that pretends to curve it towards a goal, the sense of being is to be identical to itself, entirely resolved to become itself, as it configures itself from time to time: to on, nature, game of totally casual forces, in which cause and effect do not pursue any finality, but are determined exclusively by a necessity

governing them for no other reason than the necessity itself.

Instilling fear and terror, the plague revives vain religious beliefs and guides humans back to them, humiliating them and leading them astray, yet, for the same reason forces them to open their eyes and regain self-awareness. As if the plague enacted a double movement: illusory and truthful. The more the plague leads into error, creating space for the worst nightmares of the heart and the mind, the more it reveals the mendacious and deceitful character of these nightmares. Evil is so furious and domineering, that soon no faith resists, and then against the background of a ferocious deception, reality stands out as it is. The weft of the being becomes transparent to reason, and allowing itself to be disclosed reveals that this essential poverty, this non-sense is the sense.

But there's more to it. The reduction of everything extant (heaven, earth, forces acting in the depth and on the surface, motions of the soul) to nature, is far from excluding metaphysics: on the contrary it demands it. According to Lucretius the gaze turned limpid and disenchanting, able to scrutinize the world with a pure eye and the mind free from superstitious phantasies, sees already beyond the visible, for at the very heart of nature it grasps what nature itself ignores, refutes, denies: the guilt. What could one blame nature for, if nature is as it is, not as it should be, or rather as we would like it to be, supposing that the gods had nothing to do but satisfy our desires? How can one find fault with nature, if the idea of a divine providence or only of a teleological design appears completely ungrounded?

For Lucretius nature was flawed, thus guilty – *tanta stat praedita culpa* (De rerum natura, V, 199), and this state is primeval, it has always been and will always be connatural to it – as it lacks the fundamental justification: that of justifying itself, and thus account for the vertiginous absence of motivation which belongs to becoming. What else is Evil if not this accidentality empty of intention and end, this indifference that contradicts any taking care of, this gratuitous slipping into the abyss? The infinite evils affecting humanity are amenable to the evil which is not such, and it would be unreasonable if not sacrilegious (but the two things are the same) to attribute them to a mysterious or even providential divine will.

The plague is the precise allegory of the unguilty guilt. Nothing like the plague can tell us what nature is. It is its epiphany, its disclosure. And that's why Lucretius introduces it in the culminating point of his poem. Lucretius does not hesitate to push his paradox to the breaking point, defying contradiction.

Only after contemplating horror fearlessly, as someone who knows that everything, including horror or especially horror is nature and only nature, does he come out with an affirmation that is no less abashing than revealing: the plague is an abysmal reality, pouring out of an infernal well, if it announces something that appears unconceivable. And yet it represents the event of the events, summing up all events, if it is true that the entire universe could collapse, “break down outdone” (by which endless destructive power?) “with horrible noise” (De rerum natura, V, 109); as it is true, that there is no reason why it shouldn't.

In all this one needs to focus on the quite debated issue of the alleged or real <dialectic> that moves Lucretius' thought. The fact remains that the wonderful admirable rationalization of Lucretius, able to turn the dis-enchantment into a perfect re-enchantment, exalts the enemy to fight, recognizes its irreducible character and, even if it does not surrender to it, it evokes its possible final triumph. As if reason worked actually at a real oeuvre au noir. As if it had to free itself from fear and any forms of voluntary submission; but if there was indeed a liberation, what was freed at the end is something definable only through a sense of horror, which at a closer examination proves to be something no rational principle is able to justify or redeem. This is nothing else but the Evil, more or less adequately expressed by all other evils. It is the guilt of nature to be as it is, infinitely needy as it needs a foundation it does not have. And an opening towards metaphysics is there, almost without any leap: which configures itself as the metaphysics of the evil and the guilt.

