


Melancholy as a healthy strategy in times of great human crises

La melancolía como estrategia saludable en tiempos de grandes crisis humanas

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What happens in our thinking and feeling, when we visit a certain historical moment of the past, find references, situations, and thoughts, that make us think about the present?

Does the tango song ‘Cambalache’ composed by Enrique Santos Discépolo ensure the timelessness of the world’s misfortunes? However, by specifying that it happens in “506 and in (the year) 2000 as well”, it leaves a time frame of history outside of this sentence. Discépolo does not claim to be a historian, but rather a philosopher. And a philosopher of skepticism like few others, since he allows us to sing his philosophy since he made it known to the public.

But this is no more than a deliberate detour to point out that, in tango, skepticism operates as a radical expression of shared similarity, due to the wide variety of things and characters that insist on repeating themselves throughout history. This essay aims not to reflect on continuity, but on what is discontinuous, and incidentally, to question the notions of freedom and utopia. By allowing us to place freedom no longer in the field of the ideal, but that of its origin, while questioning the notion of freedom as an ideal, will allow us to support the idea of freedom as a possible exercise.

What I propose is to reveal that the idea of the end of the world has always existed throughout history, but that it has been questioned by exercises in freedom that created conditions of resistance, which protected its practitioners from succumbing to needy resignation. In times where this idea is established in the field of culture as almost hegemonic, characters or events arise that demonstrate the possibilities of being placed in it, without being permeated with the prevailing pessimism, and establishing a consistent way of life; a certain degree of bitterness turned into a method, or according to some: a melancholic strategy to transcend life.

History and medicine

Herodotus, considered the ‘Father of History’, lived between 484 and 425 B.C. Five years before his death, around 430 B.C., presented his work ‘Histories’ (also known as ‘The nine histories books’), each dedicated to a particular muse. Two revolutionary conceptual directions for his time are already insinuated in it: the first, that the gods do not intervene in human events (an approach that Thucydides would later radicalize, given certain hesitations in this regard by Herodotus) and the second, that from knowledge of the past we can extract valuable lessons for the present. In fact, his work begins this way:

“This is the Showing forth of the Inquiry of Herodotus of Halicarnassos, to the end that neither the deeds of men may be forgotten by lapse of time, nor the works great and marvellous, which have been produced some by Hellenes and some by Barbarians, may lose their renown; and especially that the causes may be remembered for which these waged war with one another”¹.



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Furthermore, his relationship with the philosophy of the time, Herodotus sympathizes with Heraclitus and both call for the readers of their work to participate with their own criteria about what they both expose². An all-ancient appeal, that will have its masterful future revelation in Kant, regarding his 'What is Enlightenment'³.

In turn, Hippocrates, called the 'Father of Medicine', lived between 460 and 370 B.C. He is born then, twenty-four years after Herodotus. His masterpiece, as an outstanding doctor of the School of Kos, will be compiled in the so-called Corpus Hippocraticum, which contains the collection of 70 medical works, and although the participation of more authors in said work is disputed, the sole authorship ended up being awarded to the doctor of Kos.

Their relations with other knowledges privileged Democritus and Gorgias. By the way, there is a legend that associates Hippocrates to the Abderites, inhabitants of the city of Abdera, Democritus' place of residence, and with a supposed illness of the latter, attributed by his fellow citizens:

"It is said, for example, that the inhabitants of Abdera, a city located in Thrace, on the north coast of present-day Greece, on the shores of the Aegean sea, went to Hippocrates with great concern asking him to go see Democritus, who 'apparently had gone mad...' There are different versions of why the atomist philosopher was called mad. One says that he devoted so much attention to his studies and reflections that he remained oblivious to anything else and did not even answer when called. Another, that he spent the day laughing at everything and everyone. Doctor Reverte Coma collects another version, which says he "went to the cemeteries at night to remove corpses, and took them to his house", and explains that Hippocrates: 'understood that he could not 'cure' -the philosopher- of the mania for learning, nor could he convince his countrymen that Democritus was not a sick man but an above average man dedicated to research, which could not be considered as an illness. And he refused the payment that the inhabitants of Abdera wanted to give him for his work".⁴

Herodotus and Hippocrates practice an exercise of freedom by which they can create something, that reveals other non-detectable things of the world, while different conceptions predominated. And thus, other possibilities to ensure its transformation.

