



U N C A N N Y R E S T

F O R A N T I P H I L O S O P H Y

A L B E R T O M O R E I R A S

TRANSLATED FROM SPANISH BY CAMILA MOREIRAS

UNCANNY REST

BUY

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TO TERESA

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If one were only an Indian, instantly alert, and on a racing horse, leaning against the wind, kept on quivering jerkily over the quivering ground, until one shed one's spurs, for there needed no spurs, threw away the reins, for there needed no reins, and hardly saw that the land before one was smoothly shorn heath when horse's neck and head would be already gone.

—FRANZ KAFKA, "The Wish to Be a Red Indian" (1913)

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UNCANNY REST FOR ANTIPHILOSOPHY

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Most of the following texts were written in Spanish between March 20 and May 20, 2020, during the first period of confinement mandated by the Texas civil authorities in response to the pandemic caused by COVID-19. I include several appendixes from weeks following, and a few texts I have called remarks. The appendixes attempt to clarify threads or elaborate on implications derived from themes in the main text, and the remarks provide, I hope, consistency to the set of arguments in the diary entries, but mostly they develop issues in the book I came to consider crucial from my own perspective. Initially thought of as private notes, or posts for a blog that I sometimes use (infraphilosophy.com), they ended up conditioning each other and tending on their own toward the form of a book, even if an unusual one. I wanted to respect the sequence in which they came to mind, on occasion developing from scribbles and materials I already had in my computer that now seemed to take on new personal importance. They are presented without modifications. They are not any kind of diary of life in the initial months of the pandemic; they are rather meant to be a meditation on the experience of suspension of everyday time in conditions of confinement, and on its consequences, both existential and political. Several were composed as contributions to conversations in virtual spaces where I was invited to participate. I am grateful to Joseba Buj and Angel Octavio Alvarez Solís, to Jon Beasley-Murray, and to Gerardo Muñoz for those invitations, and to Benjamin Mayer. And I am especially grateful to Teresa Vilarós for reading most of these notes, as well as for her specific comments. I also want to thank Jaime Rodríguez Matos, Maddalena Cerrato, and Gerardo Muñoz for their ongoing observations on the blog posts. José Luis Villacañas asked me to send him some of the entries for a book he was editing, *Pandemia: La comunidad de los vivientes* [*Pandemic: The community of the living*], now published by Biblioteca Nueva (Madrid). I would also like to thank Matías Bascuñán for his letter, which I include in these pages. And Gareth Williams, Brett Levinson, Yoandy Cabrera, and Miguel Morrey for reading the draft of the final manuscript, minus the appended texts, which were added after May 2020.

The pandemic did not end in May, and a continued confinement was the consequence. During the summer of 2020, when I was finalizing corrections to the version of the book that was published at the end of it, *Sosiego siniestro*, a second wave arose and would last into the early fall. Eventually, a third wave developed in December through February 2021, and at the time of my writing this preface, it seems to be receding. In the meantime, in spite of the not yet quite available vaccines, new virus variants keep appearing, and the truth is that nobody knows what the future will bring. The Texas governor has just announced the end of the statewide mask mandate and is authorizing the full reopening of all businesses as usual, but there are ample reasons to mistrust the Texas governor's judgment, and we continue our isolation, interrupted only by trips to get household supplies and provisions. Our human contacts are mostly digital, through Zoom, including our classes and working group meetings. There is very little else: our handyman, Mario, when something needs to be fixed, a casual chat with a neighbor encountered on a walk. Last fall, as the confinement was becoming a heavy burden, brought the great political perplexity of the Republican reaction to the North American elections, which continues to this day and presages nothing good for the future. My daughter Camila finished her translation of the book into English, and my revisions included some additional materials from notes I had been taking through the summer. But at the time of preparing to send the finished typescript to my editor, Kenneth Wissoker, who provided me with keen and opportune suggestions for improvement, I knew that my book was essentially finished, and that there was no question of attempting to extend it in order to give it an expanded chronology that would match the first year of the pandemic. Somehow only the first two months of it were decisive for me, as, I suppose, a kind of habituation to the situation crept in. But it was a transfigured habituation: those two months changed me in significant ways, or changed something in me, and it is not for me to decide whether the change was the consequence of the trend of thought, certainly somewhat capricious and unsystematic, fragmented, perhaps untotalizable, that I attempted to register in the pages that follow, or whether it was the other way around: the change motivated the thoughts. I could probably say the change was liberating. But, as these things go, things are never just liberating, and other problems cropped up and continue to do so.

