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Temporary Blended: Why Ethics of Stasis Still Matters

FABRIZIA ABBATE

Università degli Studi del Molise
fabrizia.abbate1323@gmail.com

Abstract. The etymon *στάσις* goes back to the Greek word *ἵσθημι*, which means “to stay”: this ancient Greek verb denotes presence, spatiality, permanence. In these pages, *stasis* is the perfect word to describe the unusual dimension built all around us by the advent of the Covid pandemic during the lockdown months in our nation. Our daily movements and activities were stopped, we were forced to stay at home as a form of social distancing, or there were those who had the obligation to remain enclosed in healthcare facilities. This paper will describe three hermeneutic figures for the *stasis*, using suggestions that literature, visual arts and philosophy have been offering for centuries: the *night*, the *threshold* and *distance*. They all converge to define the outlines of an ethics that should be reaffirmed in the present, as little pieces of a mosaic brought to light.

Keywords: Pandemic, Ethics, Identity, Hermeneutics, Temporality.

*Tu sola sapevi che il moto non è diverso dalla stasi,
che il vuoto è il pieno, e il sereno è la più diffusa delle nubi.*
Eugenio Montale, *Satura, Xenia*, I, 14

INTRODUCTION

The third phase of temporary lockdown, decided by governments, has been reached.

People are all engaged in understanding how to protect themselves, how to face fears and risks, keep commitments and make decisions that will have personal consequences for us as well as for others. Established rules must be relied on and so too the opportunities offered by common sense. Will there be a return to mediating between obligations and freedom? Will moral scholars go back to doing what they are supposed to? Considerations will be written by philosophers regarding questions about the human condition in

the dark shadows of a crisis that is not only biomedical, but also social, economic, and ultimately existential. However, it will be gradually found that the usual activity of adapting ideas to new circumstances may not be enough; that the old and new paradigms can coexist in a blended format only until the breakthrough comes. It is still possible to delay for a while by grabbing at a capacity for synthesis and being determined to resolve or exasperate conflicts, but everything will come to an end: simply because it will not be enough. The truth is that people are temporary blended, and a conceptual stop needs to be made.

In the period of the pandemic, all people have the time to open a dictionary and study the etymology of words: the realization that time to leaf through a dictionary is actually one of those luxuries of the past that has been lost because of the increasing speed of the years leading up to Covid-19.

When looking for the meaning of the word stasis, three definitions come up: a medical one, as an abnormal state in which the normal flow of a liquid (such as blood) is slowed or stopped; in the laws of physics as inactivity resulting from a static balance between opposing forces; in a figurative sense, the meaning of stagnation, stop, stay, interruption, motionlessness, inaction, standstill.

The etymon *στάσις* goes back to the ancient Greek word *ἵστημι*, which means “to stay”: this Greek verb denotes presence, spatiality, permanence. By translating *ἵστημι*, many facets of a meaning are rendered in relation to reality, to something that remains in a stable position. Especially, verbs in the aorist tense, may be rendered in a variety of ways according to their context: *ἑστάθην* is the passive aorist of *ἵστημι* and it is rendered into “remained”, or “I stood” in the first person singular.

In these pages, stasis will be understood as the perfect word to describe the unusual dimension constructed all around us by the advent of the epidemic, during the lockdown months in our nations. We stopped our daily movements and activities, we were forced to stay at home as a form of social distancing, and some even had

the obligation to remain inside emergency health facilities, as what happened to medical and paramedical staff, to operators of services essential for the social welfare of the country, but also like those many ill patients unable to leave hospitalization, which have been salvific in many cases, but fatal in tens of thousands of others.

It is not possible to unilaterally describe this dimension of stopping and pausing in terms of inaction or opportunity to rest, and not even in terms of the unfortunate limitation, misfortune, harmful and pathological constraint, either because of the seriousness of the effects of the contagion or because of the economic and financial problems caused by the delay.

There is a long segment that could be drawn between these two extremes and that is represented by the fruitful work of all the social categories that have continued to maintain their identity and to exercise their skills, despite the blockade. Aspects of public discourse that have affected the political and journalist debates of recent months will not be discussed: instead, what will be looked at is stasis and to be examined by it, recognizing, firstly, its attribute of necessity. Suggestions provided by literature, visual arts and philosophy for centuries will be our work tools.

Three hermeneutic figures for the stasis will be described: the *night*, the *threshold* and *distance*. All three converge to define the outlines of an ethics that should be reaffirmed in the present, as little pieces of a mosaic brought to light.