Evil of many: ¿consolation of fools?

Neither of the two authors has promised that with their method humankind will know peace or the absolute absence of disease. Theirs is not ideology, theirs is, if you will, protoscience. The truth is, that by placing things in the order of the human, the discovery of what is fallible in the determination of events and diseases, establishes a principle of reality in accordance with the rationality of the moment and will place fantasy in the field that corresponds to it.

Today we know that by recognizing the true and probable causes of an illness, progress is made in the possibility of at least mitigating its consequences as far as possible. And, in subjectivity, such discoveries work to relieve suffering. A part of that relief derives from the fact that the doctor offers the patient knowledge that makes him aware of not being alone, that others like him also suffer from it. A knowledge that breaks the imaginary concern of assuming oneself to be the first and only victim of the injury.

It is about discovering no more and no less than an insurmountable fatality. But that is the very reason why it alleviates: in having no other choice but to accept it, this makes it possible to dispose of the energies in different directions, just as we would assume the certainty that we are born for death. However, being unconsciously immortal, the contradiction between what is known and what is desired requires us to live in community with others, and community and cooperation among equals arose in human evolution as a way of mitigating, if not of eliminating, the harmful effects that would derive from taking on adversity individually.

At least, we deprive ourselves of desolation, even if the relief is precarious and even frustrating if we turn absolute health into a possible ideal. In a humorous way someone said that life was a sexually transmitted disease, only cured by death. And another one, similarly pointed out that the great illusion of this time was to die relieved. The Greek notion of *affectio societatis* manifests the will to live in society, in order to preserve society itself. But the will to live, by exempting oneself from demanding from life the definitive solution to all ills, also implies that this is only possible with death. The discovery that we are not alone in the face of adversity, or that present adversities are not occurring for the first time in our history, makes us resilient to the desolation that others, those who consider themselves ill-fated, declare insurmountable.

Entering into community with others who share adversities similar to those of our time, enables us to also access the ways in which some of these others have overcome eventualities, taking them to another level; no longer just bearable but also useful for the continuity of life.

Current status of certain antiques

But in the unconscious, there is no temporality either. Neither contradiction, nor temporality, nor death. Some idea of what is freedom can perhaps be extracted from an experience such as the one announced at the beginning of this essay and which took us through the detour already presented.

The idea that “we travel through time”, because, compulsory memory, the unforgettable is at the same time a powerful certainty that we are alive. There is a tendency to represent current times as what some predict with astonishing certitude: probable end of the species, competing pandemics, nuclear wars, fast-growing impoverishment of populations, declining birth rates, increased violence, sharp rise in illness rates, depression, suicide, etc. All this in addition to the effects of global warming, melting of the polar ice caps, increased pollution, floods, etc.

If our representation of current time leads us to assume that we are the first victims of the events, the first victims of the threat of the end of the world, this probably explains both the popularity of the prevailing bad mood, and the vertiginous rise of distrust of democracy values to which technological development would be giving the necessary fuel, to turn it on the way to the precipice. There is a history of the idea of the end of the world and that history refers us to times of crisis that bear some similarities with our time.

Marguerite Yourcenar and Umberto Eco are two authors who with their outstanding works, *Memoirs of Hadrian*⁵, and *The Name of the Rose*⁶, respectively, fictionalize remote times during which the idea of the end of the world made its way through culture in an extensive and insidious way.

Memoirs of Hadrian

Yourcenar takes from Flaubert the phrase with which she introduces her *Memoirs* “Just when the gods had ceased to be, and the Christ had not yet come, there was a unique moment in history, between Cicero and Marcus Aurelius, when man stood alone”⁷.

