



THE DAY AFTER

The Post-Crisis IASA and Daemons That Can Help (A Farewell Address)

The concept of crisis (Gr. κρίσις) is originally linked to the concept of criticism (Gr. κρίνω). Consequently, the simplest and most accurate definition of a critical stance could read as follows: “it is an attitude of vigilant maintenance of a state of crisis.”

(Kubok, 2021: 27–8, 538)¹

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Enough is enough. The severe constraints of lockdowns, voluntary quarantines, and restrictive travel, coupled with a pervasive uncertainty about our survival, have profoundly heightened our appreciation for the freedom to interact with the natural world and with others in communal spaces. Our isolation within the confines of our homes has led to a deeper understanding: mere *absence of illness* does not equate to *health*. We have keenly felt that *living* encompasses more than just *being alive*. This epiphany heralds a significant shift: we, as *humans*, have transformed into inextricable components of *humanscapes*—extended, post-human entities with a broader scope than ever before. In the aftermath, we arrive at the onset of the twenty-fourth year of the third millennium, motivated by the recent global crisis that has spurred us to not just live fully, but above all, to live deliberately.

Significantly, IASA's origins also trace back to a crisis. Convened in Bellagio on June 1, 2000, twenty-two preeminent Americanists from twelve countries challenged the wearied, US-centric focus of American Studies. They advocated for the *de-centering*

1. Translated by Paweł Jędrzejko.

of the Americanist reflection by means of the adoption of a broader, more inclusive perspective that encompasses both hemispheric and transoceanic viewpoints. Seven years later, in his “President’s Report,” Paul Giles reflected on IASA’s inception, marking it as a pivotal moment in the field:

[...] the growth and development of IASA has been at heart [the] question of [...] what Fredric Jameson would have called historical necessity. When future chroniclers of academia look back in 50 or 60 years’ time, they will surely see that the shift to an international version of American Studies around the turn of the 21st century was brought about by a change in social, economic and cultural conditions that facilitated a convergence of three academic disciplines: Comparative Literature, Area Studies, and World History. Fifteen months after Bellagio, the jolt of 9/11 brought the conditions of globalization into more immediate and urgent focus, so that by the time the first world congress of IASA assembled in the Netherlands in May 2003, the intellectual landscape of American Studies had changed dramatically. (Giles 2010: 15–16)

Indeed, despite clear indicators of a brewing political crisis, the events of September 11, 2001, struck “unexpectedly.” The tragedy took the world by surprise, “jolting” it brutally, even though many of us had long been engaged in disseminating both scholarly and popular multi-perspective analyses on the discourses legitimizing policies that had, inevitably, led to destruction, loss of life, and unspeakable suffering of millions. *We had* issued countless warnings. And yet, frustratingly, war and pestilence always come as a surprise, regardless of our whistleblowing efforts. After all,

[e]verybody knows that pestilences have a way of recurring in the world; yet somehow we find it hard to believe in ones that crash down on our heads from a blue sky. There have been as many plagues as wars in history; yet always plagues and wars take people equally by surprise. [...] When a war breaks out, people say: “It’s too stupid; it can’t last long.” But though a war may well be “too stupid,” that doesn’t prevent its lasting. Stupidity has a knack of getting its way; as we should see if we were not always so much wrapped up in ourselves. In this respect our town-folk were like everybody else, wrapped up in themselves; in other words they were humanists: they disbelieved in pestilences. A pestilence isn’t a thing made to man’s measure; therefore we tell ourselves that pestilence is a mere bogy of the mind, a bad dream that will pass away. But it doesn’t always pass away and, from one bad dream to another, it is men who pass away, and the humanists first of all, because they haven’t

taken their precautions. Our townsfolk were not more to blame than others; they forgot to be modest, that was all, and thought that everything still was possible for them; which presupposed that pestilences were impossible. They went on doing business, arranged for journeys, and formed views. How should they have given a thought to anything like plague, which rules out any future, cancels journeys, silences the exchange of views. They fancied themselves free, and no one will ever be free so long as there are pestilences. (Camus 1991: 37–38)

The iconic quote from *The Plague* aptly sets the stage for my reflections as I conclude my term. My musings, more contemplative than purely theoretical, confront our *Demons of Self-Awareness*: the demons that ruthlessly invade the everyday space of collective human experience when a traumatic event “not made to man’s measure” attempts to force *agency* to yield to *powerlessness*. In this respect, the pandemic-like war—transforms affected territories into spaces of speculation. The seemingly familiar space suddenly reveals itself as *unfamiliar*, and the previously binding “grammar of the world” begins to falter when the linguistic categories that once were efficient in organizing the epistemic relations of the “known world” no longer suffice to explain the “new world.” In such situations, “reason,” albeit not necessarily “asleep,” finds itself ill-equipped: it lacks relevant categories to address the new state of affairs, and therefore proves powerless. And then—demons come awake.

