

Pandemic Phase 2 and the Freedom of Choice

Thoughts from
Hamlet, Muhammad Yunus, William Blake and Robert Frost

Mauro Spicci

In Italy, one of the European countries hardest hit by the Covid-19 epidemic, April officially stopped being "the cruellest month" on April 26th, 2020, when Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte announced the beginning of what everyone now calls "phase 2": "now - said the Prime Minister - the phase of living with the virus begins for everyone. We must be aware that in phase 2, the contagion curve might rise in some areas of the country. The risk is there, and we must face it with method and rigour".

With these words, on April 26th the doors were opened, life timidly began to flow again and the slow and progressive return to what many are starting to call "the new normal", a chapter of our life in which we will have to learn to live with the virus and its whims.

On April 19th, 2020, a few days before the formal inauguration of "phase 2", a speech by Muhammad Yunus, Nobel Peace Prize winner in 2006, was published in a well-known national newspaper. Yunus is known for having systematically addressed the problem of poverty in the world: it is he who has studied in depth the concept of "microcredit", an "instrument of economic development that allows access to financial services to people in conditions of poverty and marginalization". Through his



commitment as an economist and distinguished scholar, Yunus has managed to build a network of institutions that promote the culture of microcredit in the world, offering those living in extreme deprivation an opportunity to solve the seemingly unsolvable problem of poverty itself.

His achievements are so significant that they earned him the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006. Since then, Yunus has never stopped intervening publicly to help humanity reflect on substantial issues such as the real value of money, the limits of the profit-driven economic model that reigns in the contemporary world, and the need for a radical paradigm shift to build a fairer, more sustainable and just future for all.

His speech of April 19th goes precisely in this direction and contains, among others, a fascinating reflection, which is worth reading:

"After this decade all our efforts will bring only marginal results, inadequate to save our planet. Should we go back to that world? The choice is ours. Coronavirus has suddenly changed the context and calculus of the world. It has opened up audacious possibilities which never existed before. Suddenly we are at the tabula rasa. We can go any direction we want. What unbelievable freedom of choice!"

When he speaks of "audacious possibilities", Yunus refers in particular to the possibility of radically intervening on the economic model that has triumphed until now, transforming it into a paradigm based on the concept of "social business", a type of "business created solely for solving people's problems, without taking any personal profit by the investors except to recoup the original investment".

Beyond the very valid economic message that it conveys, Yunus' intervention invites us to do something straightforward: stop just before crossing the threshold of "phase 2" and look at all the infinite possibilities that open up before us.

Why stop and look at the infinite in front of us? The answer is simple: the decade that has just ended - Yunus reminds us and, together with him, many contemporary witnesses of the global crisis we are experiencing - has shown us that all the efforts we have made have not produced satisfactory results in terms of positive impact on the world, the environment and humanity. The time has come to reverse the course in a radical way, and this is the right opportunity to make such a decision in a conscious and responsible way: this is the message that Yunus is sending out to all of us.

Yunus' warning comes at a unique moment: the experience of the "lockdown" has forced us to close ourselves, like Hamlet, in the physical "nutshell" of our room and in the symbolic "nutshell" of our mind to reflect on the future, ours and the whole world's. After all, the "test" to which we have been subjected has turned out to be also an opportunity: it is not every day that we can stop - stop - and have time to reflect on how we want to redesign our future all over again.



The condition in which we all find ourselves - and to which Yunus calls us back a moment before it is too late - seems very similar to that of the character represented by William Blake, original English poet and artist active between the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries. In this etching, Blake represents a mythological character, a sort of ancestral deity with the features of a human being. If we look at him carefully, we realize that, in a certain sense, he is very similar to us: he is literally closed in what Hamlet called "a nutshell" and, just like Hamlet, he is alone, at the centre of an infinite universe, suspended between a "before" and an "after" that is beginning to reveal itself (the echo of that fascinating "unfold" used by Shakespeare in the first verses of

Hamlet returns).

He is, in other words, "king of infinite space," just as Hamlet called himself. The space that surrounds him, if we look well, is really "infinite", not only in terms of dimensions: it is infinite above all because it is full of all the unlimited possible "tomorrow" that will illuminate it. It is an endless universe because everything is still to be written, drawn, invented.

It is no coincidence that the man represented by Blake has a measuring instrument in his hand, which resembles a sort of compass with an almost magical air. What exactly is he doing? What is he measuring? He's taking measurements of the universe, he's (re)drawing it from scratch. In other words, he's re-creating it, just like a deity caught on the "zero" day of creation.

Close your eyes and try to imagine that you are that character locked in the "nutshell" painted by Blake: what a thrill to be able to rewrite the rules of the world and the universe! And what a responsibility to do it all over again! The words of Yunus - "What an unbelievable freedom of choice!" - almost seem to come out of our mouths!

It doesn't seem at all improbable to think that Blake's character - intent on (re)measuring the world after lockdown - is that young Hamlet locked in the "nutshell" of his room that we met in the cruellest month of all, in the middle of the suspension imposed by "phase 1". Do you remember? We had left him suspended between a "before" now disappeared and an uncertain "after": here we find him now, intent on extending his hand towards "tomorrow", to take the measures of an "after" still to be written, but already illuminated by the light of the morning.

The moment is unique, unrepeatable and extraordinary: the young Hamlet is returning to the world and is redesigning it with his choices. This is where one of Hamlet's most essential themes (found in countless other literary works) comes into play: that of "choice". Yunus himself reminded us of this, as a few days before the reopening of the doors of this new world he said: "Choice is ours". But what choice is he talking about exactly? Which option does the well-known scholar and philanthropist refer to?

The choice is between returning to the "before" - the known we already know, that reassuring world we left before the planetary epidemic froze the world - and the "after" - the infinite space still to be written, dreamed and imagined.

