



UNACKNOWLEDGED LEGISLATORS

BY ROBERT DINAPOLI

**When gods and gribblys visit: human incomprehension
of the malign and the invisible**

Pestilence, plague, epidemic: outbreaks of contagious disease have punctuated human history for as long as humans have gathered in communities and told one another stories about how they got there. Given how much human labour has been devoted to the matter of simply not dying, spectacles of mass death arrest our attention. Whether its cause be natural

disasters such as fires, floods, earthquakes or storms, the human folly of war or the deeper shock of invisible agents that unpick the body's integrity from within, we are both horrified and fascinated by the theatre of extinction.

Look at the literary record: the floods of Gilgamesh and Noah, the plagues of Egypt and Thebes. Homer's *Iliad*

records a numbing succession of traumas, with some of the most hideous depictions of dismemberments and disembowelings this side of an abattoir or a Napoleonic triage tent. But Homer's account of how the offended god Apollo stalks the Greek camps outside Troy chills with particular force:

The arrows clanged at his back as the god quaked with rage,
the god himself on the march and down he came like night.
Over against the ships he dropped to a knee, let fly a shaft
and a terrifying crash rang out from the great silver bow.
First he went for the mules and circling dogs but then,
launching a piercing shaft at the men themselves,
he cut them down in droves—
and the corpse fires burned on, night and day, no end in sight.

The Greeks have provoked Apollo's anger by taking captive his priest's daughter in a raid and then refusing his request for her return with callous mockery. He then appeals to his god for justice, who responds by afflicting the Greek camp with pestilence. Apollo's sharply divided character emerges here. He was revered as a bringer of order, a mover of the poet's lyre and the verbal arts it accompanied. The body's harmonies were thought to respond to his influence, so he was regarded as a patron of the healing arts as well.

But he possesses a dark side. Intent on exacting vengeance for this affront to his dignity, Apollo's distinguishing capacities turn lethal. Trading lyre for bow, one stringed instrument for another, he morphs from supreme embodiment of order, harmony and health to the 'Far Shooter' (one of his common epithets in Greek poetry), who dispenses death from a distant, superior vantage. Homer renders this onset of a god with issues in disturbingly anthropomorphic terms: his arrows 'clang' on his back as he bends one massive knee to draw his bow. And he's not simply rampaging: he takes careful aim. Phoebus the sun-god brings no morning but only a lurid dawn of 'corpse fires'.

Most human cultures have read outbreaks of widespread disease as signs of some disconnect between the higher reaches of the cosmos and our earthly floor: divine displeasure answering human pride, wickedness or inattention to what matters. It's not hard to read these traditional narratives as attempts to render intelligible the otherwise random awfulness of such calamity. It's what any of us would do in comparable circumstances. Do our

narratives of illness contracted through an unguarded sneeze on a tram or touching an invisibly contaminated surface in a supermarket offer any greater degree of intelligibility? An incensed god's wrath can at least (in theory) be appeased. Microbial gribbles are just gribbles, random vectors not open to negotiation above the cellular level.

How then are we reading the coronavirus pandemic of 2020? Modern discourses of medicine and biology, economics, politics and psychology all contribute to our understanding of this viral prodigy that has disturbed the counsels of nations and chilled the thoughts of anyone within hailing distance of a newsfeed. But analysis and explanation, however vital to the framing of our responses, by their very nature reduce boggling complexities to mind-sized nuggets. That's just our way of coping with any cognitive challenge too big or complex to take in at a glance: break it down, try to see what makes it tick, the way a horologist will disassemble an antique clock to search out the anomaly that's glitched its movement.

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This is how modern thought and reason have evolved over the three centuries since the Enlightenment: objective observation, analysis and deductive reason have allowed us to focus on specific aspects of the reality we inhabit and tweak them for our advantage or convenience. Our modern moment encompasses little more than a succession of shifts, stratagems and inventions by which we've contrived to fend off or duck many of the blows inflicted by malign chance or irate gods on our distant forebears, who had little choice but to endure them as they could. Disease, fatal injury and famine, though never wholly eliminated, have come to play smaller havoc with our actuarial prospects than they used to, even a mere century ago.

Until they haven't, as now, when unseen agencies continue to force the fact of our common mortality into uncommonly sharp focus for us. We have been jolted

awake, as our prospects have loomed more ominously with each passing day. Our thoughts have, quite understandably, lunched towards whatever immediate shifts seem to offer solace, shelter or solution, the way a standee on a bus or tram, thrown off balance by an unexpected lurch, will grope convulsively for whatever handhold seems nearest.

