

Manibus Date Lilia Plenis: A Pragmatic Eulogy in the Time of The Pandemic

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We begin to mourn, and mourning is shot through with special irony.

We cover our mirrors to better reflect. Self-estrangement invites a deepening of the self. We overflow with emptiness. We desire the creation of discomfort where there was comfort, rendering the sweetest fruits bitter, conjoining the luminosities of experience in one prolonged night. The masks we wear to ward off sickness have a funerary quality: impressions, fixed visages, without expressions. Beneath, there might be a desire to “return to life as we knew it.” This intuition, however, only insults the dead.¹

The task before us is the timely task of drawing from the dark actualities of concrete existence for the purpose of re-imagining possibilities for a richer set of collective experiences. In such possibilities, we should hope to discover a way to overcome the seemingly inevitable *corsi e ricorsi* that eventuates in renewed barbarism. In this imaginative act, there is no room for naïve optimism, reductive tendencies, or platitudes about hope and recovery. If we remove ourselves from the limiting realities of the way things are, and re-orient ourselves toward how things might be, we

do so in funeral garb. The task before us is to create and achieve a new type of freedom directed by wisdom, social virtue, and inquiry. The task is, as John Dewey remarks, to create and sustain a new “spiritual authority that would nurture and direct the inner as well as the outer life of individuals.”² To invoke a familiar phrase from *Perkei Avot*, “It is not incumbent upon you to finish the task, but neither are you free to absolve yourself from it.” Here is our eulogy, marking the sorrowful conclusion of one time and opening up space for another.

The Grassy Hill Behind The Temple

And chiefly thou, O spirit, that dost prefer
Before all temples the upright heart and pure,
Instruct me, for thou know'st. Thou from the first
Wast present, and, with mighty wings out-
spread,
Dove-like sattest brooding on the vast abyss,
And madst it pregnant.

—John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

There is a virus.

There are hundreds of millions who are sick from the virus, many millions that have died, and many more that will die. Such are some of the brute, visible facts. Our pandemical situation, however, encompasses much more than anything reducible to physical sickness: a patchwork of diverse experiences, standing adjacent as innumerable tesserae, heterogeneous, seemingly infinite in their variegation and contour. To

¹ The bulk of this essay was written in Minneapolis in June 2020 during the protests that followed the murder of George Floyd. During this time, it became even more clear that we could never neatly separate the pandemic from our other ongoing social concerns.

² LW 11, 24. *Liberalism and Social Action*. Citations of John Dewey's works are to the thirty-seven-volume critical edition published by Southern Illinois University Press

under the editorship of Jo Ann Boydston. Citations give the series abbreviation followed by volume number, and then the page number. For example: (LW 10, 12) is page 12 of *Art as Experience*, which is published as volume 10 of *The Later Works*. Series abbreviations for *The Collected Works*: EW *The Early Works* (1882–98), MW *The Middle Works* (1899–1924), LW *The Later Works* (1925–53). In the footnote, I also give the title of the work.

claim that we are “all in this together” at best identifies a base temporal fact, one that is confused with unity in empathy and direction. As it stands, such a claim is mere propaganda, as intellectually misleading as any claim could be. It should be met with cynicism.

If we are to inquire into the nature of the pandemic, we must first acknowledge that the pandemic is not a *thing* in any colloquial sense, but a complex affair of affairs that cannot as a whole become an object of reflection. To conceive a “whole” is to exercise an imaginative power, not name a brute ontological property. And yet, we can claim that the irreducibly diverse experiences of the pandemic are somehow held together by what, in Dewey’s vocabulary, stands as a single pervasive *quality*, one that is decidedly *pandemical*. Hence, the pandemic, in any sense relevant to our social situation is not an intellectual object. It is a dynamic affective force encompassing histories, present actualities, and future possibilities. It is

sustained by forces that are cultural, political, and economic. It is experienced through emotions that are primarily dark in tone, but at times hopeful. This observation orients the task: it is inevitable that we abstract particular factors for analysis, but the analytical treatment must be oriented by the synthetic, apprehension with comprehension, focus with context. Failing this, we abstract the physical sickness from the concurrent social sicknesses, and also sever the illness from our pre-existing conditions: individualism, polarization, racism, alienation, isolation, sexism, anti-Semitism, ignorance, anxiety, classism, poverty, consumerism, and drudgery. These long-sustained sicknesses are the threats to life, or, at least the factors that draw our civilizations to a

premature death. The virus, in and of itself, does not account for the destruction before us, for the deaths that are with us, for the people marching in the streets for social change, and for the anxious families at home who worry about their children.