That late-republican Rome in which the city and its old values no longer responded to the concerns of the population and, still without achieving other new values, in times of popular uprisings, of multiplication of seditious groups conspiring against Rome (“One day, the leader of one of these groups will occupy the throne of the Emperor and will inherit one of his titles, that of Supreme Pontiff...”), of famines and forced migrations, Yourcenar chooses Adriano as that man who, being alone, at the same time, was linked with all things. And in the same notebook he writes:

“Experiments with time: eighteen days, eighteen months, eighteen years, or eighteen centuries. The motionless survival of statues which, like the head of the Mondragon Antinous in the Louvre, are still living in a past time, a time that has died. The problem of time foreshortened in terms of human generations: some five and twenty aged men, their withered hands interlinked to form a chain, would be enough to establish an unbroken contact between Hadrian and ourselves”⁷.

He is, therefore, a man closer to Renaissance modernity and to the ancient Hellenistic world which he admired. He was enthusiastic about studying things in depth, the human body, for example; he regular visitor to the dissection of corpses, proposing, at the same time, to establish the multiple links between things.

The experience offered by reading this novel biography is multiple. In the first place, it is obvious that Yourcenar writes in the present and chooses a character, validated by the impression that he has of the loneliness of Man, at a given time. It is going back to where what is currently happening, already happened once.

very reason, that we can derive for ourselves sensations and affections that referring to the past, also resonate clearly with our present. The personality “of” Hadrian is the personality that Yourcenar presents just as he does, a transhistorical personality, not because it is repeated today through metamorphosis in one of the rulers of the empires, which are still legion, but because it still has things to tell us about the Roman Empire period in plain decline, a few centuries close to being transformed into the Christian empire.

Secondly, after the theory of relativity presented in 1917, time and distance are no longer absolute and are dependent on the observer. Yourcenar, the writer, and we her readers discover an example of how life can be lived in times of absolute uncertainty. With the favorable exception that neither she nor we have the responsibilities of an Emperor, we enjoy a relationship with time, which provides us with potential freedom, which demands of us, the creativity of the novelist, our desire to link our personal anguish to the horizon of time and the technology that made it possible for the book to reach us.

Thirdly, it was also the time of multiplying cults, almost all of them announcing the end of the world and the coming of the apocalypse. A time of attempted uprisings, in which Hadrian's hand did not falter to achieve their crushing, while his spirit was convinced of the impossibility of carrying out a total annihilation.

The name of the rose

Umberto Eco chooses the fourteenth century as the time frame to set the events which he fictionalizes: the investigation carried out by the Inquisitor William of Baskerville and his assistant Adso, about the crimes committed in an abbey, located in Northern Italy. A turbulent century like few others: wars between nobles and between monarchs, fifty percent of the European population wiped out by the Black Death, crops failure due to a so-called Little Ice Age which condemned the population to famine, a proliferation of preachers announcing the end of the world as a form of divine punishment... Albeit, immediately preceding the beginning of the Renaissance. William of Baskerville testifies to receiving the Greek arsenal that the Arabs had retained; his rationality prevails over the ignorance of monks and theologians: having attended a meeting of Franciscans with delegates of the Pope, in the middle of their discussion about poverty, considered heretical by Dominicans and the Vatican, he finds the occurrence of a series of crimes, in whose investigation he applies the method that he intends to teach his disciple, Adso of Melk, through the use of aphorisms and refrains, completely new to the boy. The fourteenth century, with the weakening of chains of vassalage and the advancement of agriculture, as well as trade, is the beginning of a transition, from feudalism to capitalism; With the introduction of the salary concept and the transformations of social relations of production and distribution, the monarchies leaned towards absolutism, and at the same time, began a real struggle in the ecclesiastical institution between cardinals and poor priests, which gave rise to the Franciscan order, among others, preacher of a critical attitude towards papal authority and its Dominican support.

The meeting of the papal delegates (lead by the Dominican inquisitor Bernard Gui) with the Franciscan delegates, including William, would address whether or not the Franciscan conception of poverty constituted heresy⁸.

