THE EDUCATIVE VALUE OF AUTOBIOGRAPHIES DURING THE TIME OF PANDEMIC

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Abstract

The aim of this work is to highlight the importance of the autobiography in times of a pandemic and to understand its pedagogical value. As a tool of introspective investigation, through recourse to the memory of the writer and a continuous connection of the narrator with the events of their life, it manages to bring out elements that contribute to their growth, assigning to the autobiography an educational and self-forming value. Writing of oneself serves both the narrator and the reader to educate themselves to listen to their own experience and their own interiority, to interweave the fabrics of their existence in a bond of sense and meaning, through recourse to a memory that is linked to the events of the present and projects into the future. In my personal and family experience with the pandemic, the autobiographical account has proved to be a tool to help the writer and the people in their family, and to clarify the value of certain bonds and the significance of simple things, the pedagogical value of collateral beauty.

Keywords: *autobiography, pedagogy, memory, education, pandemic*

INTRODUCTION

To affirm that the autobiographical story can represent the first real intellectual exercise of self-awareness and self-knowledge for man, is not difficult. Nor is it to be considered the first true educational[1] and self-humanising[2] device. History, in this sense, is witness to a constant need of man to want to represent themselves in artistic forms, to leave a trace of a memory of the facts, or to proceed to an introspective action and give sense and meaning to their actions, questioning their consciousness and historicity in order to develop a lucid presence to themselves and to the world through a continuous process of subjectivation. It is the education of man, who cares for man, through writing which becomes an anamnesis, a life-saving medicine for the mind and soul. The writing of oneself, among the various autobiographical forms, represents a pedagogical device at the disposal of man to trace an evolutionary trajectory, and an instrument for translating into words and language an inner movement consisting of feelings, emotions, memories, and sensations, more or less evocative to certain moments of their life, which in their disorder ask to form a bond of meaning so as to escape the deterioration of time through words that become testimony. The link between the author and time is always present in the literary genre of autobiographies, especially in the autobiographical practice for pedagogical purposes. And it is almost always a moment of inner individual crisis or a tragic event in history that unleashes the instinct

[1] Aleandri, G, Russo, V., 2017, L'Autobiografia come metodo educativo, auto-educativo e di ricerca nella prospettiva del life-long learning: progetto per una indagine esplorativa, in *EPCS Journal*, 16/2017.

[2] The autobiography is a genre of self-writing and at the same time one of the most authoritative methods of inner investigation in literature and the humanities. Various authors, at different times, have used the autobiography as a tool for retrospective analysis, investigation and discovery of their own personality, care and self-formation. Among these authors there are some who have particularly exalted its formative and self-formative value. Among these was St. Augustine who, with his work "The Confessions", used the autobiography as an inner monologue with an edifying function with respect to his relationship with God; J.J. Rousseau who, through his work "The Confessions", transformed the autobiography into the history of the soul in a continuous search for justification with respect to the evils and corruptions of his time, with a political-moral function; M. Proust, who makes the autobiography a territory of dialogue between his consciousness and the desire for an "I" constantly in tension and in search of growth; T. Fontane who uses the autobiography almost to stop the time of his childhood in order to remove it from history; until our time with Fr. Freire who uses the life stories of campesinos in the Brazilian favelas as instruments of creating awareness of a people, assigning to the autobiography the function of moral denunciation and social demand; ; to the French school with P. Lejeune and G. Pineau, who use the autobiography as a tool for the organization and knowledge of thought and for social insertion; in Italy with D. Demetrio and Franco Cambi, who from an anthropological-phenomenological perspective, exalt its pedagogical value as instruments of recognition and self-recognition, in order to probe the phases of growth of the self-writing subject, as an instrument of formation and self-care, in which the final project resides in a rediscovered integrity of the Ego.

to write, which imposes on man to question their own existence, trace paths of change, imagine possible futures. The autobiography assumes a pedagogical centrality and a hermeneutic function when it is derived from a close link between the subject who writes about themselves and their own history, expanding its functions beyond that of mere intimate investigation[3]. . It becomes a way to take control of one's life [...], of one's self-worth that coincides with the strengthening of one's own self-organization[4], with formative and self-formative value. Pedagogical research, from the late nineties to the present, is rich in studies and research that confirm this [5] (Pineau e Le Grand 1993, Demetrio 1996, Dominicè 2000, Alberici 2000, Cambi 2002, Formenti 2009, Merrill e West 2009).

It is precisely the pedagogical value of writing about oneself that this work seeks to analyse also through my personal experience during the pandemic, as material that does not give way to oblivion, but is subjected to a critical-reflective examination[6]**,** to offer the possibility for those who write about themselves to learn about themselves, to relate to themselves and others, to reveal their authenticity, to seek the truth, the truths of each other and the truths of the world. And in a time of pandemic, writing about oneself can offer itself as a "lifeline" to understand the subject's connection with their history and events, to rediscover trust, to transform waiting into hope for a better future, to delineate new paths of life. Faced with the risk of succumbing, it becomes an escape from a point of no return, towards the search for new equilibria and a new harmony with oneself and with the world.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

In order to understand the educational value of the autobiography, it was essential to resort to the main pedagogical bibliographic sources which served as an epistemological background. The combination of the sources and the description of some of the feelings experienced during the pandemic and the reflection on their meaning, revealed common points on the educational value of the autobiography, especially in times of difficulty and discomfort caused by the state of emergency of the pandemic, a time when its function of support and care particularly emerges.