The language of ethics may seem to be almost disconnected from reality, little functional, even more so in emergencies and crises that call into question biological and economic subsistence. But the philosopher Gabriel Marcel has already replied to those who persist in reasoning like this, lamenting the suffocating sadness of a world organized around the idea of function (Marcel [1955]).

1. GIVING IN TO THE NIGHT

In order not to abandon the references to classicism, one should stop and remember the bat-

tlefields in Homer's *Iliad*. The film version of those epic clashes helps in the visualization of the strength, the violence, the excitement of those bodies thrown against each other, in assaults of blood, blades and shields. Achaeans and Trojans faced each other on the fields of Ilius, and the gods encouraged and assisted them from Mount Olympus.

The *Iliad* evokes the power of war, hence the power of action and decisions to be taken, the fast and breathless clash with death, in which one cannot stop, otherwise one falls and loses: the moral imperative is to win, defeat the enemy, go forward, conquer the future. The vital and heroic memory of the *Iliad* should be kept in mind.

Yet, passages in the poem tell something more. They describe moments in which nothing seems to happen, moments that are not of silence, but exposed, sometimes even repeated. They are no less important than the others, just because they do not describe the daily enterprises, the fervor of work. Below is a passage, from Book VII, dedicated to the clash between the Trojan protagonist Hector and the bravest and most faithful of the Achaeans, Ajax Telamonius. The herald Idaeus, with wise words, keeps begging the two heroes to stop the fight.

And now had they been smiting with their swords in close fight, but that the heralds, messengers of Zeus and men, came, one from the Trojans and one from the brazen-coated Achaeans, even Talthibius and Idaeus, men of prudence both. Between the two they held forth their staves, and the herald Idaeus, skilled in prudent counsel, spake, saying: «Fight ye no more, dear sons, neither do battle; both ye twain are loved of Zeus, the cloud-gatherer, and both are spear-men; that verily know we all. Moreover night is now upon us, and it is well to yield obedience to night's behest». Then in answer to him spake Telamonian Aias: «Idaeus, bid ye Hector speak these words, for it was he who of himself challenged to combat all our best. Let him be first and I verily will hearken even as he shall say». Then spake unto him great Hector of the flashing helm: «Aias, seeing God gave thee stature and might, aye, and wisdom, and with thy spear thou art pre-eminent above all the Achaeans, let us

now cease from battle and strife for this day; hereafter shall we fight again until God judge between us, and give victory to one side or the other. Howbeit night is now upon us, and it is well to yield obedience to night's behest». (Iliad, VII)

The admonition has a sacredness such that it no longer falls within the sphere of the higher orders to obey, but in the ethical one of nature, with its mystery of greater things which cannot be disregarded. We must stop because night falls, and as night exists, we must let it take its course, performing its role of transition, darkness and rest, but also bringing forth its figure of fear, nightmares, in wait for the following day to come.

Thus, other scenes of the *Iliad* come to mind, describing the battlefields abandoned after the brutal struggle: those are moments of stasis and silence in which the clouds of dust still encase the bodies of the fallen, all scattered on the earth, between the sea and the setting sun. Everything is grounded where there used to be only running and fighting. These are eternal pages in which the question arises on the meaning of man on earth, on the meaning of short and precarious physical life, on the ethical evaluation of actions for good and for evil. «The peace of the evening», we could say using a phrase that particularly impressed Jacques Lacan: it could be a feeling of panic, for example, against the presence of the world – it is Lacan's poetic idea – or that particular anguish we attribute to the primitives, before sunset, when they fear that the sun will not return, which is not then something unthinkable, in short «a restlessness, a search» (Lacan [1981]: 155-156).

«It is well to yield obedience to night's behest» is an ethical warning indeed, it draws to mind justice based on the alternation of day and night established from before man appeared on earth. That justice demands respect; there is the day to make war and to work; there is the night to stop, to rest body and mind, but also to wait for the dawn, perhaps to be afraid of the shadows and to be alone, to fear the defeat of tomorrow, to hope for victory, or simply to recover a distance from facts.