The immediate need, the imminent danger, will naturally seize our attention at the moment of its onset. Should a tiger leap from the undergrowth, you should be running and not reflecting on the finer points of feline anatomy or some lines from Blake's 'The Tyger', as relevant as either might be to your plight. But the single most arresting thing about either the tiger or the god is the intensity of their respective gazes:

In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?

...Blake asks the tiger, the rhetorical question suggesting his wonderment at this top predator's beautiful fatality. Homer's depiction of Apollo kneeling to take aim also communicates a sense of terrible purpose and might. An invisible agency, powerful, deadly, pitiless and looking at you.

Today's coronavirus is more omnidirectional: we move among its swirling veils all unknowing, yet its purpose is no less definite than Apollo's, if less conscious. The mere sense of its presence prompts our disquiet, quite apart from its curtailment of our most common routines by the demands of quarantine's hygiene regimens, or the stark spectacle of bodies stacked in refrigerated trailers as mortuaries fill with the dead. These are all large-scale phenomena, visible and tangible to the bodily senses we rely on to navigate the world from day to day in relative safety. But the coronavirus itself is invisible, like all the microbial flora with whom we share this planet. Unequally: their biomass outweighs that of all the vertebrate species combined. And they're everywhere, on both sides of our skins, loitering opportunistically on anything we touch from doorknobs to banknotes to our own faces, helping our guts digest our food, or breaking down fallen trees, leaves and other dead matter deep in the forest.

That said, such questions of scale and provenance don't seem to figure that much in our immediate responses to the enormity of the business. Deity and microbe alike

play the role of awful invisible assailant. The technicians of the sacred and of medical science—ancient priests and modern researchers—play their parts in articulating our response to any sudden imposition, rendering the invisible and incomprehensible at least partly intelligible. Enough to get on with.

But to get on with what, exactly? We all can remember whatever form of 'normal' governed our lives in those increasingly distant days before the coronavirus shock wave overtook us. How we imagine any conclusion to this episode tends to fall back on our memory of a status quo ante. Why wouldn't it? The very idea of 'normal' refers back to our sense of past regularities. None of us can prove beyond all doubt that tonight's sunset will be answered by a next-morning sunrise. Still, we count on it as though it were so proven. QED. Rinse and repeat.

All the received wisdoms and shibboleths of contemporary politics and economics, which have (among much else) lifted Donald Trump to his present bad eminence and left parliaments in many lands beset by extreme right-wing parties and ideologues, need reviewing in a fresh light.

Yet will anything ever be the same again? In the ancient paradigms such unsettled and unsettling crises looked like expressions of divine displeasure that demanded change, the recognition of some wrong or imbalance we were somehow obliged to set right. In our modern moment, nature has simply pitched us an awkward ball, and not for the first time, although this particular iteration, with its wide-ranging social ramifications, has moved with a branching, fractal awkwardness. Issues echo and re-echo in different registers. Humankind has always shared the world with disease, natural disaster and fatal accident, yet these, within living memory at least, have tended to fall as statistical outliers and anomalies. But today, in the face of this pandemic's wide-angle demographics and high-order contagiousness, it has become everyone's problem and has exposed a number of inadequacies and inanities in how we conduct our economic, political and social relations.

On so many city thoroughfares, the wheels of commerce have fallen eerily still for months, and the normal channels of our labour and endeavour have ebbed to trickles whose pre-pandemic flows will not be restored anytime soon, or ever. Voices have been raised in some quarters demanding a swift return to 'business as usual', protesting that this interruption of capitalism's inertial grind, if it were to continue for much longer, would inflict irreparable harm not only on national budgets and financial markets but even on the delicate innards of our Western psyches themselves. How else, we might chorus with Chaucer's worldly Monk, 'shal the world be served?' But even if a restoration of some such presumed regular service were possible, would it not resemble the dubious wisdom of vowing to 'rebuild' communities in regions we know to be unusually prone to wildfires, earthquakes or floods? Setting up our lemonade stand for the fiftieth time in the centre lane of a superhighway?

Many aspects of this pandemic display febrile qualities beyond the raised body temperatures of those it has directly touched. Disparate phenomena register its presence, both directly and indirectly, exposing systemic pathologies in how the world has tended to go about its everyday business. There is much we don't know about the specific origin of COVID-19, but we do know that the global infrastructure of international travel and commerce has furthered its swift spread. At the same time, the abrupt cancellation of so many scheduled airline flights did more in a matter of weeks to reduce the relentless increase in greenhouse-gas emissions than decades of conferences and activism. The command-and-control design psychology of modern open-plan offices and assembly/production lines exposes workers to risks of contagion analogous to those faced by battery hens and stockyard cattle. The closure of a Smithfield meat-processing plant in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, once more exposed to public view the confronting conditions under which workers and animals alike are forced to play their parts in the industrialised food chain, a putatively 'essential' service likely to foster both more animal immiseration and the further spread of the virus.