RESULTS

The combination, from pedagogical bibliographical sources of reference to the short descriptions of the feelings and behaviour narrated, has resulted in the growth of the sense of awareness and the ability to resist difficulties and to grasp the formative value of writing about oneself in times of a pandemic for the global growth of individuals and groups.

THE PANDEMIC AS A TIME OF SILENCE, MEDITATION, AND COMPREHENSION

The coronavirus pandemic seems to represent, for the whole world, this point of no return, a moment of global crisis which marks the inexorable decline of an individual and collective consciousness which calls for a pedagogical reflection, for an epiphany of man in search of a new balance, and a new harmony with themselves and with others. The pandemic therefore offers itself as a pedagogical category that the autobiography, as an investigative tool, can probe and bring out the collateral beauty that represent real formative moments capable of nurturing confidence in life, the ability to develop and sensitize new skills, discover new virtues, rekindle ties, and shed light on what is essential, achieved by drawing on

[3] Covato, C, 2019, "La dimensione storiografica dell'autobiografia al femminile", in S. Ulivieri Strozzi (a cura di), *Le donne si raccontano. Autobiografia, genere e formazione del sé*, Edizioni ETS, Pisa, p. 11.
[4] Natoli, S, 2010, *L'edificazione di sé. Istruzioni sulla vita interiore*, Edizioni Laterza, Roma-Bari, pp.7-8.
[5] Alberici, A., 2000, *Educazione in età adulta. Percorsi biografici nella ricerca e nella formazione*, Roma, Armando; Cambi, F. 2002, *L'autobiografia come metodo formativo*, Roma, Laterza; Demetrio, D. (1996), *Raccontarsi. L'autobiografia come cura di sé*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina; Dominicé, P., 2000, *Learning from our lives: Using educational biographies with adults*. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass; Formenti, L., 2009, *Attraversare la cura. Relazioni, contesti e pratiche della scrittura di sé*, Trento, Erickson; Merrill, B., & West, L., 2009, *Using biographical methods in social research*, London, Sage; Pineau, G., & Le Grand, J. L., 1993, *Les histoires de vie*, Paris, PUF.
[6] Schiedi, A, 2017, *Narrare la Bildung. L'itinerario pedagogico di Edith Stein*, Morcelliana, Brescia, p. 29.

ancient wisdom. If the risk of being overwhelmed by negative emotions and feelings, to the point of succumbing, represents the greatest danger of the pandemic, writing about oneself, on the other hand, offers itself as a universal panacea for appreciating lived experiences, for understanding the way of doing things and giving an account of the experience, as a way of preparing oneself for the events of one's life[7]. An experience to which we try to give a face.

We attribute appellations and metaphors to the drama that we are experiencing to circumscribe the event, to give us the possibility to understand its origin, its nature, its effects, its meaning. The pandemic has been elevated to the synthesis and archetype of those knots and intertwining of the complexity of our time, and of its most inaccessible implications. In the term pandemic, today's man identifies the set of negative values, deviations and contradictions that characterize our era. In all kinds of literature produced this year, in which each of us has lived and continues to live suspended between the fear of succumbing and the anxiety of getting out of a seemingly dead-end tunnel, the pandemic has been portrayed with every possible metaphor imaginable. It has been understood as self-destruction, as a product of excessive individualism, as an attack on life, as complexity, as war, as social distance, as an emergency, as confinement, as a corruption of the mind, as a tsunami that has swept over everything and everyone, and as a discomfort/inconvenience to civilization[8].

The impact of the coronavirus has also been devastating from the point of view of identity, of both individual and social identity. It caught us by surprise. In the space of a few days, it shattered certainties, fuelled doubts, evoked anxieties and fears, exasperated the sense of impermanence and fragility of our lives, levelling everything, bringing man back to a time where essence prevailed over form. The realisation that everything could be lost in a few moments and that this possibility could be left to chance has united people and populations in a sense of helplessness and annihilation which has taken many forms: the impossibility of being together, of cooperating, of relating, the need to isolate oneself, of living in confinement, the awareness of having to fight against something unknown with the possibility of finally being defeated, the risk of slipping into hysteria and a loss of reason in an attempt to minimise the problem, to reject its existence. But then we realized that the epidemic was corrupting not only our bodies but also our minds[9], the minds of each and every one of us.

In fact, we all suddenly found ourselves at the mercy of a monster against whom we had to immediately activate instincts of survival[10], in contradiction to man's miraculous claim to immortality and prima donna behaviour. Our long-lived search for the elixir of long life has tragically collided with our vulnerability. A vulnerability that now claims centrality as a pedagogical category to initiate a reflection on the corruption of reason and the degradation of thought. Faced with the possibility of us succumbing (the very us who had distanced death from our sense of humanity), our vulnerability rediscovers our anthropological and formative value. For this reason, our awareness helps us to adhere to cultural values, to nourish hope, to immerse ourselves in the mystery of life, to value a spirituality that had given way to an excessive rationalization of the aspects of life itself[11], and to recover the eschatological meaning of a religious ritual tragically removed from an anthropological conception of human existence.