In January, as I was transferring a few books and papers from my garage library to my study in the house, one of our cats tripped me, and I fell on the driveway concrete and was unable to catch my fall. I fractured the proximal humerus of my left arm. It hurt, and I saw no choice but to go reluctantly to the emergency room of the local hospital. As I was exiting their X-ray room, the nurse told me to keep going straight and not turn left, as the COVID ward was on the left. I had a funny feeling in that instant that something bad had just happened. Three or four days later I started feeling ill, and so did my wife, Teresa. Camila, who had come to visit with us for a few days, had just returned to North Carolina, and that was fortunate because it prevented her becoming infected. Four awful weeks followed, tinged with apprehension that the infection might develop into long-haul COVID or pneumonia or what not. Needless to say, no medical care was available. We were lucky that both of us pulled out of it without catastrophe, none the wiser and considerably weakened. It was then that the huge winter storm called Uri hit Texas. Toward the end of that dismal week, a flock of white pelicans, accompanied by many cormorant comrades, visited the lake by our house. Our neighbor Kristi Sweet took the picture that you will see at the end of the book. Since I am writing this note almost exactly one year after we started our confinement, I trust the renewal of the annual cycle promised by the pelicans will bring good and joyful times. For me, with these words, the diary of the plague year, such as it is, will have come to an end.

The reader will find in the pages that follow a number of references to things and issues that I have been working on for some time: those include the notions of infrapolitics, exodus, decision of existence, post-hegemony, and antiphilosophy. Although I have tried to make this text self-sufficient, that is, capable of being understood on its own merits or demerits, those topics have been the object of much discussion among friends and a considerable amount of already published writing. So it would have been absurd to pretend to summarize all of them here, which was not my interest in the book, preferring it to move forward rather than present or describe work from the past. I trust that patient readers, if they truly must interrupt their reading in order to get a clearer idea of, say, infrapolitics, might check out *Infrapolítica: Instrucciones de uso* (2020) (*Infrapolitics: A Handbook*, in English translation, published by Fordham University Press). The dialogic tone to the book is a direct con-

sequence of the fact that a sustained interlocution with distant friends is at its origin, but let me add that there is no esoteric message to be found between the lines. What you see is what you get, and you must not become disoriented by the references to conversations had by email or Zoom or by mentions of Facebook or blog discussions on this or that topic. Everything relevant, as far as I am concerned, is in these pages. I have left Facebook anyway—one of the positive changes the confinement has brought about in my personal life. I could summarize it all by saying that *Uncanny Rest* is an attempt to continue the thought of in-frapolitics in the direction of exploring and making a “decision of existence” through the untimely temporality of the pandemic.

—March 5, 2021

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MARCH 20, 2020

My attempt at mowing the lawn was interrupted by today's rain. I am almost certain my tractor is about to break down, and I don't know if I will be able to get it fixed. Time vanished over the last week between preparing for the online classes that will start on Monday and bewilderment. My attention was both distracted and given over to the news, to impatient curiosity about what is being said on Facebook or WhatsApp, and to some anxiety for our children, who live elsewhere. I have to flip this around and find another way. I will need to do something other than teach my classes, which are more or less prepared. There are no routines since normal conditions for daily work and for everything else are now in question. I can no longer go to the gym, for instance; it did shape my days. The habitual has been put on hold and there is an unchosen leisure, an anxious lack of occupation, and anxiety increases from my attempts at taking advantage of it, of capitalizing on it. I want to be able to use this strange lapse as a possible entry into my own life, from which I seem to have been uncannily separated; to realize what is this halted time, which nevertheless continues onward. Two of Francisco de Quevedo's verses come to mind: *You seek Rome in Rome, o Pilgrim / and in Rome itself Rome you cannot find*.¹ Underneath is the sensation that all of this is nothing more than a precar-

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ious project that will wither as soon as someone close to me falls sick. I feel a sense of urgency for quietude, a pressing need for quietness, but quietness and urgency do not mesh. This is the beginning of what will continue for a while in one form or another—everything indicates as much—and that duration, imagined, produces a slight anguish that I cannot deny or hide.