Retrospection is the greatest inventor of meaning, but our pandemical memory is short. Within the thicket of any turbulent event, we are left mostly with immediacies and the occasional flash of anticipation, the latter largely unreflective in character. We have the sense that we are moving towards something, some end, and create the fable that this end will hold some reward

or create a higher synthesis. There is, I think, some remnant of telos or determinism here, and it is comforting to believe that our ugliness is part of the cosmic plan. Are there such syntheses to be found in sickness, in the loss of our loved ones?

The answer, likely, is negative; our pandemical situation consists of preventable suffering,

each death a reminder of our social inadequacy, each sickness a unique refractor of destruction and desperation, refulgent not from divine light but only from fires that burn in our cities. Experience seems to be caught in a cycle: spit up the blood, follow suit, and play until the edges become frayed. Kierkegaard recognized that experience is situated on the fulcrum of life and death, that nature itself was not different than the deathbed patient in that final transitional moment: “Such is the life of nature: short, full of song, flowering, but at every moment

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death's prey, and death is the stronger."³ This is just about all the "authenticity" we need.

Beyond that, there are corpses. Birth is painful, and it is the quintessential metaphor for new beginning. I want to begin at the end; suffocated lungs, stiffened limbs, the passive pooling of blood, the decomposition of flesh to bones and finally skeletonization. The final phase allows us to be forgotten. Or, it supplies a pile of bleached bones in the sun, something for our descendants to look upon and wonder "how did they live?" In these barren lands, birth comes late in the day.

Nietzsche wrote "If a temple is to be erected *a temple must be destroyed*: that is the law—let anyone who can show me a case in which it is not fulfilled!"⁴ Death is that which limits life, and the temple is that which fixes meaning. The former is physical, the latter metaphysical. The dead, as distinguished from death, are the counterforce to limit and fixity. We do more than merely remember them; we talk to them, and in return they give *us* new life. And if we are open to their wisdom, they teach us to cease our search for the comfort of limitations, the domain of death proper. Instead, their message is to live for the future generation, to stop condemning ourselves to condemned structures no matter how hallowed. The critical and subversive task of philosophy is to undermine such structures. The message of the dead

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transcendent significances, material reductions, and all other means of limiting life. The violence, death, and struggle of our times are undergirded by a refusal to *learn* from the dead, who deliver to us nature's poetical impulse.

Harold Bloom once summed up Nietzsche with a single apothegm that is equally applicable to Dewey, "We possess art lest we should perish of the truth." Bloom continues,

Poetry tells lies, but the truth, being the reality principle, reduces to death, our death. To love truth would be to love death . . . the world is rich in meaning because it is rich in error, strong in suffering, when seen from an aesthetic perspective. Sanctifying a lie, and deceiving with a good conscience, is the necessary labor of art, because error about life is necessary for life, since the truth about life merely hastens death.⁵

The forgotten corpse is traded for the living dead; the desire for certainty traded for possibility. Cultivating the poetic impulse involves a re-

mystification of our world, creating room for new competing meanings that, while in conversation with the old, *refuse to be reduced to what came before*. As Bloom writes of his master trope, *metalepsis*, we substitute late concepts for those which came before in earlier tropes, so that "the present vanishes and the dead return, by a reversal, to be triumphed over by the living."⁶

Dewey asserts that "Poets who have sung of despair in the midst of prosperity, and of hope

³ Soren Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 203.

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1989), 95.

⁵ Harold Bloom, *Modern Critical Views: Friedrich Nietzsche* (New York, NY: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), 5.