The pandemic has exacerbated civilization and its discontents[12] of Freudian memory, the friction between the individual and civilisation, where the will to affirm personal freedom meets with the firm opposition of civil society to limit it, through restrictions, impediments, and prohibitions, which restore a greater sense of security, but at times appear to be an attack on the fundamental right to be and to exist. The pandemic has turned loneliness into alienation, relationships into virtual contacts, existence into survival, silence into absence and self-annihilation. And this is precisely why it offers itself to pedagogical reflection as a time for meditation, for re-evaluation of memory, for space for understanding, for the possibility of change, for imagining one's future in which silence represents an

[7] Cambi, F, 2007, "La scrittura di sé come "cura di sé" in Duccio Demetrio (ed.), *Per una pedagogia e didattica della scrittura*, Unicopli, Milano, p. 24.
[8] Guigoni, A, Ferrari, R, 2020, *Pandemia 2020*, M&J Publishing House, p.1
[9] Ibi, p. 25.
[10] Ibidem, p. 25.
[11] Ibi, p. 181
[12] Freud, S, (2010), *Il disagio della civiltà*, Tr. it. E. Ganni, Einaudi, Torino.

unprecedented form of attention to something completely unknown, but which with its own language tries desperately to tell us something.

If that discomfort/inconvenience of civilization creates that cacophony of opposing voices, silence can restore harmony to us, it can help us to find harmony through words when it feeds them, it can help us to interpret that unfamiliar language, through contemplation and intuition. Ortega y Gasset stresses this in his essay *The Misery and the Splendour of Translation*:

"You cannot fully understand that wonderful reality that is language, if you do not start from the awareness that language is made above all of silences. A being who was unable to give up saying many things would be unable to speak"[13].

The pandemic has generated a spectacular representation of reality in which everyone, more or less, has had a say, generating confusion, breaking up the few certainties that each of us had. An overload of data and information, often contradictory and misinterpreted, has generated an individual and collective disorientation that has alienated each of us from an inner journey towards the search for our own truth, which, for those who write about themselves, is always the mediation and dialogue of their thoughts with the reality they live[14]. The outbreak of the pandemic has become an opportunity to fill the world with so many words, when perhaps it was necessary to be silent from its very beginning to free up space for the essential things, to get right to the heart of the problem, to give each of us the opportunity to review lifestyles and relationships, models of thought, and to re-define the functionality of certain scientific goals what we call progress. Without silence there is no word and there is nothing to hear, says Tiziano Terzani[15] in one of his books. A hearing which is a profound form of attention, is authentic generosity[16], a particular willingness to hear and to grasp values and teachings. And it is perhaps precisely generosity that man can use against the pandemic, as a thinking being, to transform it into a time of fruitfulness. Silence, in fact, in these dark moments, can feed man's creativity. A creativity that can generate the word which becomes writing to describe how one lives the precariousness, the moods, and the sense of emptiness that the pandemic has generated. All this cannot but be a lesson for each one of us, for a community, for a people.

Confronting the idea of death evoked by the pandemic, man tries in every possible way to escape an irreparable destiny, relying on reasoning which gives sense and meaning to what happens, and on creativity and imagination which develops possible horizons. And it is done so with the means at our disposal, with those skills which attribute sanctity to man's time and events, which sublimate our existence by bringing us closer to what is divine.

The pandemic has triggered in each of us a recourse to history, to retrieve images, information, and data, capable of giving a similar representation of an individual and collective crisis, so that we can defend ourselves against what we consider instinctively harmful to us, by trying to exorcise a situation we would not like to live in.[17]

We access memory to understand what we are living in the present, to romanticise a destiny, to imagine our fate,[18] to give us the opportunity to become something else, to recreate ourselves, to distance ourselves from something that does not belong to us or to make friends with it.

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[13] Ortega y Gasset, J, 2001, *Miseria e splendore della traduzione*, Il Nuovo Melangolo, Genova.
[14] Mortari, L, 2008, "Conoscere se stessi per aver cura di sé", in *Studi sulla formazione*, Vol. 11, No.2, p. 51.
[15] Tiziano Terzani was an Italian journalist and writer (1938-2004). He soon acquired, thanks to his travels for work, a profound knowledge of the Asian continent, which also greatly influenced his lifestyle. Terzani soon became one of the most prestigious Italian journalists in the world. His many works, translated all over the world, are an introspective journey into the discovery of a wisdom he finds in the simple things of life, a life made of meditation in which he values silence as nourishment of the word. His thought, told with extraordinary intellectual honesty and lightness, is described in his works, those which come to mind: Un indovino mi disse (1995); In Asia (1998); Lettere contro la guerra (2002); Un altro giro di giostra. Viaggio nel male e nel bene del nostro tempo (2004). Published posthumously: La fine è il mio inizio (2006), biographical conversation by his son Folco Terzani; Fantasmi. Dispacci dalla Cambogia (2008), collection of reports from Indo-China by his wife A. Staude; Un mondo che non esiste più (2010), Un'idea di destino. Diari di una vita straordinaria (2014).
[16] Weil, S, 2008, *Attesa di Dio*, Adelphi, Milano.
[17] Demetrio, D, 1998, *Pedagogia della memoria*, Meltemi, Roma, p. 10.
[18] Ibi, p. 16.

Retropathy makes us reflect on the sense and meaning[19] of what belongs to history and what we are re-living in the present, activating, almost as a reflex, a pedagogy of memory to support the drama of the present time and accompany us on a slow path of consciousness and awareness that assigns further meaning to what we are living, through what we have learned in similar situations and through what we learn by experiencing a collective drama which represents for man a real watershed, a crossroads in which to choose, and which for these reasons assumes formative value.

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN A TIME OF A PANDEMIC: WHY?

