

## *Covid-19*

# **‘FOR WEEKS NOW IT HAS BEEN EVENING’: A LETTER FROM NORTHERN ITALY**

FEDERICA FACCHIN

It is March 2020 and I am watching a video showing the Covid-19 version of a funeral procession, the most terrifying thing Italians have ever seen in the wealthy North, at least since World War II. Military trucks are transporting dozens of dead bodies from the city of Bergamo to other cremation sites, because the local morgues are no longer able to cope with an unimaginable amount of coffins. Families will not have the chance to come together to honour the dead. Their loved ones died alone. This is inhumane, but we have been asked to accept it, and so we did.

The virus attacks our relationships and our certainties, as exemplified by these two brief clinical vignettes. B just said goodbye to her father. He has high fever and respiratory problems, and an ambulance has arrived to rush him to the hospital. In a couple of days, things get worse and he is moved to intensive care to be intubated. His daughter is now emotionally devastated by an unbearable sense of guilt. She thinks she might have infected her father, because she remembers she had the symptoms of a cold at the end of February. G has been suffering from a ferocious insomnia since the beginning of the Covid-19 outbreak. He feels his reality has collapsed like a paper castle. The dystopic world created by the virus reminds him of the famous novel *The Road*, by Cormac McCarthy. For G, the familiar has become uncanny and horrific after the eruption of a *real* that science named Covid-19, with a traumatic disconnection between the past and the future.

From the steps of St Peter’s Basilica, in an empty, rain-soaked Square, the Pope reminds us that we are all in the same boat, frightened like the disciples who wake Jesus up and say, ‘Teacher, do you not care if we perish?’ (Mark 4:38). The storm brought by the virus reveals our helplessness and uncovers the false, superfluous convictions around which we have constructed our world.

Work and consume, again and again. Get what you want. Enjoy. These superego imperatives fed contemporary capitalism and gave human beings inhabiting the lucky side of the world the illusion that life can be guaranteed. We assumed the right to devastate this planet like modern *conquistadores*, and we found ourselves the living hosts of a minimalistic being with a crown, an invisible agent of chaos.

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‘For weeks now it has been evening’, from the Pope’s Urbi et Orbi blessing, 27 March 2020.

After an initial phase of denial – ‘this is a little more than seasonal flu’ – the lockdown forced us to face the truth of our fragile nature, which led to a second euphoric-manic phase, with flash mobs on our balconies, music and dances on rooftops, fireworks, and a variety of coloured ‘everything will be alright’ drawings made by our children.

It is now April 2020. In a short time, humanity offered its best and its worst. On the one hand, thousands of healthcare workers of all ages responded to the government appeal to create a task force to support health services in the worst-hit regions, including mine (Lombardy). The rhetoric of resilience and heroism spread on our social media, with heart-breaking videos showing the physical and emotional exhaustion of these men and women who will never forget the death they have been breathing through their masks for an endless amount of time. Most Italians patiently respected the rules and accepted an indefinite period of distancing from their family, friends, and lovers.

On the other hand, after the supermarket panic-buying, hundreds of people were charged for violating the containment measures. At the same time, a conspicuous group of postmodern inquisitors started the new Covid-19 ‘witch hunt’ against runners, the most dangerous contemporary criminals. In the background, the silent tragedy of elderly people – the bearers of the memory of our past – who have been dying in nursing homes, and the unspeakable anguish for our uncertain future. Will we still have a job? Will we meet our loved ones without fear of infecting them, or being infected? Will the idea of *contact* become automatically linked to that of *contagion*?

Science and politics, with their renewed cooperation after the Covid-19 outbreak, each day provide terrifying numbers and a variety of rules, but very few answers to our frightening questions. This new frontier of biopolitics aims at restoring power and control by reducing life to its biological dimension. Psychoanalysis, with its rigorous ethical principles, reminds us that human lived experience is much more complex than this, since it conceives life in the field of language. This practice deals with the singularity of the subject, which cannot be entirely captured by scientific laws. Psychoanalysis deals with the *real* of suffering as uniquely experienced by each individual, a *real* that cannot be quantified, but can certainly be approached with words.

#### WORDS OF FREEDOM

Today is 25 April, our Liberation Day. Seventy-five years ago, the joint effort between Italian resistance fighters and the Anglo-American allies led to the fall of Mussolini and the end of the Nazi occupation in our country. Today, the word *freedom* has a slightly different sound, but the words of a 17-year-old partisan, Tina Anselmi, who later in life became the first female minister in Italy, may give us strength and hope. I found them in her book entitled *Storia di una passione politica* [*History of a Political Passion*] (Anselmi & Vinci, 2016). I am pleased to translate them for you: ‘In our normality, we found the strength, the courage, or perhaps the

carefree unawareness to fight the horror. And to the death that was threatening us, hitting our families, our friends, our towns, we responded with our desire for life'.

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#### REFERENCE

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FEDERICA FACCHIN PhD is a psychologist, a psychotherapist with a Lacanian psychoanalytic orientation, and a researcher. She is currently an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology, Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan, where she lectures on psychodynamics and on the clinical psychology of family relationships. She is also a lecturer at the Freudian Institute of Milan. Her clinical practice includes psychological counselling and support, and supervision. Her paper 'Psychoses without symptoms and stabilized psychoses: Lacanian suggestions for treating fuzzy contemporary clinical phenomena' was published in the *BJP* in 2016; she is also a peer reviewer for the Journal. Address for correspondence: [federica.facchin@unicatt.it]