Intentionally substituting “monsters” with “demons,” I draw upon Francisco de Goya’s renowned etching *El sueño de la razón produce monstruos* from his *Los Caprichos* series (1797–1798), aiming to emphasize the nuanced senses of the word *demon* in the Western tradition. As is well known, the Greek word *daimōn* carries no negative connotations. It denotes a “deity” or a “genius,” a causative power that renders a person unique. A *daimōn* thus empowers individuals to actively shape their reality. It is only in its later, Latinized incarnation, that the semantic field of the lexeme shifts towards negativity: *daemonium* is an “evil spirit” of a lower category. Hence, embracing this concept in the original Greek sense, one can understand “the awakening of demons” as a positive process: a creative (though possibly hopeless) attempt to overcome the powerlessness of language to resolve the aporia, or as a challenging endeavor to navigate the limitations of the language with the view to conceptualizing new epistemological categories

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derived from extra-linguistic experience in order to reinvigorate human agency. Conversely, if one decides to adopt the Latin sense of the word as the fundament of one's *weltanschauung*, one may be propelled towards a perhaps more tempting, but potentially much less productive explanation of the human condition. A *daemonium*-based order may seem attractive by virtue of its simplicity, yet, in the long run, its epistemological productivity essentially rests upon the reduction of existence to Kierkegaardian "living towards death" in "fear and trembling." This dichotomy, however, seems to collapse onto itself in the face of the question of "the heaviest weight": the question of *responsibility* for one's own actions:

[...] What if some day or night a daemon were to steal into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: "This life as you now live it and have lived it you will have to live once again and innumerable times again; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unspeakably small or great in your life must return to you, all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!" Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the daemon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: "You are a god, and never have I heard anything more divine." If this thought gained power over you, as you are it would transform and possibly crush you; the question in each and every thing, "Do you want this again and innumerable times again?" would lie on your actions as the heaviest weight! Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to long for nothing more fervently than for this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal? (Nietzsche 2001: 194)

The Nietzschean daemon figure, beyond good and evil, dismantles the Christian dichotomy; in the daemon, the demon/god binary collapses. He is the causative power leading individuals into a realm far from their comfort zones, into the ambiguous territory of aporia. In the liminal space, individuals must face their own questions, and seek ways to answer them to regain peace. This is the principal role of the inhabitants of the *Pan-Daimōn-ium*², who exert their influence, selectively or otherwise, over "all humans"

2. Contrast this term's meaning with the well-known Miltonian concept of *Pandemonium*.

(*pandēmos*). Foremost among them is Nietzsche's *Daemon of Eternal Return*, confronting us with the notion that life, like an eternal hourglass, might be a cycle of repeated existence, with us—mere “specks of dust”—caught in its perpetual turning. Contemplating it “in Greek” allows us to expedite the development of our unique ethical frameworks (action). Conversely, thinking “in Latin” might intensify feelings of helplessness, spurring profound contemplation on inertia (resignation).

Although apparently both these perspectives are radically different, the idiom of the *Daemon of Eternal Return* seems akin to the language spoken by Ecclesiastes: “That which has been is what will be, That which is done is what will be done, Whatever is has already been, and what will be has been before” (Ecclesiastes 3:15 NIV). Emphasizing the idea of perpetual recurrence, such language may—quite possibly—resonate equally well with Western thinkers and their Hinduist, Buddhist, or Taoist counterparts alike. In each case, however, true, fearless, acceptance of the concept that “there is no new thing under the sun” either necessitates *belief* (or the *suspension of disbelief*) in a transcendental order (if the demon is read through Latin), or in the potential of one's agency (if the demon is read through Greek).

Equally vital is the subtle guidance of the *Daemon of Ratio*, as it transitions belief into the realm of immanence. Granted, that in philosophical contemplation of reality, we are urged to withhold judgment until hypotheses are substantiated. Yet, this deliberate *pause-in-belief* does not imply a passive acquiescence to unfolding events or an unthinking reliance on divine intervention. This methodical pause is a necessary step: the *Daemon of Ratio* demands the elimination of logical fallacies and the meticulous gathering of *e-vide-nce*—factual elements that influence discourse and propel action—prior to engaging in diverse hermeneutical analyses that validate judgments. Importantly, discourse is not the core essence but a distinctive aspect of existence, a perspective echoed in Nietzsche's reflections on facts and their interpretive nature.