There are moments that our memory cannot seem to recall. Others are lost because the pain is so excruciating that it hurts the memory to the point of leaving it in shreds, in the realisation that it is precisely in our memory that our life and our passions are revealed.[20] And the attempt to recall the information, the memories and the images, in order to give rigor to the history of each one of us and to the history of humanity, is lost in the illusion of recovering that sensory memory which gives back that wisdom and intelligence of the heart and soul in the face of emotions and feelings that only writing manages to delineate the edges, and trace its characteristics. First there's autobiographical thought, and then autobiographical writing takes shape, to keep one's life intact.[21] If introspection becomes self-reading and self-interpretation transforming itself into autobiographical thought, self-writing becomes an investigation to recover what seems lost and buried, in order to give one new light in the present and establish a constant dialogue between the narrator's consciousness and the anxiety and desire of their becoming. If the pandemic, as a traumatic event, becomes an attack on us, shattering us, writing becomes the string that holds us together, indeed making us enter into dialogue with the narrator. A dialogue that is nourishment for our being.

It takes form in situations and moments of particularly emotional and existential upheaval, but with the aim of preserving the integrity of oneself and the relationship with those lives that represent the other selves[22]. In this way, it becomes self-care and a soothing practice against a human condition in which fear, terror and suffering feed one's daily life[23], and the drama that is experienced constitutes a continuous attack on the identity of the subject.

The self who is represented through writing is not lost in narcissistic reflections. The self is not Narcissus who, seeing his reflection in the lake, falls into it, The writer is the self, who, by telling the story about themselves, establishes a link with history and its events and composes a plot and a connection with time, in the same way a tree lays its roots in the ground becoming an integral part of it.[24] The subject is a self who expose themselves and has no other purpose than to dialogue with themself, to avoid fragmentation, to open themself to an individual interpretation by the reader, therefore to a multiplicity of interpretations that serves the subject who tells their story, to reconstitute themself in more stable forms, and to the reader to trace lines of continuity or discontinuity with the plots of their life and make sense of it.

In self-writing, several authors are defined, and their functions are perceived. So, while consciousness speaks with a language of extraordinary realism, the narrator imagines themself in the future, leaning on that consciousness, which becomes a lucid observation of phenomenal reality, an indication of the path, the direction of their own life. Ultimately, the meaning of autobiography is to allow the past to coexist with the present to identify future existential trajectories, which in this adverse time is oxygen to the soul. But how does the need to give an account of oneself come about? What does autobiography mean in a time of a pandemic for the narrator? And above all, what is the relationship between the category of time and the autobiography?

[19] Ibi, p. 9.
[20] Sacks, O, 2020, *L'uomo che scambiò sua moglie per un cappello,* Tr. it. C. Morena, Adelphi, Milano.
[21] Demetrio, D, 1996, *Raccontarsi. L'autobiografia come cura di* sé, Raffaello Cortina, Milano, p. 59.
[22]Cfr. Ibi, p.199.
[23] Demetrio, D, Donini, E, Mapelli, B, Natoli, S, Piazza, M, Segre, A, 1999, *Il Libro della cura di sé, degli altri, del mondo*, Gunta, Torino, p.51.
[24] Graham, RJ, 1989, "Autobiography and education", in *The Journal of Educational Thought*, vol. 23, No. 2.

Literature is full of examples where the autobiography takes on a great educational value. Proustian and Freudian reflections are an example, even if they seem to be in contrast. The Freudian analysis, as an alternative to the exaltation of the typically Proustian role of memory, seems to want to privilege the idea that the autobiography could be a method of analysing one's own inner reality and investigating the discomfort of the civilisation of that time, which is rigorously exacerbated in Emilio and in the Confessions of J.J. Rosseau, who, taking up Freud's lesson uses his autobiography to denounce the evils of his time and his historical context, and the corruption of man who with self-deception tries to outline a human figure whose behaviour is in harmony with the morality of the time, ending up however to highlight how at the base of a corrupt existence there is deception, repression and the constant sense of guilt. In fact, from the perspective of the authors just mentioned, to give some notable examples, time and autobiography express different meanings. If for Freud time is the grounds for interpreting individual and collective memory, therefore the autobiographical analysis becomes the unveiling of the psychological mechanisms that move our intentions and actions, for Proust, on the other hand, time is a prison, transitory and ephemeral, and the autobiographical narrative is understood as a memorial retrieval, it is a representation of the condition of man and an attempt to remove from memory the existence of a lost time through writing, which is the capacity to grasp the correspondence of the information of our interiority. It is the recomposition of our feelings which together represent the essence of who we are. Autobiographical writing, therefore, is art that takes the representation of man's existence away from oblivion and is a way of accessing infinitely deeper knowledge because it is able to penetrate the intimacy of things. Therefore, the reason expressed in the foreword, that is, the need of man to transmit their memory over time through the art of writing, intertwining the narrator's experience with history, returns to the centre of the topic.

The writing of oneself, therefore, is continuously historicized in an inseparable link between individual and social experience, representing the individual and the community at a moment in history, and assigning universality and formative value to the values of a culture that therefore escapes the deterioration of time[25]. The representation of life scenes we make through writing tells of the symbolic world of our mind, our ability and sensitivity to listen to things, to pay attention to images that strike us. The words of our writing offer us the opportunity to confirm who we are, to demolish and refute our symbolic world, and to revisit our culture of reference through a completely personal vision of reality itself. It is a way of liberating thought and freeing it from the prejudices of a culture, of one's own culture. To write and write about oneself is to educate one's mind, one's thought and oneself, to exist and to become.