⁶ Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1975), 74.

amid darkest gloom, have been the true metaphysicians of nature.”⁷ Dewey is not referencing all poets, or a specific creative genre, but a creative energy that runs through nature, harnessed and refined into particular gestures and insights by and through the purposive imaginative process. Such an impulse opposes that which has been established as sacred and eternal. The temple of truth marks the genuine human condition and affliction: living in a precarious, tensional world, and yet desiring permanence in spite of a cosmos of change and short memory.

Emerson, Dewey’s own poet-prophet of democracy, wrote that “Whenever a mind is simple and receives a divine wisdom, old things pass away,—means, teachers, texts, temples fall; it lives now, and absorbs past and future into the present hour . . .”⁸ Thirteen months after his wife died of tuberculosis, Emerson also wrote “I visited Ellen’s tomb & opened the coffin.”⁹ Surrounded by death, Emerson understood the role of crypts, and began to doubt the role of temples, the former being a medium for speaking with the dead, the latter a shrine to false constancy.

Our pandemical temple invites us to spend time with others in an enclosed space, and surely death exults when given such advantage. Life as it was known is the sanctuary, its decorations consisting of false promise, bad habit, political lie, squandered potential. Dewey, ever the critical optimist, wanted us to stop erecting temples, shrines to the eternal, and instead focus on the truest spark of divinity in experience, those proleptic modes of poetic action that revive the dead in order to create the future. These are ends-in-view. To be certain, death is a viewable end, at least for its witnesses. If we place the meaning of death outside of the qualitative serial matrix within which it actually occurs, it becomes lacking in significance—it loses its proleptic

character. The dead, however, belong in the *here and now*, not in the eternal, and not in the past. Their message is of continuity. In our pandemical expanse, death is enshrined, and divine wisdom gathers somewhere beyond; if we follow, the dead will bring us to the verdant hill beyond the threshold of the temple.

The Broken Pattern

For now, the pain pauses in its round,
notes the time of day, the patient’s temperature,
leaves a memo for the surrogate: What the *hell*
did you think you were doing? I mean . . .
Oh well, less said the better, they all say.
I’ll post this at the desk.
God will find the pattern and break it.

—John Ashberry, *A Worldly Country*

We live wretchedly much faster than before.

Knowledge has been given its exclusive space, and the results have been disastrous: deepening social divisions, ongoing wars, lack of community, all accompanied by the latest technological advances. Such advances enable global connection, and as such, have enabled the rapid global spread of the pandemic—hardly a comforting irony. The immediate solutions to the pandemic, including vaccines and medical technologies, require the production of a great deal of knowledge. The larger resolutions to our pandemical situation, however, must be located within the domain of wisdom. Our times call for great political change. We can call for revolution, but the spirit of any revolution cannot be sustained when the underlying social tendencies remain unchanged. Let the troubled voices take the lead; let a revolution in wisdom become our rhythm section, driving the composition

⁷ LW 1, 96. *Experience and Nature*.

⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self Reliance,” in *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York, NY: The Library of America, 1983), 270.

⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson in His Journals*, ed. Joel Porte (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 82.

forward, holding it together, changing the tempi, accenting the leading tones, those that urge us to resolution.

Virtue necessarily shares its space with wisdom, and wisdom is not knowledge. Socrates is the patron saint of teachers, and his lesson was that we must pursue *the good* without *knowing* its exact nature.¹⁰ Philosophy lacks virtue in proportion to its willingness to sever questions about *how we know* from larger factors in human experience: *how we live, how we create a culture*. Placing our collective faith in a solution consisting of increased knowledge, or assuming that a privation of proper knowledge about some particular element is the root of our social woes, fails to address the existing conditions that have made our virus ever more fatal, which are the very conditions that limit our potentialities.