Facta! Yes, *Facta ficta!*—A historian has to do, not with what actually happened, but only with events supposed to have happened: for only the latter *have produced an effect*. Likewise only with supposed heroes. His theme, so-called world history, is opinions about supposed actions

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and their supposed motives, which in turn give rise to further opinions and actions, the reality of which is however at once vaporised again and *produces an effect only as vapour*—a continual generation and pregnancy of phantoms over the impenetrable mist of unfathomable reality. All historians speak of things which have never existed except in imagination. (Nietzsche 1997: 156)

In translating Nietzsche's insights into Ricoeurian phenomenological terms, the *facts–prefigurations*—available to our discursive apparatus only as *vapors*, or *mimetic narratives*—would be seen as *configurations* of reality. This process, in turn, forms the foundation for the *refigurations* performed by narrative recipients. However, mimesis thus understood hinges firstly on the extent to which the narrative recipient acknowledges the chronicler's authority and, secondly, on the recipient's willingness to engage with the *always-already*—to face the aporia inherent in endless semiosis. Considering that human experience is inextricably linked to the world in which one exists, and may have no beginning outside of it, an individual is perpetually an *always-already*-subject, interpreting reality through *factual* lenses. This raises a pivotal question: what are the morally actionable, effect-producing *facts* within this framework?

Amid the chaos of pandemics or wars, the conflict extends beyond mere human struggles with (their) commonsensically understood “demons”—fears, ambitions, traumas, desires, angsts, and all of other conditions and structures always-already in place even before we become aware of them. Although, beyond doubt, such “side effects” of being-in-the-world or being-with-others generate facts that are effect-producing, whether these facts prove to be morally actionable depends on if and how we engage them. This is why I claim that, at least in the Western perspective, the conflict also entails, perhaps more crucially, a fierce battle between the *daimōn* and the *daemonium*. Recognizing the eternal recurrence of such catastrophes as pandemics or wars, the “Greek mindset,” embracing the *daimōn*, fosters an existential philosophy that emphasizes participation in the realm of immanence, shaping our ethical considerations and energizing actions. In contrast, the “Latin approach,” in constant fear of the *daemonium*, seems to foster the perception of self as permanently plunged in “fear and trembling,” despairingly “sick unto death,” and prone to attrib-

uting malevolent forces to the “evil spirits,” thereby generating configurations that shift the narrative towards self-absolution, and ultimately legitimize refigurations that diluting personal responsibility delegate it to transcendence. Embracing Greek thought, we engage in an ongoing quest with *facta-ficta*, revising language critically (Gr. *κρίνω*), without expecting finality in our categories, acknowledging that our imperfect language is essential for defining our existence within immanence. Conversely, “Latin thinking,” in which demons are seen as elements of a transcendent realm, unreachable without relinquishing the self—or as part of a faith-based narrative, and in which human is potentially lacking tangible impact—involves the risk of rendering us indifferent to historical lessons, legitimizing a fatalistic *nihil novi* as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Of course, *daimōn*-based thinking is not risk-free. Yet, erring in the effort to revise the once-sufficient, but now exhausted epistemological categories is a causative act: after all, the Latin word “errare” has several meanings. It may mean “to make a mistake,” but also to “wander without direction,” or “to become lost on one’s way”—this is the word used by Homer’s Latin translators to describe Ulysses’s wandering in search of Ithaca. And even if we suspend, or abandon, our search for the “lost” path, it does not mean that we have stopped erring—erring is an invariable component of human existence even if we choose to make a “therapeutic” leap of faith. However, if we *purposefully* fail to obey the prompting of the Greek *daimōn* and shrink from shouldering “the heaviest weight” of which the proponent of *Gay Science* writes, we doom ourselves to sending “reports from the besieged city” time and again, forever. If we do not take responsibility to blow the whistle when we see rats in the streets dying by the thousands, we effectively permit ourselves to join the ranks of those who will doubt the reality of the pestilence—or war—until people begin to die. And then we will need “Latin” demons to blame, because the sense of guilt “would possibly crush” us.