If the pandemic represents a time of crisis, interpretation (as in Freud) and imprisonment (as in Proust), the autobiography becomes a liberating tool which gives the interpretation of life the possibility of becoming education and humanisation, an exercise in individual and collective maturation, a rigorous analysis of the signs of a time that attribute formative value to memory as it is full of existential traces that tell of a journey towards what each of us wants to become after acquiring an awareness of who we are and what is really important to us in the face of the prospect of death. The autobiography offers itself as an exercise to rediscover a lost freedom, confined within norms of security and safeguarding, to free thought from the risk of slipping into tragic irrationality as an effect of fear that wins over reason. Writing of oneself helps us to tell ourselves who we are when at risk of depersonalization and homologation, to inform ourselves when we re-read what we have transferred to a sheet of paper, how we faced a time of adversity, what the critical issues were and what possibilities it could offer us, what elements struck us to the point of engraving them with thoughts and words. Writing becomes the dilation of time as words seem to have the power to stop it or at least slow down the process of its flow. In a distended time, those who write about themselves have an opportunity to dialogue with themselves with greater quality, since latency[26] or the time that elapses between the rereading and the reflexivity, creates a distance to generate a critical self-reflection, to problematize the experience, to initiate a metacognitive investigation in which to investigate the ways of structuring one's identity, one's thinking and

[25] Stein, E, 2007, *Dalla vita di una famiglia ebrea e altri scritti autobiografici*, Tr. It. Venturi, B, rev. di D'Ambra, M, a cura di Ales Bello, A, e Paolinelli, M, (Opere complete 1), Città nuova-Ocd, Roma.
[26] Liverano, G, 2020, *Stringimi la mano. Esperienza autobiocreativa tra realtà e desideri: uno strumento di cura e autoformazione*, Edizioni del Rosone, p. 31.

knowledge. Paradoxically, where the pandemic has generated distance, self-writing and the reflexivity that follows it creates a distance to bring the person who writes about themself closer to their essence, stimulating the faculty of feeling, and sensitizing the value of attention. If the pandemic has exacerbated relationality, the autobiography in this sense can educate the subject to amplify virtues that could improve the ability to relate, a way of relating by being more attentive to listening to others in contrast to a way of relating pre-pandemic in which we often met to cancel out and overlap each other. Listening is simultaneously listening to oneself, and every listening is resonance,[27] that is, the evocation of a lived experience that stimulates thought to imagine a possible reality different from the present.

Autobiographical writing gives an account of what memory brings out, instinctively and in an induced way, not to remain imprisoned, but rather to make choices. It helps us to recognize ourselves and to meticulously put in order what has happened to us[28], in a continuous process of questioning our recollection that interprets the experience in our memory which represents time and the structure of one's interiority.[29] The autobiography clarifies what appears disorganized and distorted by events[30], such as the current pandemic, giving a face to anxiety to validate the need for transition to the adoption of new values, new lifestyles, new virtues and new skills whose seeds and buds live inside us waiting to be cultivated to be used as a weapon during times of the unexpected, the never experienced, to which our intuition has sharpened our attention so as to be ready for surprise. Self-writing becomes a repositioning of the essential elements that define us and that coexist within us, that receive importance and order from the writing, through words that guide and seduce us.

The writing of oneself in a time of pandemic, therefore, offers itself as a tool for "focusing" on issues and values, which at other times would occupy positions of confinement. They now acquire a new centrality in the life of each of us experiencing fragility and facing the possibility of losing everything in a few moments. Writing about oneself and careful reflection during this time, can help us give value to the simple things and to understand the vicariousness of issues that we have considered fundamental up to now and which we realize we can do without because they are not indispensable to this search for a way to serenity. This is the benefit of autobiographical writing. It can help us to search for true happiness and to outline its forms and contours. To elaborate and translate the teachings we have learned and are still laboriously learning into a way of life, a style and a liturgy of behaviour, perhaps simpler but certainly more authentic.

It is a pedagogical tool effective in representing the relationship man has with the history from which they draw to recover events similar to what they are living in the present, and with time: with an individual time understood as a moment of psychological investigation and inner examination, and a social time understood as historicity, in which the autobiography performs the task of historical reconstruction and of imagining the future. In both situations the autobiography uses the memories of the author, a spontaneous memory in which recollections and images emerge, and a sensory memory which evokes feelings, almost managing to relive the same emotions, moods, and smells experienced in the past, giving new light to the present, enriching it with hope and expectation, with possibilities, and with new horizons and meaning. The autobiography becomes a formation process and a creative tool, since writing brings out information about a lost, forgotten treasure. Just as it is being produced, it is tied to the present, it is given it new forms and enriched with humanity. The autobiography is nourished by one's personal life and the lives that have a connection with the person who writes about themself.