The political domain has put its thumbs on the scales too, in obvious and less obvious ways. The Chinese government and the current Australian and US administrations all sought initially to downplay the severity of the outbreak, with sometimes bleak results.

Because of widespread closures, this March was the first month in eighteen years that US schools reported no major firearms incidents, even as the president tweeted encouragement to antigovernment activists protesting social-distancing and lockdown measures in a number of states with Democrat governors, many protestors asserting their ancillary 'open carry' prerogative by toting assault rifles for added emphasis. Placards bearing non sequiturs such as 'Give Me Liberty Or Give Me Covid!' lent an air of manic disconnect. Political manoeuvring and display delayed or confused public efforts to contain the virus. Early frenzies of antisocial profiteering on stocks of toilet paper and cleaning supplies presented a grim enough first-order pathology, but this has been overtaken by an exponentially accelerated wave of antisocial mayhem, at least in the United States, spurred on by an increasingly incoherent 'cheerleader' chief executive.

Grasping calculation, ill-focused self-regard and crude imposition of autocratic will: the dramas of the juncture we have reached play out a fever chart of late-capitalist pathology. Surely these are signposts pointing precisely in directions we don't want to go. Nothing so grand as an Olympian god singling you out for a serve of nemesis, on the one hand, but clear enough that none of us should have to puzzle over their big-picture setting. We must keep heads and hearts open to pushing back against not only the pressures of the immediate situation but against the default notions of 'normal' towards which we are already being shepherded by the 'grownups in the room', while the coffers of Netflix and other streaming services bulge with the readies of binge-watchers and distraction-seekers.

There's nothing wrong with entertainment per se, of course. A few decades before Chaucer, the Italian poet Boccaccio imagined a party of young Florentine aristocrats who, fleeing an outbreak of bubonic plague, take refuge in a country villa with servants and victuals. There they pass the time by entertaining each other with the tales of love, lust and (mis-)adventure that make up Boccaccio's *Decameron*. All in one go, they provide their own entertainment and contribute to a landmark of world literature. The Black Death that reshaped the societies in which Chaucer and Boccaccio wrote was a total game changer, whose impact exceeded the most pessimistic forecasts of COVID-19's by many orders of magnitude, carrying off 30 to 60 per cent of Europe's population.

To simplify a complex matter, the demographic shuffle triggered by the fourteenth-century plague made any simple return to the routines of the prior feudal order impossible: the various societies of Europe had to learn how to do things differently, and many historians argue that what we imagine to be our modernity has its roots in the reconfigurations of social, political and religious order that followed those troubled years.

England was then mired in the opening decades of its own forever war (of roughly a hundred years' duration) with France, which did not end particularly well. Yet those years of sporadic plague and chronic war heralded the Renaissance and the age of Shakespeare and all that followed, in its motley, ambivalent splendour. I triangulate with poets here: Dante, Boccaccio, Chaucer, Shakespeare. Their substantial realignments of faith and imagination, tradition and innovation, critique and speculative play made them the house band (across their three centuries!) that played the world through its pivot from medieval to modern sensibilities.

But what about us moderns, then? How might we negotiate our pivot to whatever might come next, how finesse a seemingly (to our foreshortened vantage) immemorial status quo into hitherto untested patterns of exchange, communication and interaction, not necessarily grounded in the old grind of zero-sum, winner-takes-all, mechanised, monetised, Monopoly® legerdemain à la Davos? In his 1821 *Defence of Poetry*, Shelley declared poets 'the unacknowledged legislators of the world' who call to our attention 'the before unapprehended relations of things'. Along with countless others, all the poets I've named in this essay, from Homer to Blake and Shelley, gave uncanny voice to their sense of how the vital elements of their worlds danced with one another.

Am I suggesting we should turn over whatever recovery programs we eventually conceive to some world council of poets? If, like me, you have the merest inkling of the history of poetry and of those who've channelled its muse down the ages, the very idea will give you pause. In sober truth, I know of no poet, living or dead, to whom I'd cheerfully consign the fortunes of our world. Poets, even relative dilettantes like me, tend to be a shambolic lot, all in all. Occasionally beguiling entertainers but indifferent governors. The old chestnut about organising a piss-up in a brewery springs to mind. To be fair, Shel-

ley was proposing no such nonsense, but his notion of poet-as-unacknowledged-legislator still packs a punch we would do well to ponder as governments start weighing in with policies, plans and projects.


