



Reflections

on Covid-19 during an Interregnum

'The only thing that we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history'

Hegel

Our retrospective view in the comfort of post-COVID-19 renders a comfortable perspective on the effect of the viral pandemic on the behaviour of individuals and groups in society. It also reflects its effects on virtual reality in which we had hitherto existed recreationally while mixing freely, before restrictions of the latter escalated to a matter of the imperative rather than the subjunctive – mandatory prohibition of public movement. The rhetoric we encountered haphazardly and purposely online throughout the time of unnerving panic rendered what to us now seems a truer sense of the emotions and attitudes that were generally received or contested, from a wide spectrum of irreconcilable purviews. Political, economic, ethnic, national, tribal, gender, racial and other tropes, wrestled for star-billing in the mise en scène of the dress rehearsal of the Prohibition period. Questions that arose, at least in our minds and dialogues, were whether prevalent inferences held and manifest over the onset, duration and aftermath of the pandemic were fact or fiction, and the most plausible answer would perhaps be that they were neither. We start this discussion from the precarious position of one who casts an eye of poetic interpretation on the verisimilitude of events of and utterances on the virus. Our poetic eyes and ears heard and saw a multi-vocal vision that sporadically vacillated between binary polarities of Darwinism and Biblicism, at times flirting with both. We do not

claim doing fair justice to assertion of the binaries, but merely postulate them as a compass of convenience, whereby we can make some sense of what seemed senseless at the time.

As we look back, it might be propitious for us, now that the apogee of the virus is in a stage of denouement, to gird ourselves to postulate a *post priori* argument, or even a major premise, that we would have liked to adduce at the time. The premise pursues an argument that the predominant semiosis of COVID-19 was thematically a trajectory of discourses that were distinguished by dialectics of fact and myth, optimism and pessimism, belief and apostasy, sympathy and cynicism, empathy and indifference, romanticism and reality, secularism and spiritualism, parochialism and universalism, and dystopian realism and utopian idealism. In terms of form it ranged between eloquent rhetoric and studious silences, and history and poetry, where 'best lack[ed] all conviction and the worst [we]re full of passionate intensity.' At the time of its currency, the virus, these contradictions could never find a synthesis, then and now. Instead, their emphasis found fecundity and intensity during the lockdown, which occasioned a torrential surge of activity on the internet. It became a virtual monopoly for disseminating and receiving news and updates of the scourge, vying with major television stations. News anchors proliferated and as public news flourished, professional and mobile device cameras flashed with high frequency, interest aroused by professional and amateur bewildered journalistic inquiry into the inexplicable behaviour displayed by the flock of dissidents who appeared indifferent to the lockdown regulations.

Many across the spectrum of age, with the majority leaning in favour of the young, cried foul upon witnessing the nonchalance or deviance of their compatriots and total disregard for the President's decree of safety on the one hand, and restriction of their freedom of movement on the other. Not all recognised the fact that the lockdown was a *conditio sine qua non*. We are speaking from a South African context, but without excluding re-enactment somewhere else on the African continent, on a balance of high probability. The concomitant of our premise, which may now seem like stating the obvious and lack of originality, is that COVID-19 had no historical or theoretical antecedence, but only approximations. Had we expressed that view at the height of the virus, it would in any case not have undermined the 'witches of Salem' syndrome, as portrayed fictionally by Miller and Condé, that in some circles found its *raison d'être* of sentiments against the Chinese, either stereotypically as a race of rogues or a delinquent nation state, the People's Republic of China. In the latter regard it is uncertain whether the stimulus was injected by the other super power, which is presided over by a man whose personal attributes seem to border on the psychopathological, or works of similitude with Koontz's 1981 science fiction, which refers to a scientist who defected from China to the US with information of a virus called Wuhan-400, manufactured in a laboratory of the city where the virus was hypothesised to have originated.

Given the history of plagues, we could not help but brood aloud on defectors or dissidents from the mainstream of epidemiological expertise and common sense, most of whom rode on the optimism of divine intervention. One thing



Reflections on Covid-19 during an Interregnum continued

seemed clear, then and now, that beneath the exhibitionism of ignorance, lack of education and religious fundamentalism, in opposition to arrogance of book education and intellectualism on the other, there were all encompassing undercurrents of nihilistic attitudes that stirred restlessly among the destitute. It seemed COVID-19 appeared to ingratiate itself with the proletariat as the equaliser of social stratification – the servant of retributive and poetic justice. The patron saint of the economically mobile had brought death to the door of the poor and globally immobile. The irony was that enlisted under ‘essential services’ depended unproportionally on blue collar jobs.