“In the meantime it was folly to grieve, or to think.” This is a line from Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death.”² Now is not a time of affliction, not for me or for my loved ones; nothing has happened to us, and I hope nothing will. But thinking also feels like an excessive effort. What is there to think about? Only the inane, inanely. My condition has, also, elements of Prince Prospero’s: I too am taking refuge in my “magnificent structure,” and I too have invited a thousand ladies and gentlemen found every night on Netflix or Amazon Prime to join me. We have supplies. The only thing that remains is for the masquerade to be organized. In the story, the prince’s castle includes a strange interior room, with its contrasting black and purple, where there is a “gigantic clock of ebony” whose chimes interrupt the orchestra’s music and stop the ladies’ and gentlemen’s waltz. When they feel these chimes tremble, they turn pale without understanding why the sonic disturbance is affecting them. At the stroke of midnight, a “new presence” appears, masked like all others at the ball. It is the Red Death, which came like “a thief in the night . . . And the life of the ebony clock went out with that of the last of the gay. And the flames of the tripods expired. And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all.”³ But this doesn’t occur, according to the story, until the fifth or sixth month of confinement. In the meantime, it is not about finding a measure of rest in uncanny times but, instead, about seeking it out and grasping it. This search will be imposed on us as an essential task over the coming months. Or am I just imagining it? And it will mark these months. It will change my life only if something else doesn’t change it more harshly first. One cannot grieve or think, but grieving and thinking—thinking their hidden rapport—are for the time being all that seems possible, the only open track.

Remark 1: The Path of the Goddess

In my copy of Mario Untersteiner's edition of the Parmenidean texts (*Parmenide: Testimonianze e frammenti*) I wrote "Catania, August 1978." Today, while reading the transcription of Alain Badiou's 1985–86 seminar on Parmenides, I recover, somewhat tumultuously, images and memories from that trip. I almost missed my train in the immense railroad junction at Messina, because I became distracted while sitting at the station cafeteria. I had to run through the tracks and jump into an already moving train, where Teresa was waiting for me. In Sicily our first destination was Catania, and there I bought Untersteiner's edition. But before Catania and before Messina, the train had left us at Velia, in the middle of a dusty hot afternoon. We wanted to go from Velia to the Elea archaeological site. I think we took a cab or perhaps we hitchhiked. But it was almost 6:00 p.m. when we arrived, and the site was closed for the day. What could we do? It was unthinkable for me to miss seeing the site, probably in my mind the main attraction of the whole trip. In Barcelona I had been reading Antonio Capizzi's book on Parmenides and Elea—for Capizzi the poem told the story of an initiatic, shamanic trip around the town.⁴ It was imperative to see the gate to the city, the founding site of philosophy through which the path of the goddess goes. Also the poplar trees, the maidens in the poem, and the fountain or spring of the goddess. And the acropolis from which the contemplation of the well-rounded sphere of truth could take place. If thinking and being are the same, if being is the same as that which being calls for, it was necessary for me to imprint on my retina, and to wager then on the revelation that might never come, the impression of that without which, or that is what I felt, my own life was a waste of time, a waste of life. But the gate to the site was locked, and we could not see anybody who might help. Disheartened and fatigued by the heat, we sat on some stone, we made some noise, we yelled, just in case somebody could hear us, and to our surprise a guard showed up on the other side of the wall and asked us what we wanted, what we sought, since the site was closed and we could not come in. In my rucksack I had a leaflet on the Elea site that I had found at a Naples bookstore, authored by a Mario Napoli. I had to lie (I almost never lie) and identify myself falsely as Professor Napoli's student, hoping there was indeed a Professor Napoli that had something to do with the site and was known there. I alleged some im-