In the night my hand is stretched out without wearying; my soul refuses to be comforted [...]. I consider the days of old, the years long ago. I said «Let me remember my song in the night; let me meditate in my heart». Then my spirit made a diligent search. (The Holy Bible, Psalms, 76-77)

Meditate, remember, wonder: the night of this *Psalm* is not of unquiet stasis, but rather, restlessness. It is a search and a wait for answers that will be found ready at dawn only if how to pass that night and that stasis, to which it is good to yield, would be known. «Notte troppo vasta, / [...] immobile mare ove il grido / è rottame inutile. / [...] mia notte, spazio non di vita / non di morte, / ove non è dato sapere / se una qualsiasi speranza d'approdo / sia ancora possibile (*Night too vast, / [...] motionless sea where a scream / is a useless wreck. / [...] my night, space not of life / not of death, / where it is not known / if any hope of landing / is still possible*)»: the poet, David Maria Turolto, reminds us that night means not knowing and not holding still (Turolto [1990]: 115)¹.

The night should not be viewed merely as factor of disorder, but as the main place of an indeterminacy, where potential metamorphoses open up new possibilities for different lives and identities. Stasis is what is found within the edge of the night.

One should not think an edge as a limit and a separation: the night just before dawn is almost, but not yet, day, just as the city borders are not yet countryside, and the outlines of an artistic work are not yet the theme of that work (Saint Girons [2006]).

Reclusion and anguish during the unfamiliar pandemic also bring to mind a statement by Susan Sontag:

Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the Kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place. (Sontag [1978]: 3)

2. HOLDING BACK ON THE THRESHOLD

The metaphor used to define the *ethics of stasis* was *giving in to the night*, which means the recognition of a natural limit for the time of acting and doing. Now, a second image: staying on the threshold. In this case, paintings should be used as an aid.

One of the cultural events which opening was delayed by the epidemic was the exhibition on Edward Hopper organized by the Fondation Beyeler in Basel. In addition to the beauty of the paintings, a short film in 3D can be admired, which was made by the German director Wim Wenders and who transformed the American spirit of the painter and the mood of the scenes represented in the paintings into film. «In front of Edward Hopper's paintings - Wenders says in the short film - I always get this feeling that they're frames from movies that were never made». So, this is why the director tried to imagine the stories of the characters portrayed (Wenders [2020]).

If the following three important paintings are considered, *Morning Sun* of 1952, *Room in New York* of 1932 and *Night Windows* of 1928², they all have in common two elements: a window, through which the interior of an apartment can be seen, and solitary characters encapsulated in domestic environments. But one thing is striking us: in those clean geometries and rarefied spaces, Hopper seems to repress a suspension of time, the stasis in which those figures are immersed.

The woman sitting on the bed has her gaze fixed on the wide open window, as the morning sun fills the silence in the room; the two characters in the New York room are next to the window through which they can be seen, one reading the newspaper and the other staring at keys of a piano, they are not looking at each other nor are they speaking to each other; the three windows on the top floor of a curved building are views of

² E. Hopper, *Morning Sun* (1952), oil on canvas, 71, 5 x 101,9 cm, Columbus, Columbus Museum of Art; *Room in New York* (1932), oil on canvas, 73,7 x 91,4 cm, Lincoln (Nebraska), Sheldon Museum of Art; *Night Windows* (1928), oil on canvas, 73.7 x 86.4 cm, New York, MoMA.

¹ The previous translation is unofficial.

a home environment too, a red cloth and a woman bending to do something; a sense of city solitude is perceived, of separation and isolation, but also, on the contrary, of communication with the outside, which existence those windows indicate (Laing [2016]).

Not to dwell on the psychology of Hopper's creations, in which a parallel can be drawn for the representation of citizens confined in their houses during the pandemic, but to continue in search of an ethics of stasis: in the trailer Wenders asks - «What's the story that is beginning here?» - referring to the stillness of the painted scene - «What will happen to these characters in the next moment?». He perceives that stasis is the first frame of possible courses of action, of a story that will start after the motionless situation. Wenders gives a key to read those scenes of reclusion neither punctually nor in claustrophobic manner, because he does not see them as simply firm, but already virtually projected forward into a story to tell. It's as though those characters stand on the threshold of the future, the threshold of the story to which they belong.

Michail Bakhtin theorizes about the *chronotope* of the *Threshold* in his writings. The Russian philosopher speaks of real historical time and space that find their moment of reflection in the literary genres that take possession of that reality and historicity. It is not by chance that Bakhtin gives the name of *chronotope* to this operation of narrative speculation (κρόνος and τόπος), and makes it an expression of the evolution of human identity in narrative plots. For example, Greek literature uses the chronotope of the *Road*, Medieval literature the chronotope of the *Castle*, and the early bourgeois literature of Flaubert focuses on the chronotope of the *Parlour*.