Sentiment in the townships portrayed a fearlessness of the proximity of death, as people casually roamed the streets in herds and revelled, all the while subject to the surveillance of social media vigilantes, paparazzi and watchful eye of the Althusserian ‘Repressive State Apparatuses’ that were always ready to pounce violently against the poor and considerably against the wealthy. When one considered the abject standard of living in the townships perhaps it was not at all incredulous that ‘poor education’ and ‘death’ were a trope inherent to the narrative arc of the impoverished. One could almost hear them proclaim: ‘Death is nearby? Not much has changed.’ If the saying, ‘There are things worse than death,’ has but one iota of credibility, we would imagine the veracity of Goldstein’s echoing of Bava Batra, and perhaps nod with reluctant acquiescence, that “Poverty in the house of a [wo]man is worse than fifty plagues.”

Now that we are speaking in the luxury of distal temporal deixis, we allow ourselves the indulgence of proceeding to advance our Budapest gambit on the chess board of disputation by quoting a

poetic excerpt from a prose narrative of the 19th century:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way – in short, the period was so far like the present period, when some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received ...

(Dickens, 1857)

In the context of the embargo on the trade of alcohol and cigarettes, and prohibition of sale of other non-essential commodities, arguments were posited and lobbied that stated unequivocally how the sale of such products would have a stabilising or detrimental effect on the country’s economy and small and medium businesses. This was without so much as an anecdotal citation of evidence or any health considerations. Amidst the various outcries, there existed a rogue group of people whose virtual lives seemed to continue unchecked; while some actively avoided confrontation with it, certain groups zeroed in on the corollary of family unity or class or professional affinities in sharing of edifying reflections. In other circles the workspace appeared to be evolving irreversibly for white collar workers who relished working from home, all those in favour rallied in solidarity, not without riposte from antagonistic camps of extroverted inclinations. In simple terms the COVID-19 pandemic, by its own manifesto, called for unity by isolation and did not fail to divide us further by bringing us closer together. The paradoxes and ironies of these discourses and acts played themselves out in theatrical dialectics.

The descent of Coronavirus coincided with the end of the climactic and figurative ‘spring of hope’ in 2020 in the northern hemisphere, that it would be circumscribed to its place of genesis, and the interphase of autumn, that brought home the fact that it was most likely to spread than retreat, and threatened to most likely continue through a major part of a ‘winter of despair.’ Participants in what evolved into a private and public grand drama included a cosmopolitan populace of personae: Poets, novelists, journalists, commentators, story-tellers, fortune-tellers, prophets, soothsayers, seers, clairvoyants, sages, pastors, priests, humanists, theologians, eschatologists, politicians, economists, social scientists, astrologers, alchemists, biochemists, quacks, shamans, biologists, physiologists, geneticists, immunologists, pathologists, epidemiologists, laypersons, demagogues, epistemic megalomaniacs, politicians, charlatans and a horde of ignoramuses, clowns, fools, buffoons, idiots and morons. This was to an extent that it manifested a pandemonium of postmodernism, whereby every authority made room for itself and ‘insisted on its being received.’ There was hardly a rumour or murmur about Africa having had no role to play in the genesis of the spread of the virus. For the first time, the cartography of the world was flattened to *an earth*.

Major dialects of these complex, complicated and complicating anchors of consciousness could be viewed by an objective observer from an overarch of the tripartite and irreconcilable hypotheses of empiricism, religion and agnosticism, derived respectively from a shorter epoch of adherence to Darwinism, about two centuries, and longer epoch of belief in Biblicism, two millennia. In their belief, adherents of the former sought solutions through deployment of knowledge of laws of physics and chemistry, while advocates



Reflections on Covid-19 during an Interregnum continued

of the latter, in their incredulity, supplicated for suspension of these natural laws for divine intervention. Epistemological ecumenists, in the secular sense, lived with a hybrid of both dyarchies of epistemology. This theatre of conflict between the realms of knowledge and para-knowledge was a re-enactment of former times of plagues, e.g. the plague of 1918, that is reputed to have decimated 50 million people. The exuberance of effusive output of knowledge through private and public channels was testimony at that point, 'that we had everything before us.' Yet there was abundance of ignorance to share, and the dearth of definitive solutions was evidence that 'we had nothing before us' to bring the plague to an end. There was no room for the luxury of objectivity.