At that time, the printing press had not yet been invented and only scholars had access to books. It was on an immense amount of books that the palimpsest took up the lost Greek literature, preserved by the Arabs. A book, on Comedy, attributed to Aristotle, is considered by Jorge of Burgos, a monk at the abbey, to be an “instigator of impiety and diminution of due fear of God.” The book’s page corners, which the monks will leaf through by moistening the fingers with their tongues, are impregnated with poison. Burgos ends up being discovered by William of Baskerville, while the meeting between the Franciscans and the papal delegates ends with a high probability of the former being declared as heretics.

The novel announces what is to come and what we are cultural heirs of in the West. The personality of William of Baskerville reports on the possibilities of settling oneself in a difficult world, also full of announcements about the end of time. The printing press will bring unforeseen possibilities, since the relationship of each reader with the sacred book and with other books, will create a direct nexus with the word, previously with restricted access to them and mediated by educated readers.

Perhaps that explains why, as current readers of those fictionalized events, we feel that something that is talked about in there, is also talked about today in these dark times. For that same reason, the relationship between William and his assistant, Adso, is a relationship that can be thought of for times like this.

Testimony of what an apprentice knows to do with the relationship that he has had with his mentor. A distant teacher of the almighty sage, who bases his teaching method on mockery or contempt for the student and the refrain about how things were always better in the good old days.

¿And what about the Baroque?

But if there is a time more similar to the one we currently live in, that is the Baroque period. Bolívar Echeverría is perhaps the author who has delved the most into this subject in Latin America. A commentary on his book, *The Modernity of Baroque*⁹, expresses as a synthesis:

“In its suggestive and vertiginous pages, the baroque attitude is perceived as an extreme moral tension, as an extreme difficulty in living in the world, a tortured search for impossible reconciliations: complicity and shame, conformism and rebellion, mask and ecstasy. The theme is linked to several key aspects to our being and our history.”

Alonso Quijano and Miguel de Unamuno

This is what Bolívar Echeverría, in another one of his texts¹⁰, takes from the analysis made by Don Miguel de Unamuno¹¹ about the character located between the Renaissance and the Baroque, Alonso Quijano, the Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha. Also affected by the time in which he lives, Miguel de Unamuno going against the grain of time, that is, *practicing a true exercise of freedom*, chooses a character also located in times of widespread unrest.

In the times of Don Miguel:

“...the social life of Spain, which he perceived to be mired in the most tedious and opaque pragmatism, in a hostile judgment to every metaphysical finding, enemy of myth, affirming in its own way the “disenchantment” characteristic of the modern world described by Max Weber, replicator of the scientific discourse initiated in the Enlightenment and stuck in the positivism of the nineteenth century”¹².

The times of Alonso Quijano, represented in his niece, “paragon of sanity and realism, manipulator of priests, barbers and high school students, enemy of poetry: the same one that, already in the 20th century, frightened by the communist threat, will answer the call for help of Generalissimo Franco.”

Of course, with regard to the niece's time, it is not restricted to her own, it extends to our present... as if reaffirming the idea that today and the past have been a long-standing relationship, not anything new. But let's continue with what Echeverría highlights from Unamuno's essay. What will Unamuno say about Don Alonso Quijano?

Miguel de Unamuno makes the action of Cervantes's character signify as an expression of resistance against that world:

"Don Quixote, that is, the madness of Alonso Quijano, is for Unamuno the result of this gentleman's resistance to the burying of heroic Spain inspired by the "tragic feeling of life", the Spain open to the world and to adventure" .

The character of Don Alonso Quijano is a dramatization, a character, in turn, of Cervantes. For difficult times, times of war, plagues, the Counter-Reformation, the multiplying visions and apocalyptic messages, the condemnation of the book and of reading, the seeds of the Enlightenment in progress, the time of visibility of the universe by Galileo. Don Quixote would be the way to establish an imaginary "beyond" in the person of Don Alonso Quijano, and of course, in that of Cervantes.