portant errand; *il professore* had sent me there, we needed to enter the place, just a short while, a few minutes, please. And then, behind the guard, somebody else showed up, a thin gentleman, with white hair and a goatee, who addressed us in French, a language I was not so comfortable in. We responded in English and we seemed to impress him enough, since he instructed the guard to let us in with a hand movement. We entered, and we saw the pink gate, the spring (from which we drank), and the trees. There was also a splendid red Mercedes roadster with a woman inside with whom the gentleman with the goatee spoke in German. He asked us in English about our real interest in the site, and I said I wanted to look out at the sea from the acropolis. He had in his hand a ridiculous black plastic handbag with some Badajoz insurance company branding. So he might also speak Spanish, which we confirmed, and in Spanish he said that all visions from any acropolis were only ever the vision of the Styx, as I should know or learn. I had the impression, fleeting though strong, that the man was Charon the Polyglot. All of this happened. Teresa and I continued with our visit, and when passing a rudimentary wooden hut the guard asked us to stop. He opened the door and extracted from the inside what he told us was the latest find: a bust of Parmenides with the inscription *iatrós, physikós, sophós*. I held it in my hands. He told me to speak of it to Professore Napoli.

It was, of course, impossible not to see the Styx, river or lagoon, from the acropolis at twilight. The sun was low on the horizon, and there was a dark light cast among yellow rays. I remembered that dark light today as I was reading in Badiou: "It is the impossibility of non-being . . . as a creation of the possibility of the thinking of being. Thinking cannot be thought . . . except at the price of an interdiction: there must be an interdiction so that there may be thinking as thinking of being. But the interdiction . . . is thought itself."⁵

In Catania we had a friend, a friend of friends, rather, and we had dinner with her: sea urchins and pizza, as I remember. We never saw the gentleman with the goatee again, or his German companion, but on returning to the hotel, in the great Catania piazza, a dog crossed our path and looked at us. The warning in his gaze alerted me. How can I not understand it now as a reference to the Parmenidean interdiction? Not to follow the path of non-being, since non-being is not, is a condition of thought, hence a condition of being. But, Badiou says, "a point of non-submission to the interdiction is necessary."⁶ How to live the

non-submission? Today's memories revealed to me that the last forty-two years could be summed up as its tattered experience, for better or for worse: an errancy sometimes ecstatic and joyful, other times dense and obscure, of which no account can be rendered, far from the path of the goddess, to which I cannot know whether there is a return. I never did read Untersteiner's edition, but I still have that book, miraculously, since most of my things from that time in my life ended up in the hands of some junkman in the Encants fleamarket in Barcelona, who bought them as a bargain and probably sold them at a better price.

MARCH 27, 2020

Our inability, on the left as well as on the right, to deal with this pandemic implies the need for new thought, or perhaps just for thought. Nobody knows how to think this, its arrival, its implications. It becomes necessary to renounce conventional ideologies and commitments, which, despite their indigence, have not only held out, but are also hardening in an increasingly dogmatic and harebrained way. Old forms of rhetoric are applauded with mounting ferocity while the incipient or possible is immediately disqualified, condemned to the hell of irresponsibility. If this continues, anything can happen. There is no telling how people will react.