With the nineteenth-century novel, the evaluative-emotional chronotope of the *Threshold* arises, that is the chronotope of the *Crisis*, of all those decisions that change the course of life: it means being on the threshold of a change. In Hopper's work, it is the metaphor for looking at the interior of the rooms while the viewer remains on the threshold. The space and time on the thresh-

old are that of suspension before the events. Fedor Dostoevskij uses this chronotope in his novels: the long scenes in *Crime and punishment* set on the stairs, in the corridors, in the anterooms. It is as if all the anguish of the protagonist, Raskol'nikov, is expressed on those thresholds from which he looks and waits for life, and that he manages to cross only after having sought and waited for the answers from his deep conscience (Bakhtin [1982]).

Hopper's windows are the threshold on which all his characters stand: what will they do next? What course of action will they decide to take? What will their initiatives be?

All these questions call to mind the issues addressed by the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur regarding human subjectivity. A part of identity is composed of permanence in time, and Ricoeur calls it *idem* identity. *Sameness* is «a concept of relationship and a relationship of relations»: it is the numerical identity, for example, which allows identification and the recognition of a thing or a person as the same numerous times; it is the qualitative identity, that *extreme similarity* for which it is possible to replace one thing with the other, because it is precisely the same. It is still what Ricoeur calls «uninterrupted continuity» between the first and the last stage of a process: we can see it in human development for example because its fundamental criterion is the continuity of identity despite variations such as growth or ageing, which work to destroy similarity.

In simple terms, we are still the same at five years old and at fifty, despite the differences; what really constitutes this concept of equality is precisely the permanence in spite of the differences, the distance, the discrepancy of time.

Our genetic code, for example, or our blood type, are an aspect of identity *idem* that characterizes us and accompanies us throughout life. Our biological identity is in fact the same. *Sameness* is also the basis of our character, its immutability in the form of the dispositions acquired and settled, so that «by character – Ricoeur writes – I understand the set of distinctive marks which permit the reidentification of a human individual as

being the same» and he later qualifies this: «character designates the set of lasting dispositions by which a person is recognized»: habits, as well as acquired values and lifestyles (Ricoeur [1990]: 119-121).

But there can be no identity outside of time.

The other identity, *ipse*, is grafted onto this fund of permanence. Selfhood is not the perseverance of the same (which others see of us and recognize), but it is the belonging to ourselves, to that same as well as to the variations of that same, at every moment. *Ipseity* is the punctual identity of us with ourselves, the connection with what we are and do, the ability to take on what we are (character, habits, stratified values) and to see ourselves as the same, even when we find ourselves in front of time that produces events, changes, or fractures. The inestimable value of the *promise* relies on this dimension of identity as *selfness*.

We promise to keep our word, to uphold our commitments not because nothing will change or time will not leave its mark on us: we promise precisely because everything changes, precisely because time will pass and will affect characters, values and habits. We commit ourselves to remain the same in our given word, in a coincidence of us with ourselves despite change.

Finally, Paul Ricoeur proposes *narrative identity* as a synthesis of these two identities: this *fragile offshoot* is the story of oneself, the capability of configuring life experiences in a narrative structure.

So, what does *stasis* mean for us in view of these considerations? Stasis is the threshold on which we stop to regain possession of ourselves and to finally be able to take the initiative to say something, to do something, to promise, to commit. Just what we expect Hopper's characters to do after that moment when we see them stationary.

What is one called to do now after the pandemic's lesson of *sameness*? Now is the time to commit oneself anew, to give life to new initiatives. «Commit yourself with all your heart!» is an exhortation often heard. But if one never stops to strengthen oneself, what kind of commitment

and responsibility will ever be possible to achieve? This «responsibility of suspension» is tested in terms of distance from events and offers a direction to one's expectations (Miano [2020]: 90).

3. RECOVERING THE DISTANCE

The time during the epidemic was opportune to naturally hone in on the *ethics of stasis*. The long forgotten wisdom that there is a day to do things and, nonetheless, a night to which it is good to yield; it should have been relearned not to go running into the rooms of everyday life, but to stay on the threshold, to see what is beyond, to wait before taking initiatives. The third figure of this ethics of stasis is as equally important as the others: it shall be called *distance*, and it is linked to temporality and lived reality. «Recovering the distance» does not mean to speed up the pace, but it means to achieve a long perspective, managing to free oneself from a blinding proximity (Marconi, Pastori [1991]: 75)³.

«Abitare la distanza» (which can be translated as “inhabiting the distance”⁴), was the oxymoron used by the Italian philosopher Pier Aldo Rovatti in the early nineties to understand this gap between the stability of living and the elusiveness of distance (Rovatti [1994]).