It so happens that we have two contrary answers to the same question: if the evils afflicting humans stand out against the Evil, which is something ultimate and unsurpassable, and would thus represent the very sense of being ( or rather its non-sense); or if on the contrary the same evils humans suffer from but also cause, ascend to a higher horizon of expiation and redemption, a horizon of sense, in which sense and non-sense play the “battle of truth” – converging into a hermeneutics of being as such and being as such in the world. We could define the (the plague as divine punishment, but also as the occasion of redemption) as mythico-religious and the other (the plague as a thing of nature alone) as naturalistic and materialistic. What we need to underline here is that within each of these interpretations a specific metaphysics of guilt configures itself: situated alternately on one or the other side, but keeping essentially over the centuries the dominant traits and above all the founding alternative between necessity and freedom, destiny and election, fall and salvation. Up to the most improbable oxymoron of the *felix culpa*, which was to become with Augustine and Kant the test bed of ethics.

Under focus is the nexus between pain and pain extinction. Postulating that for the human beings, in spite of the hailed aspiration towards happiness, evil is the real destiny. Who decided to impose this burden on them and not only on them, but on the living beings, in general, which wear an indelible mark of sorrow and melancholy? Is this a sentence, that was not declared by any law court but is inscribed in the order of things and belongs to the nature of things? No metaphysics of guilt is free from these questions. There are two possible perspectives as already anticipated. The one dating back to Anaximander's figure of injustice and the one amenable to the Christian conception of the original sin. And here we would like to make a digression.

Two fundamental possible perspectives, as it has often happened, can be brought together to the point of making them overlap, if not identified with, the idea they share: the idea of the tragic guilt. But what is the tragic guilt, or hamartia, of which the original sin is a translation? Or, better, what does such a guilt consist in? Answer: in the fact that on one side it makes one feel guilty and on the other it absolves the guilt, staying within the contradiction. It makes one feel guilty: in as much as being born means incurring a debt for life, a life which has been given even if not requested; and this debt has to be paid. It absolves: the individual has not stipulated any debt, let alone a commitment versus others or other, and thus does not see how he/she can be charged for anything. There is only a solution left: that destiny should be assumed as one's own (as a thing one is responsible for) even if it is recognized as destiny (that is if it has the objectivity and the cogency of an imposition). Summing up this implies responsibility towards destiny. The essence of the tragic would then manifest itself when the guilty who is innocent, or the innocent who is guilty takes responsibility for what belongs to him/her in a fated, necessitating way.

Actually we face very diverse scenarios. The fall, or rather the fact that in the one-everything dimension of eternity, there is someone coming to being as if from null (but actually detaching himself from being) to fall back into null (actually turning back to being); the fall, that is the fact that somebody is born and dies, in Anaximander is a fact, something occurring necessarily according to the rhythm of time, which marks the rise and the sunset, the coming into light and relapsing into darkness. This represents a perturbation within the core of being, but as being is not a perfect, self-enclosed totality, but apeiron, the infinite, which includes its own endlessness and its own measurelessness, one needs to conclude that the negative is intrinsic to it, as much as anything that contradicts it: finitude, mortality, temporality. Anaximander does not speak so much about hamartia, as about adikia, and the adikia, that is injustice, is the perturbation itself, that is being for ever perturbed as for ever facing its non being. The mortals bear guilt in so much as they participate in the

being, but they distance themselves towards regions of evanescence, dissolution, death. The life is for them a subtraction of good (subtraction of being) which they have to give back, the ones to the others, according to the order of time. According to necessity.

Much different is the Book of Genesis. The fall is there the consequence of a temptation. At the center of the story is not necessity, but freedom. The debt incurred at the origins (following the fall into temptation) is not with the being, but with God, which implies a sort of blank cheque so to say. This means – an unheard of novelty, a thing that defies common sense – that all are responsible for everything and committed to all others. In other words: everything happening in the world, the uninterrupted display of any kinds of evils, presents itself to me not as something that doesn't affect me or which I have to accept, but as something I am called to responsibility for, and thus assuming it, recognizing it as my thing, for even if it is beyond my reach, it regards me personally, as the evil is a horizon that pre-cludes me. This derives from a logic of pain based on this hypothesis: if the innocent pays for the guilty, all the more is the guilty expected to pay for the innocent. One finds himself guilty not only for this or that, but primarily for the fact of not recognizing oneself in the guilt.

