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Syndromes

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Abstract

I check my phone whenever I have a pause between two things - as if each section of time needs to be filled with doing something; and thus feeling as if just standing there, without anything particular to do, would be unacceptable, I open the screen and look. I do it in the elevator, while I wait for the bus, or for the train, or while I queue up at the airport gate before a flight; even at the gym, between one set of reps and another. On top of this, on some of these occasions the silicone earbuds of my ipod (yes, I still have my trusty ipod) isolate me as much as possible from what surrounds me. Heifetz playing Tchaikovsky, or Schubert performed by Richter or the Tallis with Plaestrina proceed to block out the noises of the traffic, of the voices, and even of the announcements that I should be listening to: in other words, the people. The exercise is the following: I hold my smartphone, I open my mail box, Whatsapp, Telegram or the text messages, that by now pretty much only my telephone company sends, and I start browsing the messages. Then, without really reading them, but after having briefly looked at the names of the senders, I start deleting them.

Syndromes

Raffaele Donnarumma
Translation by Angela Condello

I check my phone whenever I have a pause between two things - as if each section of time needs to be filled with doing something; and thus feeling as if just standing there, without anything particular to do, would be unacceptable, I open the screen and look. I do it in the elevator, while I wait for the bus, or for the train, or while I queue up at the airport gate before a flight; even at the gym, between one set of reps and another. On top of this, on some of these occasions the silicone earbuds of my ipod (yes, I still have my trusty ipod) isolate me as much as possible from what surrounds me. Heifetz playing Tchaikovsky, or Schubert performed by Richter or the Tallis with Plaestrina proceed to block out the noises of the traffic, of the voices, and even of the announcements that I should be listening to: in other words, *the people*. The exercise is the following: I hold my smartphone, I open my mail box, Whatsapp, Telegram or the text messages, that by now pretty much only my telephone company sends, and I start browsing the messages. Then, without really reading them, but after having briefly looked at the names of the senders, I start deleting them.

In some cases, I can even select a whole string of messages, and I can make them vanish all together with just one gesture: but that corresponds to the bored joy that I suppose was felt by lazy and bloodthirsty Herods of ancient times when ordering a hasty execution. These tyrants were indifferent towards the fates of the multitudes,

deaf towards the fate of single individuals, and their indifference was reiterated every time they ordered the slaughter and collective devastation of the masses. The real pleasure, the one that requires diligence and effort, emerges when it is not possible to do it all with one sweep of a finger, like in the case of the chat groups. With them, at least on Whatsapp, one must choose every single message, wait for the little square on the left, click on it to see the tick, click on the trash icon, confirm to be sure to eliminate the messages, put your finger on the “erase” box and not on “undo”, and - only at that point, irreversibly!, the operation is over, the vacuum has swallowed emoticons, pictures, words.

With emails, one should pay more attention: an email by Ryanair could be a simple advertisement, or it could remind you that you must do the online check-in for a flight you have to catch in a couple of days, if you don't want to pay the 55 Euro penalty. Academia.edu can notify me that, during the last week, my name has been mentioned by a certain number of papers (but if I want to know *which* papers, I must pay), or, alternatively, it can recommend a paper to me that might pique my interest. However, a message sent by the secretary of my Dean or of my Chancellor might invite me to a conference about themes that I don't know (and I do not intend to know) anything at all, or it can summon me for an important meeting or to join a Commission at my University. Amazon can recommend deals and objects that are absolutely uninteresting to me, or notify that the book I have ordered will arrive late, or that it is no longer available. There, unlike in the case of messages that, because of their brevity, one reads, the joy would correspond to the choice not to open the mail at all and to erase it directly: but in that case, I would then find it on my computer, and thus better to see it appear, verify rapidly that I can choose *not* to read it (even more so if, in order to access its content, I must download images or open files), and - boom! - I can trash it. I confess that if the email is longer than ten lines and if it is not addressed from someone directly to me, and me alone,, but has been sent by Anonymous Entities to myself as a whatever member of an undifferentiated Collectivity, or as one number of a large series that, for this reason, reduces me to an Anonymous Shadow, then it is also possible that I preserve the message,

but as far as reading it is concerned - well, no - it will never happen.

What kind of damages or dangers does this refusal entail? For sure, I have missed some deadline, skipped some meeting, wasted some opportunities to apply for funding or to benefit from a bonus; but every joy comes with a cost, and, in the end, the risk is worth the effort. If I then kick myself because of guilt for my inattention, or if I feel like an idiot because I have not done what I could have done, that still makes me feel thrilled and such a thrill could never be produced by some money - pain, after all, is the only certain proof of our existence.