The semiotics of COVID-19 became a grand narrative that attracted interest and advocacy from knowledge derived from learning, reading, education, assimilation, enculturation, acculturation, socialisation and propaganda; from epistemology to ontology – each speaking the tongues of its discipline, religion, politics, ideology, conviction, perspective, perception, purview and consciousness.

While the Malthusian thesis of population, pestilence and famine might have made sense to a sceptical degree of remarkability, any semblance of logic was suppressed by proliferation of often times perplexing attitudes of the personae that engaged in a discourse of dialectics that reduced their themes and mythemes to active, reactive and passive acceptance, acknowledgement, intransigence, denialism, subterfuge, resignation, surrender, submission, nihilism, obstinacy, and resilience, that could not have led us 'direct to Heaven' of a redemptive solution but 'direct the other way' of extermination. Each chorus beat its drums and blew its trumpets in a triumphal march following

its drum majors, soloists, prima donnas, protagonists and messianic visionaries, to be derived from either the physical (sensual) or metaphysical (spiritual) view of the world, and dancing to a choreographed tragedy of mayhem and fatalities. We thought the earth was:

*Turning and turning in a widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

(W. B. Yeats, 1919)

There were indeed many 'turning gyres' of intractable behaviour and grandstanding. Institutions that founded their authority through democratic elections, pseudo-democracy, autocratic imposition, coups, and other devious means of usurpation, found themselves presiding of a wasteland of ignorance, a major part of which they created. Over and above there were also religious organisations that mirrored the political, by founding themselves on false prophecy, deceptions, spiritual blackmailing and material extortion. Thus, the turn of events accelerated into a roller-coaster of 'turning and turning in a widening gyre,' from the epicentre of 'falconer' positions of authority. Inhabitants of the 'zone of being' flaunted their arrogance, derived from the power of their material existence, while the 'zone of non-being' wallowed in fear, helplessness and misguided defiance of lockdown regulations. We held our peace because of phobia of drowning in truculence of amorphous argumentation.

Religious bigotry romped into public and private discourse with prophetic overtones of judgement every so often. It

transformed the ordinary congregant into a messenger of messianic proportions or condemnation of Sodom and Gomorrah. Among the most widely quoted scriptures the Book of Revelations loomed large. In some instances, it was apparent that the Christian faith, perhaps Islam and Judaism also, was used irresponsibly to subvert medical instruction and contravene scientific inquiry. While political and economic institutions were subjected to criticism, some religious institutions instead obfuscated with capricious scorn of secular scrutiny. How much of that accounted for the negligence perpetrated by the general public one could only speculate at the time, with a view unfavourable to religion.

The COVID-19 pandemic spawned and mentored many conspiracy theorists into existence. There emerged one dubious and malevolent political or religious agenda after the other, one neither more plausible than the next and none backed by a hint of irrefutable circumstantial evidence. No definitive talk of any treatment or cure prevailed over the collective undying desire to express condemnation of *thy neighbour* or wax lyrical about personal fantasies of a post-COVID-19 utopia, outside of the medical profession. Furthermore, despite remarkable, albeit imperfect modus operandi in combatting the virus, sense contended with a hotbed of capitalist rhetoric of self-preservation. The immediate needs of the poor were drowned out by the chorus of pleas to government for financial relief among the elite. Business owners, professionals and entertainers clamoured for personal compensation like a child imploring a parent to breastfeed it.

A united front was exposed for what it truly was, nothing more than a front, and the usually philharmonic patriotic



Reflections on Covid-19 during an Interregnum continued

song and dance was a discordant melee of individual voices. The virus decimated its victims physiologically; when affected, parties tune of social interest became plagued by a sense of foreboding and fraught with imperatives such as 'stay at home.' Its political ramifications – bans imposed on non-essentials goods, alcohol and cigarettes chief among them and the prohibition of public gatherings – visited psychological terror upon the uninfected, at times one was hard-pressed to discern which interest, health or luxury, triumphed.