A certain psychoanalysis theory tells us that freedom as an ideal should be set aside and rather "(take it) as something capable of being exercised and its implementation frightens and provokes a regression, a withdrawal"¹³. In this way, it would be a "melancholic strategy to transcend life" typical of Don Quixote, not a form of evasion. We must remember that for psychoanalysis madness is a defense mechanism that rules the exercise of freedom. For him, the imaginary consistency of the poetically transfigured world -of the world staged with the help of knighthood novels- has become, as a world of life, a thousand times more necessary and grounded than the real world of the empire of Philip XI, necessary world due to gold and based on the strength of weapons.

The disenchantment with what exists is transmuted into a vivid and creative imagination, at the same time, achieving a suggestion in the readers, which can only be explained by the fact that the content and the novel format resonate with the concerns, fought in line with the adversities of their time. What Cervantes does is exercise his freedom to imagine "a beyond", possible for the imagination, but of uncertain probability, as if unaware of his sowing, so that a new utopia can be established in the future.

A poem by Quevedo y Villegas

From La Torre is a sonnet written by Don Francisco Quevedo y Villegas, published in 1648, three years after his death¹⁴. Practically everything in the poem is written in a baroque style, but for our intent, the poem reveals a type of exercise of the writer's freedom, in the midst of the peace of a desert, where he withdraws from the bustle of the world in which lives:

From La Torre

*Withdrawn to this solitary place,
With a few but learned books,
I live conversing with the dead,
listening to them with my eyes.*

*Open always, if not always understood,
they amend, they enrich my affairs:
in rhythms of contrapuntal silence,
awakened, they speak to the dream of life.*

*O Don José, for those great souls
absconded by death, the learned
press avenges time's slanders.*

*In irrevocable flight the hour flees;
but it can be counted fortunate
when we better ourselves by reading.*

Withdrawing in this case means anything possible, except evading. Quevedo, with his act for “the lesson and study”, betters himself. Improvement of what? Improvement of the discomfort caused by the turbulence of his time, even if he has to choose the peace of the desert, since it was the necessary condition to access an attentive reading. Quevedo also establishes a means of exercising freedom for himself, facilitated by the printing press, to “converse with the dead” and “listening to them with my eyes.”

When the authors tie the discomfort with their time to the knowledge of authors of the past, what they serve is the dream of everyone's life, with this they mend or enrich their own affairs. How can we not recall here ‘Life is a dream’, by the baroque writer Don Pedro Calderón de la Barca? As I mentioned earlier, that possible “beyond” proves to be as grounded, if not more so, than the reality of the moment.

Partial conclusions

What we must emphasize about these “cases”, is that they are exercises of freedom in difficult times, *in order to make the unlivable, livable*, to be disobedient to the demands of the time period. This is the true radical practice of critical thinking, hidden behind the magnificence of its embellishments, written in code for attentive readers: give space for desire, to the imperative need of making the world a better place. Behold, the true act of resistance.

The chosen authors correspond to difficult times, as the current times are usually depicted. Technology has introduced new ways of relating to each other and to knowledge. The reactions are spread across the entire spectrum from pessimism to optimism. Discourses such as psychoanalysis are challenged by what seems to be novel, but is not, and by what seems to be permanent but is new. Thus, psychoanalysis is required to accept its unstable condition, which contrasts with undeniable lightning strike moments.

For the intense and infuriating popularity that sad passions have, translated into exercises of hate, wars, diverse violence, return of authoritarian values from the past, I propose a *quevedian* attitude, which linked to the ideal of the self, would serve as a fictional reality that turns what is unlivable in our own reality, as liveable.

“Bitterness as a Method”¹⁵ or “the melancholic strategy to transcend life”, are ways of proceeding to live beyond mere survival. A method or strategy that has nothing to do with the needy resignation of the vocational servant¹⁶, and much less, with considering that the social sciences must adapt to the world, as it is, to obtain authorization and legitimacy. Another necessary way of proceeding is critical thinking: by the desiderative decision against one's own prejudices, for the decision to articulate personal anguish with the traces that define the horizon of the time, and finally by renouncing to wait for redeeming messiahs, who preach action based on purely voluntaristic determination. We are in a position to offer creative aptitudes, whose purpose is precisely to produce ways of living “a beyond” and to recognize the imperative need not to represent freedom and utopia as goals but as possible practices.

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