MARCH 29, 2020

A feeling, perhaps mistaken, that the world will change in such a way that our known coordinates and parameters, and everything that we spend our lives trying to know and understand, are going to stop being relevant; to this extent, that everything we are currently saying or thinking is merely provisional and uncertain, but also that everything we read, written by those who lived before this uncanny incursion, is not more than false hope or compensation: not necessarily irrelevant, but of indeterminable relevancy. Either that is the case or it is a warped excuse for my sluggishness. And so, second uncanny blow, the notion pops up that the felt indeterminability of history should not be constrained to our understanding in times of crisis, but rather that it extends to our entire temporality. In every case, everything changes always in such a way that how one thought and lived ceases to be relevant

and does not deliver anything other than a provisional and treasonous truth, a lie. And what one reads is always, in every instance, false guidance and compensation. And that moment of vision that risks disorder reminds me of old thoughts: how the expression *ho autontimoroumenos*, which was an example used in my old Greek textbook of a participial substantive, from which we could translate from the verb *timeo* as “he who honors himself,” can also be read from the verb *timao*, which would then have to be translated as “he who destroys (or torments) himself.” Friedrich Nietzsche remits *circulus vitiosus deus* to this structure of the double blow of the uncanny. But Nietzsche was not able to avoid radicalizing his idea toward the participial construction of *timao*.

APRIL 1, 2020 A.M.

When Badiou, whom I am reading with a certain intensity these months, in a specific moment in his seminar on the essence of politics, mentions the “political-ecstatic style of the 1930s,” he says that “its seriousness and depth” were inevitably tied to the production of a disaster. The disaster would have been the “theatricalization, found under the sign of a staging of place, of a singular knot between politics, state and philosophy.”⁷ The surging of the sacred name of the leader and the production of political space as a space of terror, in which a part of what is prohibited from being, are direct consequences of the ecstasy of place. One would tend to think of fascism as being the most obvious manifestation of that ecstatic theatricalization. Badiou, who excludes Nazism from the notion of disaster inasmuch as Nazism never proposed itself as a politics of emancipation, offers another precise name: Stalinism. It is no good to think that such a name will not recur again in our history. The right will radicalize. Where is the left moving toward today? Where, in the height of the coronavirus crisis, or of this first crisis, are the incipient emancipatory proposals? And in what place are we to find the politics that never claimed to be emancipatory but still mean to be democratic?

The politico-ecstatic style of the 1930s was not separate from the economic crisis of the '20s. Given present economic predictions and political conditions, we run the not so remote risk of a new ecstatic territorialization. Carlo Galli, in a short text entitled “Epidemic and Sovereignty,” identifies it as an incipient exacerbation of sovereignty, in a situation that

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calls, from a democratic point of view, for “two equal and opposite demands”: first, that the reclaimed sovereignty be effective, that it work, for example, to handle the public health problem and to promote economic reconstruction; and, second, “that the emergency not be institutionalized into a state of exception.” But, if overcoming the crisis supposes “inventing a new normality, re-founding the pact of our democracy,” for Galli “we will have a need for sovereignty.”⁸ And that is the danger: that in this new need for sovereignty, under the pretext of a refounding of the democratic pact, political practice be rebuilt as a will to found a new ecstatic place in terror, out of an affirmation of sovereignty in an identitarian formulation. This is bound to come from the right.

In a confinement that is necessary to minimize the risk of contagion, communitarian whims and voluntarisms appear. But the generous applause, from Spanish balconies at 7:00 p.m., for instance, for the frontline health and public order professionals who are working to contain or mitigate the viral intrusion, has on its dark side the denunciation of those who dare break the prohibition of confinement and the aggressive fear of possible carriers of the virus. The community ban that is implicit in confinement is an unstable counter-communitarian sign. That the community is, today, murderous, becomes inverted into an imprecise communitarian nostalgia. That contradiction could lean toward resolving itself—there are still weeks of confinement ahead of us, weeks of communitarian nostalgia, perhaps more than weeks—into a new epochal equivalence of ecstatic character that would force an identification, a sameness of the good and the necessary. The political (or economic) good would be constituted from the postulation of a new communitarian suturing. We know what this can implicate. We know that there are sectors of the population already predisposed to it. On the right, and on the left.