Writing about ourselves at this historic moment gives us the opportunity to give a face to the pandemic, to be able to look it in the eye, to observe it, to speak to it and, to who is writing, to discover that they do not do it to say what they know, but to get closer to what they do not know[31]. Writing about its effects on each one of us and about its drama seems almost to succeed in trying to give it an anthropomorphic form, to make it more human, bring it a little closer to our lives and, as with any other disease, to make

[27] Demetrio, D, 1998, *La pedagogia della memoria*, Maltemi, Roma, p. 74-75.
[28] Ibi, p. 47.
[29] Koch, F, 1993, "Lo sfollamento della memoria femminile", in "*L'impegno*" vol.1, p. 33.
[30] Laneve, C, 2009, *Scrittura e pratica educativa. Un contributo al sapere dell'insegnamento. Prefazione*. Erickson, Gardolo (TN), p.11.
[31] Lejeune, Ph, 1986, *Il patto autobiografico*, trad it., Santini, F, Il Mulino, Bologna, p. 82.

it more treatable, to transform it into something to talk to, to enter into a meaningful relationship with, more confidential, because it helps us to better accept it. In this time of pandemic, when thoughts are fast moving, autobiographical writing can help us to set the pace of our lives, to rediscover that peaceful stillness and sense of stability and balance compromised by the pandemic itself. Writing about oneself can help to give more realistic contours to a phenomenon that has generated instability, to look it in the eye and to consider it a difficulty whose destiny is to be overcome. Writing about ourselves and reflecting on the relationship that each of us has tried to establish with the pandemic can make us understand the extent of its effects, more than anything else, a construct of thoughts and worries that we will abandon as soon as we manage to get used to new rules, because new lifestyles will represent normality, part of a new culture of a person, a community, a people.

The autobiography in a time of pandemic has an educational function because it communicates episodes, feelings, emotions and experiences, it represents a historical memory for the writer and for the reader who can grasp formative aspects and teachings, identify themselves in roles and situations and transform the story of the narrator into their own story. A formative bond is established between the writer and the reader, which becomes an out-of-time experience that can be transferred from generation to generation. In this sense, the written words assign a universal and eternal value to the thought which generated them, to insert them in the history of each person with a meaningful and reconciliatory function.[32] The reader's memory, in fact, will be enriched by this bond and the memory will evoke what they have been able to grasp and which has contributed to their growth and which they can, in turn, pass on to others who will listen to their story. The autobiography, in particular moments, such as a pandemic, stimulates in the listener the desire to tell their own story, to create a sort of collective account, in which the experiences of each person's life become historical heritage, common sense, a collective identity. Also in my personal experience, listening to the accounts of men and women telling their stories during a pandemic was a highly educational moment from which I was able to grasp values and positive reactions by including them into my personal and family history, nurturing dialogue with myself and with others. The desire to tell my story and the desire to tell our stories as individual members of a family has become an extraordinary pedagogical device of relief from the daily tasks[33] of maturing individual and family consciousness and awareness, as the resultant dynamic of relating to the world[34]. In this case, to find lucidity and pause it in time, to exorcise sad events, recover their intrinsic beauty, transform them into opportunities for change towards the progress of a new humanism. It offers, for example, the possibility for adults and children to define their role in the family and to reveal the value of their presence and relationships with people considered important for their own development, to set in motion a metacognitive and meta-reflexive work, to nurture values and virtues, to take on possible new positions in areas of their life, to preserve a family memory capable of encouraging the development of methods of self-identification[35].

The following is what my children and my wife responded when urged to talk about what the pandemic meant to them:

"The pandemic made me feel sad as if I was in a cage without a key to open it, but it made me realize that being close to the people you love is not of little importance. Maybe there's a silver lining to the pandemic. The people who are with me are able to warm my heart. I think the pandemic is negative but also positive" and still "my face is sad, grey and angry, and no object is important at the moment, but my family members are" (my son Piervito, 10 years old).

And again *"the pandemic makes me think of red, a red sadness, no object is important to me in this pandemic. My relatives yes, they are important. I'm very bored at home now, I don't know what to do and I think that in the future we can go back to the way we were. I hope to get out of this "Prison", sooner or later"* (my son Luigi, 11 years old).

[32] Zambrano, M, 1996, *Verso un sapere dell'anima,* trad. it., Nobili, E, Cortina, Milano, p.25.
[33] Ibi, pp.19-21.
[34] Mollo, G, 2011, "Il problema della formazione", in Pagano, R, (a cura di), (ed.), *La pedagogia generale*, Monduzzi, Milano, p. 173.
[35] Smorti, A, 1997, *Il sé come testo*, Firenze Giunti.

And again *"Who knows why they say that being still to reflect helps to think more. This last year has been a totally new year. We were forced to stay in our homes to "think". To think of what? I still haven't understood...! My nature, my "form" of being human has always led me to go beyond the structures, the affirmations. My experience, who I am, has defined me more clearly. I don't need to be quietly still to think. Thought itself is not quiet, it is not stillness, but it is a continual being, it is a continual becoming, so why stop to think? Life is hectic, but I think this pandemic has led us to look into each other's eyes, inside, into our souls, deep down into our hearts. This is a difficult time because we want it to be. Nothing is difficult if you don't want it to be. Let's just try to encounter our inner being, our own world, which can and must be different from other worlds, but more advantageous precisely for the encounters. Encounters that should be heralds of welcome and sharing. Abandonment is necessary to undergo a metamorphosis, and then there will be no more pandemics, no winter, no night. Every tragedy and every turmoil can disappear. These days, months, years have led me to understand and to learn that these were not separations and closures but a real openness, we have learned to live each other's shelter. It has been a sea in which we could dive into hundreds, even thousands of times, to emerge stronger, more serene and more resolute than before. It was an opportunity, it was an opportunity to make a difference that must not be postponed or ignored, but lived, taken with open hands and then held tightly, breathed in deeply. It is a way of alleviating suffering and transforming it into a deep understanding of ourselves and of others. It must be a joyful cathartic opportunity, pushed beyond the limits of what is humanly possible. This trial is an opening to doing ordinary things with extraordinary love and intelligence, it is an inexhaustible source of love, it is the hidden key to happiness and survival. It is to give oneself to one another continuously without hesitation, with the right spirit, precisely because action must be shared, because only this can have an effect on us like rain on dry soil".* (My wife Tonia, 50).