First, those 'unapprehended relations of things'. Let that idea simmer for a bit. All we know about the world and our place in it comprises nothing but 'relations'. The first lifts of our infant learning curve involve us in stumbling negotiations between near and far, high and low, light and dark, warm and cold. Full and hungry. Familiar and stranger. The human mind is a constantly threshing relation machine, hoovering up first bodily experience, then experience of what can pass between body and body, person and person. By adding to that store of experience, we enlarge consciousness and expand our horizons of the possible, whether by our own exertions or by overhearing the exclamations, songs and warnings shouted down or back to us by forward observers of the imagination who have posted themselves out front or up there.

The viral pandemic has entailed (at first blush) a drastic reduction of possibility, on many fronts, in many dimensions. This has been only compounded in the United States by the exposure of the entrenched social issues now convulsing communities in every quarter of the country. But for all of us, much of what used to proceed as everyday business no longer answers to our expectations, so our first task must be simply a matter of not foreclosing possibilities prematurely, of remaining capable of more than strict calculation and logistics, as vital as both those activities may be in particular spheres. Initial efforts to drive certain numbers up (surgical masks, ICU beds, ventilators, etc.) or down (infection rates, fatalities) have answered certain urgent necessities. Demographic analyses can expose trends or reveal social biases in the spread of infection. All such enumerations can serve as powerful tools. But tools can only project or impose, as extensions of will and intelligence. They work within the horizons of what is possible, as it appears to common consent and thought. But if everything looks like a nail to someone holding a hammer, such appearances do not represent exercises of imagination but rather its reduction. The kinds of subjunctives drawn on by the active poetic imagination reach much farther, albeit only tentatively, and on the whole towards no practical resolution of anything. But keeping such what if's alive as long as possible, realising just one or two out of

maybe millions, is the only way to coax a clapped-out feudal order towards a renaissance, given time.

In the end I can do no more than speculate, and only very broadly at that. A limitation, I concede, though it has its uses: it can free the mind to consider scenarios that most may dismiss out of hand as complete moonshine. And for good reason. But at the same time, why not? The lockdown has left us all with more time on our hands, which we should spend wisely. Or even foolishly: why shouldn't I choose to imagine, say, some invisible Shelleyan college of poets? A real college¹, not some bureaucracy bound by the strictures and minutiae of funding committees or budget reports. A collegium, in the ancient sense of the word, a body of colleagues, souls bound by a shared interest or vision, maybe fired by poetry's associative energies and free to pursue them wherever they might lead. 'Unacknowledged legislators'? Not in any ordinary sense of 'lawmakers', i.e., drafters of rules and regulations that govern the behaviours of responsible citizens. Perhaps mediators of heaven's secret sympathies, of what some esoteric traditions refer to as the etheric currents, the hidden founts that spring from any vital enterprise, wells of living powers that counter the downward sag of inertia and death.

My only substantial point here is that the COVID-19 crisis presents us with a rare opportunity to reconsider the methods, manners and materials employed daily by our societies, if we can hold ourselves open to such possibilities. For as long as we remain in relative lockdown, we should direct our free time to such speculations and pursue them at every opportunity. All the received wisdoms and shibboleths of contemporary politics and economics, which have (among much else) lifted Donald Trump to his present bad eminence and left parliaments in many lands beset by extreme right-wing parties and ideologues, need reviewing in a fresh light. The further harrowings, historical as well as current, exposed by the death of one man in Minneapolis, demand even more radical reorientations of major social axes. But could any program of social engineering, under the aegis of calculable number and quantity and the mere horizontal (re)distribution of stuff stand much chance of lifting us meaningfully out of the slough we find ourselves presently mired in?

Of course the virus must be contained, people will need to get back to work, and the movement of goods and provision of services will have to resume. But dare we ask what work, exactly, or which goods, moving how, and what sorts of services? Aspiring merely to get the country 'open for business' again elides any number of larger questions that need asking about the dance of our world's vital elements. Answering those questions will require more choreography than management, more fostering than forcing, more gardening than grasping. Can we look away from the mirages and eidola of employment statistics and GDP numbers, property values and market trends, policy statements and commission reports? Can we find the heart to turn from them to the human realities such numbers crunch? The question hangs over all the upset, distress and grief of the past several months. We have yet to formulate our answer. 

¹ 'Ligament' and 'ligature' share a common etymology with 'college' and 'colleague'.

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Image: Matteo de Mayda, Vo' (Padua), Italy, Tomb of Adriano Trevisan, seventy-eight, first certified Italian victim of COVID-19