In Anaximander we find reciprocity too. In the famous fragment it is written that human beings are expected to repay “each other in turns.” Reciprocity means here measure, more precisely: as long as, the measurer being time, which establishes objectively, -marking the rise and disappearance of things, that is the becoming- , how much is due to anyone. As long as one lives, so much he pays: with death, and in particular with that advance payment meant to be settled with death which is the suffering. Thus: who lives long, pays much, by suffering much, as it inevitably happens (according to necessity, that is to the objective measure of time; instead who lives shortly, (blessed is the one who dies young, says Silen's sentence), pays little, as he/she suffers little. With the payment, the the account is closed. Justice is restored, injustice cancelled. The individual has no benefit from it: he simply disappears from the stage of the world.

In the case of the original sin instead, the single person is called into question: her salvation or perdition is at stake. Reciprocity means here assuming the guilt. Admitting one's guilt even for things no law court would charge you with, taking a responsibility versus everybody else. It means answering a call. God's call. And he has the power to welcome the sinner among those he had chosen or to reject him.

Schematically: if the tragic is responsibility for your destiny, Anaximander's figure of injustice puts destiny in place but takes responsibility away, while the Christian conception of the original sin, sets destiny as identical to guilt assumption and the deriving responsibility.

"I am the plague", Oedipus exclaims. He defines himself "the evil of all evils, evil that generates evil and is generated by evil": active principle and conscience aware of being guilty, and being the more so, the more he denies it. With this Oedipus is out of the tradition which, like Anaximander, used to see evil as suffering, agony, necessity. This does not mean that Oedipus's experience of the evil is already the prologue to what would become the Christian conception. But the concept of hamartia in Sophocles appears much richer in implications if considered in a descending rather than in an ascending line, that is in relation to the history of its reception and re-interpretation. For Oedipus it is tragic not only to discover the heavy burden he has to bear by an obscure fatality, but more to recognize that the great affliction and disaster he is surrounded by, actually irradiate from him and he alone is accountable for it, has to give a response and pay for it. (The moment of the anamnesis, of his conscience, is essential and it is missing in Anaximander). In a materialistic and naturalistic vision, if we admit that we can speak of a conscience then it is passive, and can't do anything but take into account what happens according to necessity, paying the debt accumulated by the mere passing time. In the mythico-religious vision Sophocles' tragedy refers to the conscience that is active: responsibility and freedom belong to it. It is here that the tragic takes places, for it does not exist where destiny disengages the individual from his bonds and from himself, but where the individual coincides with his destiny. His own destiny, hence one says that death, our common destiny, has a meaning only if it becomes my, your, our death.

Tracking the tragic along the paths that descend from its first manifestation is a rather problematic enterprise. Up to what point does the tragic remain what it used to be at its origins, while the forms of poetry and literature change continuously, faking a purely nominal genus identity? After declaring his failure in his attempt to reach the Eleatic sources of the tragic, Nietzsche turns his gaze into the opposite direction, thinking he could find what he was looking for in Greece in an epoch apparently as anti-tragic as his own. On his way he finds Dostoyevsky, as he happened to come upon in Nice, almost accidentally the French translation of *Crime and Punishment* and *The Possessed*. The Philosopher experienced a sort of revelation, at least judging by the frenzied annotations (difficult to read) he left on the margins. Here we add that the echo of Oedipus's terrifying scream does not sound anywhere else so powerfully as in Dostoyevsky's work. See the words with which his "ridiculous man" confesses to be the plague himself and to have infected his peers. An awareness of evil which

forces one to see in the modern novel not just a filiation of the myth, but also as one of the places in which the tragic, drawing on the myth, reveals itself in its actuality.