The larger solution shall not consist of knowledge, but of a pursuit of wisdom, the latter being the genuine counterforce to mounting social sicknesses:

[The] love of wisdom is not after all the same thing as eagerness for scientific knowledge. By wisdom we mean not systematic and proved knowledge of fact and truth, but a conviction about moral values, a sense for the better kind of life to be led. Wisdom is a moral term, and like every moral term refers not to the constitution of things already in existence, not even if that constitution be magnified into eternity and absoluteness. As a moral term it refers to a choice about something to be done, a preference for living this sort of life rather than that. It refers not to accomplished reality but to a desired future

which our desires, when translated into articulate conviction, may help bring into existence.¹¹

Wisdom trades in ideal moral possibilities, “a desired future,” and is the force that aligns and orients the interconnected aspects of *lived* experience: culture, desire, impulse, habit, and even cognition. Dewey reminds us that “All possibilities, as possibilities, are ideal in character,” and observes that “All endeavor for the better is moved by faith in what is possible, not by adherence to the actual.”¹²

In addition to pertaining to *lived experience* and its possibilities, Socrates knew that wisdom involves dialectic, a critical and oppositional conversation, a productive conflict. Hegel’s Romantic generation took dialectic to the cosmological level where it was “the principle of all motion, of all life, and of all activation in the actual world.”¹³ In Dewey’s program, conflict is similarly central, generic to all existence, and necessary for any generative process. Every single important term for Dewey denotes a tensional relationship: experience-nature, organism-environment, actual-possible, theory-practice, habit-impulse, means-ends, travelling-arriving, form-content. There is, however, no necessity involved in the creation of the synthetic, no abstract metalogical categories. Loss, without recovery, without enriched meaning, remains a genuine threat; *hazard*, for Dewey, is also generic to existence. In every conflict there is potential, but potential inheres in the precarious and stable, the “sacred” and the “profane.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Of Socrates, Dewey writes “Because he was the first man clearly to conceive the necessity of the union of intellectual training and moral aims in education and because he suffered death for the loyalty with which he held to this conviction, Socrates may fairly be regarded as the patron saint of teachers” (LW 17, 186). “Syllabi: History of Education.”

¹¹ MW 11, 44. “Philosophy and Democracy”.

¹² LW 9, 17. *A Common Faith*.

¹³ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, trans. T.F.

Geraets, W.A. Suchting, and H.S. Harris (Indianapolis,

IN and Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing Company, 1991), 129.

¹⁴ In *Experience and Nature* Dewey writes “Plague, famine, failure of crops, disease, death, defeat in battle, are always just around the corner, and so are abundance, strength, victory, festival and song. Luck is proverbially both good and bad in its distributions. The sacred and the accursed are potentialities of the same situation; and there is no category of things which has not embodied the sacred and accursed: persons, words, places, times, directions in space, stones, winds, animals, stars” (LW 1, 43).

For Dewey, wisdom involves actively adjusting the ways in which each oppositional tendency relates in their experienced particularities:

the significant problems and issues of life and philosophy concern the rate and mode of the conjunction of the precarious and the assured, the incomplete and the finished, the repetitious and the varying, the safe and sane and the hazardous. If we trust to the evidence of experienced things, these traits, and the modes and tempos of their interaction with each other, are fundamental features of natural existence. The experience of their various consequences, according as they are relatively isolated, unhappily or happily combined, is evidence that wisdom, and hence that love of wisdom which is philosophy, is concerned with choice and administration of their proportioned union.¹⁵

Our pandemic proportionalities include social solidarity and individual character, optimism and cynicism, safety and courage. If we place our faith in any single term, we are at best left with empty slogans and professed values we can scarcely claim to have. At worst, we continue to drive away any hope of social recovery.

Dewey emphasized the connections between virtue, wisdom, and tensional relations, and understood their shadowy counterparts to be living uncritically, acting myopically, and abiding by dualisms. Throughout all of his mature works, Dewey's primary target was not formal epistemology, materialism, scientism, or idealism. It was dualisms, metaphysical dead-ends that haunt Western thought to the present day: reality-appearance, nature-convention, being-becoming, essence-accident, theory-practice, mind-body, objective-subjective, *a priori-a posteriori*, self-social, and so on. He does not invoke such dualisms for philosophical sport; these are the most common ways of limiting lived experience and hence cultural potential. These are hence problems for the street, the crowded

apartment, the diseased marketplace, the sick mother, the worried husband, the lonely child, the unborn baby.