La frase «abitare la distanza» suggerisce qualcosa come un'instabilità? Uno scarto tra l'essere da qualche parte, presso qualcosa o qualcuno, e il non esserci davvero? Suggestisce, forse, che il dimorare è proprio il riuscire a stare in tale scarto e che solo in questo modo – una specie di esilio da casa propria – possiamo ospitare l'altro? Oppure, ancora, il bisogno che abbiamo di far coabitare la presenza e l'assenza? (Does the phrase «inhabit the distance» suggest any-

³ In these considerations written by the Biblical scholar Gilberto Marconi on the Gospel according to Luke, distance is the key to the aesthetic and ethical relationship between man and the mystery of faith and revelation: distance is necessary to keep alive what is Sacred and the value of human finitude.

⁴ An official translation of the book is not available; the following is an unofficial one.

thing like instability? A gap between being somewhere and not really being there? Does it suggest, perhaps, that the concept of dwelling is precisely to be able to stay in such a gap? That only in this sort of exile from one's own home can one host others? Or, does it suggest that presence and absence need to coexist?. (Rovatti [1994]: 24-25)

In Rovatti's book, the concept of inhabiting alludes to a fixed point, ultimately to the *habitus*, the habit, the repetition, something that reassures. Distance instead describes an extended temporality, which reveals the surprise of an unpredictable world.

In the alternative between «alienating distancing» and «participatory belonging», using Ricoeur's words once again, the capability of making up the distance can be found in the middle ground: being too deep into something may imply losing contours and profiles, to separate existence and meanings into little fragments (at the expense of everything else), lacking balance and equidistance. Selfishness, antagonisms, contradictions originate from a space within that area which imposes decisions and solutions always disproportionate, paroxysmal sometimes, even wrong and dangerous in the medium and long term. The meaning of many ethical challenges lies in this capability.

For example, the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas wrote to be very worried regarding the possible ethical challenge during the crucial days of this pandemic. The number of patients to be admitted to hospital was higher than the number of intensive care beds available in treatment departments; so, doctors, on many occasions, were forced to make tragic decisions on the spot between young people that could have been saved or the elderly and frail with chronic illness.

After the fury of events, an ethics of stasis must be recovered, in order to preserve an adequate distance appropriate enough to judge as immoral those choices, owing to the «abdication to the principle of fair treatment of citizens», as Habermas affirms (Habermas [2020]). What doctor would replace the value of one man over the

value of another, thus establishing himself as master of life and death?

The urgency of acting entraps one in a circle of utilitarian justifications from which, when one manages to free oneself, one has become lost and embittered, without feelings, as it happens to the protagonists of the story described by José Saramago in the novel *Blindness*:

Before, when we could still see, there were also blind people, few in comparison, and their feelings were of someone who could see, therefore the blind felt with the feelings of others, and not as the blind people they were. Now, certainly, what is emerging are the real feelings of the blind, and we're still only at the beginning; for the moment we still live on the memory of what we have felt, eyes are not needed to know what life has become today, and if anyone were to tell me that one day I should kill, I'd take it as an insult, and yet I've killed. (Saramago [1995]: 252-253)

In order not to lose the ability to feel, it is necessary to preserve the memory of what makes us human and, like all memories, distance is required, oblivion and setting.

After all, the ethics of stasis necessarily deals with time, the greatest of allies and the worst enemy: an ally when it is «opportune time», the *καιρός χρόνος* of the Greeks, the ancient idea that there is a right time for things to happen; an enemy when it reveals the radical limit of death, this uncomfortable thought which has been renounced so as to be prepared, removing it from our busy days, preventing it from being present in our inner life.

«The disintegration of the consciousness of mortality involves the disintegration of the sense of belonging», the consciousness of mortality is decisive in keeping together social and emotional bonds that constitute human existence (Manicardi [2016]: 76-77). Freedom is awareness of those ties, insofar as they are lived as essential by subjectivity that is not enough for itself, because it knows and remembers its finitude.

The pandemic has brought back the very uncomfortable position that we had been in for millennia: poised between two worlds, the one we

left, with its emergency, its lockdowns and conceptual tools, and the new one that awaits us at a return to normality, which will require a change of mindset.

New technologies, powerful screens, the digital and robotics revolution, as well as the return to working in presence, the reorganization of health care and economic systems, are all the practical challenges for those who walk on the edge; but, to cross it, an ethics of stasis is needed more than everything else, because it gives identity and audacity, without which no time will ever be *opportune*.

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