One encounters something very similar in the Italian writer Manzoni. In the genuine tragedy presented in his *History of Pillories* (*Storia della Colonna infame*, 1843), apart from the two unjustly accused characters, real sacrificial victims, there is no figure that should not say about himself “I am the plague.” Ought to, but doesn’t and this is the guilt. For each character sees only whatever he wants to see, even if that doesn’t exist, and does not see what one could very well see, if only he wanted to. This is mainly valid for judges and State clerks, who in spite of the barbarian times do not lack instruments to get to the truth. But it also regards the ordinary people, who are not just unguilty victims of those barbarian acts, but also intermediaries and co-authors. The fact is that the plague is not only a thing of nature, but also, or primarily a thing of the spirit. It is voluntary blinding, mendacity, guilt.

And when with Leopardi, nature will be thought of and turned into poetry again within a framework that is primarily Lucretian (thus, with all difference saved, amenable to Anaximander), the novelty almost forced by that perspective should not surprise. Leopardi writes to his parents. The plague that had been devastating Naples for months, is rising in the peninsula and seems to have already reached Ancona. The poet cannot move. But finds an excuse: he apologizes for a guilt that is not such, but is fatality. He can’t help a pathetic and illuminating outburst. If he could, he says, he would catch up with his parents. He wants to share with them the destiny preannounced by the plague. Admitting that an essence of the tragic exists, one could not express it better.

The plague calls. It puts a person in front of a choice: stay on or run away. It was so in the remote past. But also later on. The young Florentines of *The Decameron* think they can save themselves taking refuge in the country side. While the London chronicler of *A Journal of the Plague Year* defies destiny and does not move from the city devastated by the epidemic. In Camus there are people who decide to go away, even when it is no longer possible, and others who decide to stay on, even when the gates are still open. One could continue with the list. But the question remains: why is there this out-out if the plague is destiny? Is it then a particular type of destiny, actualized always and anyways as my destiny, our destiny?

Jaspers saw the plague arriving in time: the Nazi-plague, as it used to be called publicly before Hitler



had taken the power. He succeeded to save himself leaving Germany. But when he turned back, immediately after the end of the war, he dared to raise the question of the guilt. Guilt for what? For the plague, that is for destiny. An unheard of gesture, but full of truth. Not this or that factual truth, nor the juridical or the ethical truth. In all these cases there is no trace of guilt and the alleged guilty should be acquitted. Things are different on the metaphysical plane. There truth (metaphysical truth) is the very sense of being. According to Jaspers discovering a destiny in the plague, that is raising the question of the guilt, means already calling into question the sense of being, – precisely that sense of being metaphysics forgets about according to Heidegger, as it does not have eyes for it.

Heidegger too saw the plague arrive in time, and found the exact word to define it: destiny. But diversely from Jaspers, a Christian thinker, to him destiny appeared in the Greek way as unguilty guilt.

And as he considered that the only thing to do in front of what presented itself as destiny, was to assume it in its historical necessity, as a thing that belongs to the becoming of things, but not to conscience, he did not want to recognize himself guilty, nor could he, even less did he believe he could question by that path what according to him remained undisclosed. Had he given a sign of a humble gesture of remorse, assumption of responsibility, or at least of an act of amendment, metaphysics itself would have opened him a passage versus that type of interrogation which according to him metaphysics precluded: the sense of being.

For this is the question. If guilt is not thought as destiny (if it has no origin, if it is not related to destiny, no matter if it is an intrinsic defect of nature or the repetition of an original fall), it decays into a thing of psychology, something superfluous we could very well free ourselves from. But if destiny excludes the guilt (excluding thus the possibility of assuming it and becoming responsible for it), then destiny becomes unthinkable, or thinkable only as the most senseless and absurd thing ever. What if this were a false dilemma? The metaphysics of the plague hints at a solution in which the guilt and the destiny fall together. There is a sort of destiny in having to recognize one's own guilt. But guilt for what, if not for what looms over as destiny?

*Translated into English by Gabriela Dragnea Horvath*

*Edited by Patrick Burke*