We thought that the mayhem unleashed by COVID-19 was reminiscent of the opening chorus of 'Oedipus Tyrannus.' In fear of sounding anachronistic in our interpretation of the unfolding drama, and accusations of veering far from diagnosis and prognosis by hiding behind sophistry, we confidentially considered:

*Look around you, see with your own eyes –
Our ship pitches wildly, cannot lift her head
from the depths, the red waves of death...
Thebes is dying...*

*and the women die in labour, children stillborn,
and the plague, the fiery god of fever hurls
down*

*on the city, his lightning slashing through us –
raging plague in all its vengeance, devastating
the house of Cadmus! And black Death
luxuriates*

in the raw, wailing miseries of Thebes.

(Sophocles, c335 BC)

There was a myriad distractions that misdirected acknowledgement of the devastation of this virus – ubiquitous torrents of information concerning things such as the mounting death count, new cases, arrests made, legal infringements committed, new sanitary elixirs, hygienic protocol, social withdrawal symptoms, etc., such that Oscar Wilde's words through Wotton could not have made better sense: 'Nothing can cure the soul but the senses

just as nothing can cure the senses but the soul.' It was not insensible to begin to question the pernicious impact that technology has had on its users, especially the all-reliable smartphone. The detriment it imposed on physical and psychological health is well documented, one has only to use a smartphone to become intimate with its gravitational pull of efficiency of transactional speed. The use of social media became an exercise in psychological catharsis through humour, comedy, satire, parody, and mimic; and terror through pathos of the apocalyptic tragedy that was inexorably pervading the world – the earth.

The arena of virtual reality surpassed capacity in this period when people could no longer physically run to their neighbour, relative, companion, friend or associate to find themselves. Humanity might as well be precipitously on the decline forever if we failed to use the emergence of the crisis to restructure society and education. When the fatalities of the virus hit the 50 million mark and surpassed it, we thought and hoped that the world would be impelled by unanimous inspiration that would level the hierarchy of propositions of discord.

The continents of thoughts that prevailed in the mainstream and periphery continued swimming in a turbulent and treacherous sea of contention and confusion. Besides

this, it evolved into a narrative that further developed intransigent discourses, that were a palimpsest of historical reactions to plagues. After the climax of the virus, public discourse was destined to lead each voice to its own genesis of knowledge, epistemological or ontological. The only redeeming acts were those performed by pragmatists who took to alleviating pain, reducing the spread of the plague, treating those who were infected, and doing clinical tests to find a cure. The rest is a category of irreconcilable custodianship of knowledge, facts and truths.

For our part, the fear of drowning was also petrifying, in that the dialogues between the two of us, of engagement with matters scientific and sociological, was intuitive rather than empirical, and not grounded on any episteme. We were overwhelmed by the thought of a *spiritus mundi*, that might judge us harshly. Now as we write, we are apprehensive that in the receding stages of this plague, it is only an interregnum, to another, which is already incubating, either naturally or through genetic modification. Were it not for self-imposed modesty, we would conclude this argument by affirming that every discourse about the COVID-19 found its orbit within the content and form of the premise we proposed *ab initio*. ☀

REFERENCES

- Althusser, L. 1971. 'Ideology and Ideological state apparatuses', in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. New York and London. Monthly Review Press.
- Condé, M. 1992. *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*. London. Heinemann. (Translated from the French by Richard Philcox).
- Dickens, C. 1985. *A Tale of Two Cities*. Harmondsworth. Penguin Classics.
- Fanon, F. 1986. *Black Skin White Mask*. London. Pluto Press.
- Goldstein, W. 2006. *Defending the Human Spirit: Jewish Law's Vision for a Moral Society*. Feldheim Publishers.
- Koontz, D. 1981. *The Eye of Darkness*. New York. Pocket Books.
- Malthus, T. R. 1798. *An Essay of the Principle of Population*. London. J. Johnson.
- Miller, A. 1953. *The Crucible*. London. Penguin.
- Sophocles. 2000. 3rd edition. 'Oedipus the King' in *The Harcourt Brace Anthology of Drama*, ed. W. B. Worthen. Orlando. Harcourt College Publishers.
- Wilde, O. 1985. *The Picture of Dorian Grey*. London. Penguin Books.
- Yeats, W. B. 1978. 'The Second Coming' in *Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*. London. Macmillan.