And yet, few things give me such a vindictive, irritated and thus fulfilling satisfaction - as erasing something from that worthless and annoying mass of information notifications announcements warnings greetings summons adjustments hints requests petitions reminders orders injunctions threats - that arrive through a discontinuous and incessant flux. Maybe it is a revenge against those who, by adding my name to a blind list of meaningless *others*, have erased me already, and thus do not deserve an answer: not even when they dare to conclude that I cannot answer anyways; maybe it is the fatuousness of a narcissist protest; maybe it is pure and simple laziness, indolent resistance against my duties - but in the end, why wouldn't I have the right to react like this? Maybe it is informatic Luddism? Or pathetic resurgences of anti-modern Romanticism? It would not be a crime; and after all, some juridical systems have started protecting the right to disconnection, some sort of "do not break my balls", but established *de jure condendo*. But what I propose is a larger rebellion, a complete sabotage. Since, at least up to now, emails almost never contain notification of the reception, and since one can also bypass the double tick of the read message, I invite you to follow my example: do not read them at all, do not even *open* them. Let us raise silent billboards to protest, invisible billboards, on which there would be written: I DO NOT WANT TO KNOW; moreover, to increase the rebellion, let us conceal them so that the tame tyrants against whom we are protesting cannot read what we wrote, and they would look out their balconies in their palaces and, in front of a mass who demonstrates silently, they could not understand, and

would feel a knot in their throats and would not be able to breathe.

The first ones to diagnose the excess of information in the Western world were probably Flaubert and Nietzsche. *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*, *Salammbô*, and above all *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, together with the *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*, describe an ungoverned proliferation of *savoirs*, which by now are lost, unverifiable and contradictory. I would name this the 'Bouvard and Pécuchet syndrome', BPS: its symptoms are coaction to mental hyperkinesis, confusion, progressive intellectual disrepair, idiocy. The *Second Untimely Meditation* qualifies the syndrome as epochal, and it describes the pulverization of the *Kultur* in the *Zivilisation*: if one wants to know too much, that is unhealthy, because he will know nothing. Nietzsche escogitates revolts and palingeneses which are more than human; Flaubert, with his irony and sarcasm, is more vulnerable, and for this reason I consider him as more contemporary.

Flaubert and Nietzsche, besides, reflect a transition that would have, then, changed the frame of things entirely. If, up until the dawn of modernity, knowledge was something that one should go and look for purposefully, and the search was just for the few (and happy?), from then on the mechanism would be overtuned: information would come and look for us, and it could (and would) reach, if possible, every single individual. Today, with modernity and mass society at their highest, one cannot expect that the tragedy takes place in the realm of Thebes or of Elsinore; and thus, the tragedy wears discouraged and clowny garments, and has found, more than in newspapers (which we would have to buy) or on TVscreens (which we still have to turn on), its privileged headquarters in the mailbox.

When my father saw his postbox full behind the opaque glass, which was there to protect his privacy and at the same time would hint discreetly at the content, he would open the box, and he would take out bunches of flyers, letters and envelopes covered with cellophane, to then comment - disappointed and annoyed: "ah, this advertisement that I am condemned to receive every day: I cannot stand it!". In his exhaustion, the exhaustion of a FIAT workman coming home on the 5pm bus, one

could hear the moan of an entire epoch: it was the suffocated tremor of the *Zeitgeist*, a tremor that had elected him as its spokesperson and was embodied, as it was right, by a metalworker living in the suburbs - a species that within a couple of decades would have been swept away by the whirlwind of history, just like Tito would have dispersed the people of God seventy years after the Messiah had come. But the weak tremor of my father (and of the *Zeitgeist*) would turn into stubborn revolt, into stable and scornful denial. Shortly afterwards, on the mailboxes one would find stern placards: indicating that advertisements or junk mail were not welcome, they would command to leave it all in a (sad) container that was there on purpose, they would silently suggest that it was better to give up, and that delivery men should spread their infesting seeds somewhere else. In the gloomy discord of the co-owners, between the fights for windowsills and basements and garages, a first form of solidarity would prosper, and the entire community would strengthen its covenant by saying: WE DON'T WANT TO KNOW.

In the mailboxes, in fact, a sneaky and threatening mutation would take place. The syndrome of Bouvard e Pécuchet, the BPS, was a malfunction of the intellect, a strain due to the excess of environmental stimulation, whose injunction would sound: "please, know me". The mailbox syndrome, the MBS, compels action; it is an answer to the imperative that in its general form sounds: "do this", and, in its more specific form, sounds "buy me".