This is how autobiographical writing at this time can help us to investigate our lives and to understand the value and importance of the relationships that give meaning to our lives, and to understand how intimately and sometimes unconsciously our actions and behaviors are linked to those of our fellow human beings, producing reciprocal effects.

The autobiography in a time of a pandemic assumes a great educational value because it can fulfil many functions, thanks to the relationship that the subject has with their interiority, with the history, the culture and civilization of their time, and with the events of their life. In this sense, the autobiography becomes a self-exploratory investigation, not an end in itself, but of great pedagogical and self-formative value for the subject who uses it to ascertain what it is from the point of view of their own identity and personality and what is important to focus on in the course of their day or in that of their life, in order to consecrate them.[36] And consecrating some elements over others is not something devoid of sense and meaning. Writing of that information to consecrate it means removing it from oblivion, it means making it present in a future time. In the future, we will be able to re-read that information and we will almost be able to describe the feelings we felt, to associate images that accompanied certain emotions.

THE EDUCATIONAL VALUE OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN TIMES OF PANDEMIC: MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

It was the 13th March, 2020 when I was told that I would have to carry out my profession from home because of a damned virus. The world would not be the same again. Something infinitely small was about to take on devastating significance for all mankind. A significance that until then the world had not understood and that I had not understood. What I will report in these few lines is the experience of a man who, through his own writing, recounts the drama of those days immediately after the news that the coronavirus was invading our lives and would occupy the front pages of newspapers for a whole year. It is an account of a journey, of an intimate writing which retraces moments of extraordinary emotion which represent just as many ideas for the formation and growth of my identity in my different roles, of my interiority and of the virtues I have discovered I can increase, of the moral strength and of the values to which I adhere, as a necessity and as a simple choice of life. In the eyes of the people I met

[36] Focault, M, 2014, *La cura di sé,* Tr. it. Frausin Guarno, L, Feltrinelli, Milano, p.54.

there was astonishment and bewilderment at what was happening, a wonder that had the taste of terror and the vision of death. In my glances, which were reflected in the mirror and which I promptly translated into my daily writing, the realization matured that soon everyone would have to deal with something infinitely more powerful and devastating. I wrote and thought about the corridors of the buildings where I worked, until that moment a crossroads of looks and words, now dark places where the voices of those who worked there, of those who lived in those rooms for six or nine hours a day, of my colleagues, of me, echoed. The drama of the news, informing of the number of infected, which were becoming more and more frequent, prevailed over everything. It seemed as if the world was experiencing an alien invasion and that invasion had also reached those remote places forgotten by everyone, those places inhabited by me and by us. Fear began to take hold of individual thought and of a small community, almost leading to psychosis and collective hysteria. My thoughts immediately became concerned with figuring out what to bring home to allow me to work from there, maturing the almost instinctive capacity to understand the tragicness of what was happening, which, from that moment on, would result in the impossibility of being able to experience the places that represented my second home. There was a growing awareness of having to organize a way to survive until time decided that this lesson would be enough to make the world understand that it had overcome moral and peaceful civilizational boundaries. Writing about me would have been the most insightful way to represent and transform a collective psychodrama into a very special personal formative experience from which to bring out the collateral beauty that offered itself as an educational possibility. This drama provided a wonderful opportunity for me to be with my family and to have quality time with my children, giving me the opportunity to raise awareness of my sense of responsibility towards them, which was expressed above all in trying to protect them from the risk of infection. At the same time that I and my family were becoming aware that we had to move our lives within very limited boundaries, those of our home, there was also the need to organize a complex of things and behaviour, which pointed the way to a new way of life that we had to slowly adopt: when to do the shopping, who was supposed to do it, how to do it, how to equip for it, how to use the time inside the home. In those early days, family and close friends began to discuss what was happening, to compare perceptions, emotions and feelings and to try to sketch out predictions for the future, an uncertain future. Slowly in all of us adults and children, the realization matured that we would no longer do things we would have done a few days earlier. I made a commitment to myself to write down everything that happened in my little diary that always accompanied me in my work, because I wanted to engrave information, images and emotions in the personal memory of something indelible that would inevitably end up in the history books. It was to become a pilgrimage, a journey accompanied by silence, meditation, thought and writing. A scripture I knew had to become prayer, a prayer to God to get us out of the uncomfortable situation we were experiencing as soon as possible. All together they represented my life at that time. Together they are synonymous with living, where living is a continuous unveiling, a continuous existential tension, not an end in itself but to transform our living in the world into a prayer, a praying and contemplative act, poetic and transformative of life with an involvement of all dimensions of being, expanding the boundaries of its forms and its essence to enter into an infinite essence of divine nature.[37]

My conscience warned me of a danger for me, for my family, for a community, for the whole world, and it made me feel the need to give an account of a few moments and of me. It is as if my instinct wanted warn me of the need/possibility to focus on some information because those would have been the reasons and the tangible sign to set us on the path of a new stage of our maturity.[38]