During the course of our pandemic, the dualistic condition of what we might call the *false patriot* is especially worth noting. A naturally fundamental antagonism is imagined to exist between the self and the social, and the related concepts of freedom and autonomy are formed in accordance with this dualism. For the false patriot, freedom entails placing individual right above social virtue, at least whenever convenient. If discrete and atomic states of affairs are believed to exist, imagination simply continues on the path of least resistance until it envisions the *self* as a discrete existence, and "individual rights" as fundamental and immutable, and hence metaphysically severed from evolving social needs. They see no paradox in the statement "I shall act freely, even if it harms my community."

The false patriot is not without a counterpart. On the other side of the ideological spectrum, the individualism of false patriotism is rejected for a different dualistic extreme: the *counterfeit pluralist*. Here, we encounter themes common to Dewey's descendants: a proud proclamation of "pluralistic values" and a celebration of "diversity." Such values, if genuine, are crucial to democracy and social solidarity. But have we lived up to these values any more than the false patriot has lived up to the ideals of freedom and national pride? The pandemic brings about honesty, and an honest assessment would admit that such terms have joined the schema of consumerism, ornate shrouds and costumes that obscure what occurs beneath. For the counterfeit pluralist, diversity of background and opinion are desired so as long as they sit comfortably with the power structures that have long been in place. Marketing thrives in such vanity, in proclamations of pluralism that have no substance.

¹⁵ LW 1, 66-67. *Experience and Nature*.

Wisdom, however, has no tolerance for impoverished performative pluralism.

The pandemical situation has, I think, made clear the failure of both extremes, and the dualisms that fund their respective failures. Polarization has not made us more free, and proclamations of pluralism have not shown strength in fighting injustices and giving opportunity to those who are most vulnerable. The first step in creating something new is to appreciate *relation-and-individuation* as a single generic trait of existence. Death teaches us something nuanced; it is nature's clearest proof of the existence of immediate, individuated, and perfect cadences. There is nothing illusory about the complete perfection of loss exhibited in death. And yet, while death is sufficient, it is not metaphysically discrete. It has connections, but is irreducible to pure process, for no such purity exists in nature. There is a co-determinate relation between the experience of "process" and "completion," a mutual entailment between "relation" and "exclusivity." Again, the lesson has been lost on most philosophers, the best of whom speak of "plurality" and "relations" without a solemn acknowledgment of their oppositional counterparts, of the fact that "in every event there is something obdurate, self-sufficient, wholly immediate, neither a relation nor an element in a relational whole, but terminal and exclusive."¹⁶ Wisdom will find the balance if nurtured through education, active participation, a controlled cultivation of social intelligence, and a renewed sense of loyalty to our social causes.

Josiah Royce understood genuine loyalty, and acknowledged that such loyalty coincides with the creation of a self in coordination with a social cause. There is no *self*, and hence no possibility for *self-legislation* without a critical and

reflective, and so not blind, dedication to external social forces. These forces, both ideal and actual in ontological character, are what grant a unified narrative of personhood to what is otherwise a mere disorganized collection of events unfolding over time. A self is only affirmed by and through a cause, and a cause is given substance from unique and visionary selves. Such a relationship is, for Royce, the locus of what can justly be called "individual rights,"

Have I private and personal rights, which I ought to assert? Yes, precisely in so far as my private powers and possessions are held in trust for the cause, and are, upon occasion, to be defended for the sake of the cause. My rights are morally the outcome of my loyalty. It is my right to protect my service, to

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action.**

maintain my office, and to keep my own merely in order that I may use my own as the cause commands. But rights which are not determined by my loyalty are vain pretense.¹⁷

Cities across the globe are currently experiencing an awakening of *selves*, enabled by a shared crisis, and this awakening has the potential to surpass the selfish individualism of the false patriot, and the empty sloganeering of the counterfeit pluralist. Royce navigated the problem of social dualism through the spiritual authority of loyalty, and Dewey through the metaphysical legitimacy of democracy.

With crisis comes opportunity, with opportunity comes the possibility of cultivated wisdom, and with wisdom comes genuine virtue. To say that our pandemic is a species of social conflict, a crisis, is to state the obvious. So are war, economic depression, and climate change. Some elements are tangible, some are not, and our pandemical situation is not unique in having invisible enemies. What is, perhaps, unique about a

¹⁶ LW 1, 74. *Experience and Nature*.