In the early 1990s Badiou references the three great books that closed philosophically the communitarian (communist) sequence that would have started with the French Revolution: the books by Jean-Luc Nancy, Maurice Blanchot, and Giorgio Agamben on community.⁹ From these, Badiou asks for a reconstitution of the thinking of community that would dwell on the impossibility and unnameability of community itself, in other words, on that which, in the history of community, or of communism itself, constituted absolute disaster: its suture to the place, its suture to ecstatic leadership, and its suture to terror as a liquidation

of everything the suture excludes. Is there a residue today for an emancipatory politics that would allow us to avoid those risks? Or is what is exacerbated within the new communitarian voluntarism, from the left and from the right, which is the other side of the state-administrative management that will reclaim, or has already reclaimed, a vaster and more infinite sovereignty, nothing more than an insistence on a new hegemonic community whose achievement would force a return, as farce, to the politico-ecstatic style of the 1930s? In the words of Badiou, to a new Stalinism; but also, perhaps primarily, to the ghost of that which Badiou excludes from disaster. Or a mixture of the two.

Remark 2: The Pandemic and the Event

In the best of possible worlds, there is no event, everything is linked to the principle of sufficient reason, which is either a warranty that God exists or God itself. If everything is preordered, if there are no indiscernibles, then there is no event, there are only happenings. The event, insofar as it can be conceptualized as a supplement to a given situation, as its point of excess, as that which happens indiscernibly to undo the situation such as it is and to open another history and another truth, does not take place. For Badiou it is not easy, it might even prove impossible, to refute Leibniz's theory of the indiscernibles and their negation. It is finally a matter of belief. If for you the world is finished as the best of all possible worlds, you will always find reasons to establish your faith in the principle of sufficient reason. But for Badiou to posit the emergence of an event as a point of excess and overflow of a given situation is also a matter of belief. And it is equally irrefutable, to the extent that it can only be posited as a truth process from the future anterior. The pandemic will have been an event if the pandemic becomes an indiscernible starting from which we can unleash a process of fidelity, and if the world changes as a result of fidelity to what the indiscernible brings to the world. We can only ascertain this from the future anterior, which makes it irrefutable at any given point in time.

In the June 2 session of his 1986–87 seminar on Heidegger, Badiou says:

Le savoir en situation, que j'ai convenu d'appeler 'encyclopédie,' distingue et classe toute une série de parties de la situation et les subsume sous

Uncanny Rest

- 1 I found these Quevedo verses in one of my texts for this week, in Álvaro
- Enrique's novel *Sudden Death*, 142.
- 2 Poe, "Mask of the Red Death," 604–9.
- 3 Poe, "Mask of the Red Death," 609.
- 4 Or so I mostly remember it.
- 5 Badiou, *Parménide*, 109.
- 6 Badiou, *Parménide*, 111.
- 7 Badiou, *L'essence de la politique*, 156.
- 8 Galli, "Epidemia e sovranità, 3."
- 9 Badiou, *L'essence de la politique*. Badiou is referring to Blanchot's *La communauté inavouable* (1984), Nancy's *La communauté désavouée* (1986), and Agamben's *La comunità che viene* (1990).
- 10 Badiou, *Heidegger*, 291–92.
- 11 See Stiegler, *What Makes Life Worth Living*, 98: "The genuine question, for Europe as well as for the rest of the world, is whether it can invent—in dialogue with America and the new major industrialized nations—a *new way of life* where *economizing* means *taking care*."
- 12 Stiegler, *What Makes Life Worth Living*, 83.
- 13 See Papo Kling interview Jorge Alemán on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aAle_yTJFmc and at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=reCHq_7PTYg.
- 14 Nancy, *Birth to Presence*, 82–109.
- 15 Derrida, *Learning to Live Finally*, 22–26.
- 16 Alemán, *Soledad, común*.
- 17 Nancy, *Birth to Presence*, 174–75.
- 18 Graff Zivin, *Anarchaeologies*, 31–49.
- 19 Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 85.
- 20 Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 69–70.
- 21 Agamben, "Una domanda."
- 22 Tobit 2:8, quoted from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*.
- 23 Tobit 4:3–4, quoted from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*.
- 24 Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 319–39.
- 25 Heidegger, *The Question concerning Technology*, 3–35.
- 26 Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, 90. The translators of the essay into Spanish, Hel-