And here we are, at the onset of 2024. The war in Ukraine still raging, the conflict in the Middle-East more bitter than ever, our Colleagues dead in the absurd shooting at the Charles University in Prague. Should we give up? Should we grow content with *nihil novi*, even if we do not have any evidence that the *Daemon*

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of *Eternal Return* has indeed caught us in the cycle of repeated existence? Or should we embrace the *daimōn* and unleash our causative potential, actively shape our reality, err, and shoulder “the heaviest weight”? I can only answer this question for myself, but I believe we would not have all arrived where we are now, if we did not share the same intuition. All of us, the “old guard,” on our way towards the shadow line, and the IASA Emerging Scholars; both the seasoned IASA members and the newly admitted Americanists, we are here to err together. At IASA, we believe that our responsibility as humans-of-letters—in the broadest sense of the phrase—is to make sure that the question “Do you want this again and innumerable times again?” asked by the daemon in Nietzsche’s thought exercise indeed lies on our actions as the “heaviest weight.” As teachers and scholars responsible for the history of the future, a history that tends to repeat itself, we have the power of agency. As scholars and scientists, we have the will and the skill to use the effect-producing *vapors*, the *facta-ficta*, to err our way out of the discourses that imprison us in the everlasting cycle of suffering. We drive our points home by means of reading literature, film, performing arts, history, social and material realities, legal discourses, and many other interpretable objects, not necessarily tangible, not necessarily in physical existence. After all, as Daniel Defoe, whose aphoristic observation Albert Camus adopted as the motto of the *Plague*, points out—“it is as reasonable to represent one kind of imprisonment by another, as it is to represent anything that really exists by that which exists not” (Defoe 1720: 18). Guru Gobind Singh went even further when he ordained Guru Granth Sahib as his successor, thereby equating the human agency with the agency of the—largely poetic—text. Let us allow ourselves to see ourselves as *extended-humans*, not only inseparable from our universe, but also responsible for it, as caring gardeners cultivating “an attitude of vigilant maintenance of a state of crisis” (Kubok, 2021: 27–8, 538).

Deliberately exercising our own agency through fiction we exercise deliberate life: a life rooted in the principle of responsibility. Having made erring our profession, we choose to err responsibly, professing mindful, careful empathy. We are here, because, like Camus, we realize that “though a war may well be ‘too stu-

pid,' that doesn't prevent its lasting. Stupidity," the writer aptly observes, "has a knack of getting its way; as we should see if we were not always so much wrapped up in ourselves." We are here, because our compassion allows us to see *humanscapes* beyond the scope of our own egotistic selves, and that gives us a fighting chance to exorcise the demon of stupidity out of this most beautiful of worlds. Living deliberately, we should not feel guilty for not having been able to achieve that goal yet, for not having been able to prevent Russian invasion of Ukraine, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the shootings in Prague, the conflict between Israel and Palestine, or the death of George Floyd. Rather, as researchers and teachers, we should credit ourselves with our agency in preventing all the wars and plagues that never happened because we have been consistent in successfully opening up eyes every day.

Karma always gives you back what you give the world.

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Abstract: Amid the chaos of pandemics or wars, the conflict extends beyond mere human struggles with (their) commonsensically understood "demons"—fears, ambitions, traumas, desires, angsts, and all of other conditions and structures *always-already* in place even before we become aware of them. Although, beyond doubt, such "side effects" of being-in-the-world or being-with-others generate *facts* that are *effect-producing*, whether these *facts* prove to be *morally actionable* depends on *if* and *how* we engage them. Summing up the mission of the post-Crisis IASA, I build my argument around Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of personal responsibility in the face of the *Daemon of Eternal Recurrence*, Paul Ricoeur's phenomenological hermeneutics, and leading Western existentialists to demonstrate that, at least in the Western perspective, the conflict also entails, perhaps more crucially, a fierce battle between the *daimōn* and the *daemonium*. Recognizing the eternal recurrence of such catastrophes such as pandemics or wars, the "Greek mindset," embracing the *daimōn*, fosters an existential philosophy that emphasizes participation in the realm of immanence, shaping our ethical considerations and propelling actions. In contrast, the "Latin approach," in constant fear of the *daemonium*, seems to foster self-perception as constantly plunged in "fear and trembling," despairingly "sick unto death," and prone to attributing malevolent forces to the "evil

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Keywords: demon, pandemic, Nietzsche, IASA mission, Ricoeur, Camus, existentialism, daimōn, daemonium, crisis, International American Studies Association

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*Life Matters:
The Human Condition
in the Age of Pandemics*

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