¹⁷ Josiah Royce, *The Philosophy of Loyalty* (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1916), 143-144.

pandemic is its global import, coupled with its immediacy, coupled with its potential to efficiently kill members of every social class (albeit even more efficient in conditions associated with poverty).

The momentum given by our collective threat might be transfigured into the greatest wave of social change heretofore witnessed in the modern era. Let us hope that old patterns be broken, and let our hope be sustained by wisdom and action.

Conclusion: The River of Light

Then as a folk who have been under masks
Seem other than before, if they divest
The semblance not their own they disappeared
in,

Thus into greater pomp were changed for me
The flowerets and the sparks, so that I saw
Both of the Courts of Heaven made manifest.

—Dante, *Paradiso*, Canto XXX

Emmanuel Levinas writes of a dog, Bobby, who would greet him and the other prisoners as they came and went from the camp for work duty. Despite the wretched condition of the prisoners, Levinas observes that for Bobby “there was no doubt that we were men,” and adds, “This dog was the last Kantian in Nazi Germany, without the brain needed to universalize maxims and drives.”¹⁸

Bobby teaches that a deep recognition of humanity, in all of its varied forms of misery, is not given as a human capacity. Even in the best of times, we too often develop the opposite tendency, that of divesting others of their humanity to justify abhorrent behavior. In times of great upheaval—and the present situation qualifies—

the risk is ever greater. Such behavior has been on display during our pandemic, and it is actively at war with the capacity to recognize ourselves in others. When we uncover our mirrors, we should hope to see them. Bobby also teaches us that cognition and its most sophisticated prizes do not somehow substitute for love, heart, courage, resilience, and virtue—the constituent parts of wisdom.

Dewey characterizes the *imagination* as a power to unify a disparate or plural series of experiences into a singular vision.¹⁹ We are able to conceive of *a* universe, *a* person, *an* interpretation, but benefit by knowing that these can be pragmatic constructs, ways of organizing, not *the* way. Dewey also writes that the imagination is “a warm and intimate taking in of the full scope of a situation,”²⁰ an additional way of understanding its unifying capabilities.

During the course of the present essay, wisdom has been characterized as an important source of virtue and engine of change, and the life of wisdom is funded by “a desired future.” Just what this future should look like, however, may be the office of imagination, whose place as a philosophical concept and moral principle should remain beside wisdom. To merely prescribe that one ought to *get an imagination* is a vapid suggestion. To actively work to implement and hone imaginative skills—placing ourselves in the position of others, criticizing our cultural institutions and imagining what they could look like—is what is substantial.

To hope that this pandemic is a gateway to a new imaginative era is the first step. What comes next is a healthy pessimism accompanied by a desire to work for what is needed. Dewey was an optimist, but not naïvely so, and the chief mark of healthy optimism is an acknowledgment that failure is possible, perhaps likely. And if success

¹⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 153.

¹⁹ See: LW 9, 14 and LW 9, 29. *Democracy and Education*.

²⁰ MW 9, 244. *Democracy and Education*.

is subject to the whims of contingency, it is mere luck and not genuine achievement.

Epidemics and pandemics are not new to human history, and one cannot with any confidence claim that there has been any lasting moral lesson. The Meiji-era tuberculosis outbreak in Japan, for example, also disproportionately affected the poorest strata of society. The government, like so many governments in the present day, did its best to hide the voices of the epidemic, whose primary victims were the young girls working in textile mills. Their voices rang out into the night, unheard. To stay awake, the girls would sing:

At 2 or 3 a.m.
The grass and trees sleep.
I'm tired, but I suppose it's impossible.
If the female spinners are human,
Then the dead, shriveled trees of the mountain
bloom.²¹

When Dante's avatar in *Paradiso* drank of the river of light, he saw divinity with clarity, with new eyes. After traversing the concrete horrors of our ordeal, we can transfigure the pandemic into such a river, or, at least continue to work so that the dead trees of the mountain bloom in some distant future.

²¹ See Elisheva A. Perelman, *American Evangelists and Tuberculosis in Modern Japan* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019), 14.