(Advertisement through mailbox, in my apartment building, arrives anyways. If nobody opens the door, they leave the flyers nevertheless underneath the front door, and so forth someone will slip on them, will hit their head, and will die. I only open the mailbox to separate cellophane from paper, and to then sort the garbage, as a good citizen does, following the rules of differentiated waste collection. I deflect my gaze, super rapidly, from the fliers of the home delivery pizzas, from the complimentary issues of the *Corriere di San Francesco*, from the oblong envelopes of Amnesty International).

But with email box syndrome, EMS, the virus takes on another mutation, it avoids the poor defenses of the spirit, and becomes

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aggressive and lethal because it is more accommodating and insinuating. Now, it is not enough to say - like Satan to Adam and Eve: “know”; it is not enough to whistle: “do, buy”. Now it has the skin, the eyes and the congeniality of Kaa, the hypnotizing snake of the *Jungle Book*, or of Sir Biss, the reptile of *Robin Hood*, and it whistles: “beeeee”. The illness does not contaminate the mere sphere of thought, nor that of action: it contaminates the focal points of identity.

It is undoubtable that media have transformed and shaped our identities - which is, of course, true, but which seems to consider only the possibility of an influence or of an interpenetration and thus a positive answer or an adequation, as if refusal, or resistance, or escape, were not considered as possible solutions. It would be like saying that rain has a decisive function in the history of humanity, without considering that it has determined, not only the invention of umbrellas and raincoats, but also that of rooftops, buildings and entire cities to provide repose from the rain itself. The trouble is that this flood of information washes away the terrains of the mind and it flows away by making the terrains sterile; or, on the contrary, it drenches the terrains and produces landslides and avalanches. Information! It is an aggregation of useless, poor and dull news. The abundance of messages produces an oversaturation of news, and it reveals that they are merchandise with low value or - worse - that they are harmful, like the food circulated by swindlers after the due date, when the cold chain has been interrupted. Once upon a time, knowledge was a high edge escort, that could be approached only through qualified agencies: it would be received in discrete apartments, in rooms with half-light and full of effused aromas; but these of today, are whores that beat in the street, slaves sold by bloodthirsty pimps, and - once thrown on the sidewalk - they gesticulate, they scream, they uncover their poorly reconstructed breasts - how many of them are still healthy? How many of them already have contaminated blood?

Assaulted by so many messages, our brain confuses them, and it does not know if the invitation for dinner comes from Bob or from Jane, or whether the most convenient rate is Telecom or Vodafone, if

the humanitarian emergency is in Asia or in Africa. The nausea grows, the instinct to escape likewise increases. The mind, tense and laboured, embroils itself. While they would like to fertilize the thought, the media pollute it; while they would like to push us to do something, they lead us to strike; while they tell us “you are this and this”, they lead us to think that we no longer have an identity, that we don’t exist anymore. The MBS belongs to the most insidious of all diseases: it is an autoimmune syndrome that works by sabotaging the world that assaults it, our mind works in favor of its own extinction, and begs to be turned off.

Actually, what is it that I erase, in my rage against Outlook or Gmail, Whatsapp or Telegram? Really, and only, what I erase is the presence of *the others*, the traces of their persecution? Some of them are completely indeterminate others, and their voice, expressed through automatic messages to which one cannot answer, messages that have escaped the anti-spam filter - that voice is not even a voice. Is mine really a defense of the “I” against external interference, a pure affirmation of my own right to be left alone, in peace? This angry aggressiveness is the alibi to express an aphonic fury, and a more outrageous one. In the end, what I erase are just parts of myself, it is indeed *myself*: not only because, in the long row of messages, there are also those written by me; but also because in the end what I “undo” is my possibility to reply, and thus my own voice. I don’t want to know, I don’t want to express my opinion: leave me alone and act like I did not exist. All this conceited request to demonstrate an existence, this irritating urging to tell, to do, to react, to be... - resembles an act of kicking a piece of carrion which lies on the ground, to then ask: “is it still alive”? In front of this confusing invasion, the best defense is that activated by the beast that pretends to be dead in order to escape the predator; the best answer, is silence. Clicking on the link is absolutely pointless, and likewise asking to be erased from the mailing list; it is more fun, every single time, not even to say “no”, but not answering at all, evaporating and wearing an astonished expression, with the empty eyes of a ghost. What is it that you want from me? Don’t you realize I am no longer there?