The theme of choice is, as we have seen, at the very heart of *Hamlet*, a play suspended between two worlds and between two ages, and is iconically summarised in the well-known soliloquy of "to be or not to be". In the context in which we find ourselves, in the aftermath of the inauguration of phase 2, the choice that concerns us is no longer just a question of pure reflection or simple theoretical evaluation. Now that we are crossing the door of our room to return, again, to take possession of the real world - the one made up of relationships no longer only virtual, of encounters of bodies, of conflicts and projects to be built and invented - at this very moment we are called upon to make a choice. And not just any choice, but a fundamental choice, which will determine who we are and the world model we want to help grow. The choice we make is a decision that will make a difference not only for us but for the rest of humanity, which together with us - at this very moment - is rewriting its future.

This is what Yunus emphasizes when he writes that now "We can go any direction we want": at this moment it is as though, together with Hamlet, we were in front of an infinity of roads all passable. It is up to us to choose which of the possible paths to take.

This condition closely resembles the state described by Robert Frost, an American poet who lived at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, in one of his most famous poems entitled "The Road not Taken" and published in 1916.



<u>ENGLISH</u>	<u>ITALIANO</u>
<p>Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, And sorry I could not travel both And be one traveler, long I stood And looked down one as far as I could To where it bent in the undergrowth;</p> <p>Then took the other, as just as fair, And having perhaps the better claim, Because it was grassy and wanted wear; Though as for that the passing there Had worn them really about the same,</p> <p>And both that morning equally lay In leaves no step had trodden black. Oh, I kept the first for another day! Yet knowing how way leads on to way, I doubted if I should ever come back.</p> <p>I shall be telling this with a sigh Somewhere ages and ages hence: Two roads diverged in a wood, and I— I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference.</p>	<p>Divergevano due strade in un bosco ingiallito, e spiacente di non poterle fare entrambe uno restando, a lungo mi fermai una di esse finché potevo scrutando là dove in mezzo agli arbusti svoltava.</p> <p>Poi presi l'altra, così com'era, che aveva forse i titoli migliori, perché era erbosa e non portava segni; benché, in fondo, il passar della gente le avesse invero segnate più o meno lo stesso,</p> <p>perché nessuna in quella mattina mostrava sui fili d'erba l'impronta nera d'un passo. Oh, quell'altra lasciavo a un altro giorno! Pure, sapendo bene che strada porta a strada, dubitavo se mai sarei tornato.</p> <p>lo dovrò dire questo con un sospiro in qualche posto fra molto molto tempo: Divergevano due strade in un bosco, ed io... io presi la meno battuta, e di qui tutta la differenza è venuta.</p> <p>(Traduzione di Giovanni Giudici)</p>

In this captivatingly simple poem, Frost makes us imagine-being catapulted twenty or thirty years on. In the folder of memories, a photo suddenly appears. The photo depicts a decisive moment in our lives: the moment in which we chose the road to take and began to build our future as protagonists.

Frost summarizes the infinite variety of options available - the "unbelievable freedom of choice" to which Yunus refers - in the immediate and straightforward image of a fork in the road: on one side there is a bright and tantalizing road, yellow as the colour of autumn leaves. It is a reassuring road, somehow attractive because, in some way, it is "known". The poet - like Hamlet, the man, painted by Blake and each one of us - looks at it, studies it and observes it for a long time to evaluate its practicability: it has, in fact, the advantage of being known and reassuring like the past. It is a road to travel along where we can make use of the example of those who, before us, have already travelled it and left a trace of it.

On the opposite side, there is another road, as tempting as the first, but more grassy, a clear sign that it is less frequented. The poet - like Hamlet, Blake's man and each of us - decides to take the second road.

What matters is that faced with the possibility of choosing between a known and an unknown road, the poet - like Hamlet, Blake's man and each one of us - can dare to select the second one, the unpublished one, not yet written.

Have the courage to take "the road not taken", the road that no one has made yet. Have the courage - with every step you take once the door to your room has opened wide and you are back on the road of the world - to take - among the infinite double options that will appear before you - the "road less traveled", the one that makes you less comfortable, the one that always takes you a little out of your "comfort zone" and puts you in touch with new intellectual challenges. Have the courage to be "kings" and "queens" of your daily choices: the choices you decide to make - from the simplest to the most articulated - will determine your life and the direction the world will take. Remember - as Frost suggests - that we are defined not only by the actions we choose to take, but also by all the paths we decide not to take. In these days of forced lockdown, we have all been amazed to see that the world's roads - no longer trampled on by the endless steps that have traversed them "before" - have once again become the meeting place of nature, which has made its reappearance in spaces from which it had long since been banned. The squares have become surprisingly coloured green, the animals have returned to inhabit them. All this suggests to us that a road - once no one goes along it anymore - disappears and the balance of things returns to a placid flow.



There are roads that the time has come to abandon and new paths to take: do not be afraid if you are the first to walk them; others, seeing your steps, will follow you and what now seems a shy track, will become a path that will redraw the map of the world. Now stretch your legs beyond the line of the "nutshell", stretch them a little and get ready to make the leap into the infinite universe of your future: the morning has arrived

and, with it, the time to make the choices that will determine your future and that of all humanity.

Don't forget to bring with you the compass - just like Hamlet and the man painted by Blake - of your "amazing mind": in twenty or thirty years, when you find the picture of yourself ready to make the leap towards the infinite space of your future, you will remember the "unbelievable freedom of choice" of this extraordinary moment, the road you chose to travel with courage and the ones you chose not to travel. And you will realize with pride that the grid of roads that you have helped to redraw on the map of the world thanks to your courageous choices will have made it a new, extraordinary and more human place.

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