But to give an account of something that could bring back the semblance of what was happening, implied the responsibility of being able to connect one's past experiences with those present in order to extrapolate the connection of meaning and the meaning of so many intertwined plots, so as to define the clear, less fluid contours of an existential project and derive from it universal values not only for those who write about themselves but also for the reader, who can see in other writing the fulfilment of their life plan, something they need and lack, the representation of something imaginary to continue and or complete their formative pilgrimage. In fact, the need to tell oneself in the face of such a dramatic

[37] Bellester, M, 2001, Iniziazione alla meditazione profonda, Edizioni Messaggio di Sant'antonio, Padova, p.12.
[38] Demetrio, D, 1996, *Raccontarsi. L'autobiografia come cura di sé*, Cortina, Milano, p. 21.

experience makes it clear to those who write about themselves that they have reached a point in their lives where the anxiety that comes from feeling that they have to be something else without knowing why turns into astonishment and wonder, to finally have access to a truth that becomes clear, to an authenticity that is revealed, to a need to feel things more profoundly, to a consciousness of existence and to exist with consciousness and awareness, to deeply penetrate the nature of events because they are no longer extraneous to one's own history. Writing about oneself therefore becomes an acknowledgement of having to access a formation that consists in a process of self-revision, through autobiography, which then reveals its entire pedagogical matrix as it talks about man.[39]

The exceptionality of behaviour dictated by events quickly become the rules of a culture, but they acquire a logical rigour and meaning when they are intertwined with the plots of our own life, so everyone feels they have to be someone else rather than themselves because the nature of existing and its purpose is clearer. In this sense, autobiographical practice helps in understanding a plan of happiness as it is offered as an educational path and informs the person that they have reached a point in which to draw a balance, to a maturity which is at the same time the end of something and the beginning of something new, end and beginning are inseparably linked. The autobiographical practice shifts the attention to the subject who is experiencing an individual struggle, and presents itself as a representation of many destinies of a time and of a common history, precisely in relation to the historicity that becomes an integral part of the subject. The resulting writing is a continuous analysis of the identity of the subject in relation to time and places.[40] In this sense, the autobiographical practice has a formative function in that it analyses and indicates a path of a moral nature. If a path is indicated, it takes on a political role, obeying first and foremost an instinct with a cathartic function, since it offers the writer the possibility of freeing themself from a weight and a burden that they can no longer bear, and then reason when the subject feels the need to establish within the confines of comprehension and interpretation, a point of arrival of their own path of maturity which immediately becomes a starting point for reaching new conquests of thought and new frontiers of humanisation.

I remember an endless series of news reports and interviews with people on television. There were those who shared their experiences with the pandemic, highlighting only its drama and devastating effects on their lives. A minority showed extraordinary resilience, perhaps because they were accustomed to the exercise of solitude, to sacrifice, to having to make virtue out of necessity. In my family, in the meantime, the possibilities for dialogue and mutual listening had multiplied, to watch a film and comment on it all together, to take a short walk when possible and to grasp the extraordinary beauty of nature, which always seemed to have escaped us, to grasp the extraordinary educational value of the small things and the simple gestures in which happiness resides, perhaps true happiness. The wonder and privilege of a small dinner in a restaurant all together after celebrating the Sacrament of Communion with one of my two children made us rediscover our relationship with spirituality and with God. We realized, in fact, that despite the drama of the events, we were able to accomplish things, as if we were accompanied and at the same time protected by a divine semblance, along our way. This is all the collateral beauty in my family life in a time of a pandemic.

CONCLUSION

Now, after a year, many things have changed and time seems to have even expanded. Some exceptions have become rules, and the thought of being able to return to a pre-pandemic life is upsetting to people. Each one of us can give our own account and all the dramatic and funny things it has meant to live it, but which certainly taught us something. My concern goes to my children as they wait to see what their reactions will be to a gradual return to normal life, if there will still be one, knowing that it will never be the same as before the pandemic. When I stop, isolate myself and reflect on the effects of this strange time, I don't know if I'm more fascinated by the idea of security that this way of living gives me, almost similar to a time of "war and curfew" or if I'm more fascinated by being able to experience a new exodus

[39] Cambi, F, 2012, "La formazione "lifelong" come orizzonte sociale e culturale nella società liquida", in Lupoli, N, (ed.), *Libero, riflessivi, pensosi. Nuovi orizzonti della Lifelong education*, Franco Angeli, Milano, p. 54.
[40] Cambi, F, 2002, *L'autobiografia come metodo formativo*, Laterza, Bari, pp.1-5.

towards a new life, towards a transformed world, completely different from the one I lived before. This suspended time expanded my imagination and helped me write, and while I was writing, I realized that I was only reporting the information I thought was essential, making me aware that in life it takes very little to be happy. There are very few ingredients to nourish harmony and rediscover a peaceful normality: silence, meditate to grasp the essential things, do things according to nature, understand and fulfill one's role responsibly especially in times of emergency like these, value the simplest things, train the will of a group towards the same goal, understand how to solve a problem and try to do it, feed the positive spirit and the idea that at the end of every tunnel there is always a light and a way out waiting for us which doesn't need to feed a loop of negative thoughts because it risks becoming a vortex ready to suck us in and swallow us. I have written so much about myself, for myself and for others, a writing that, when read and reflected at a distance, has become an extraordinary lesson in life, an opportunity to bring out the collateral beauty. Today it no longer escapes my eyes nor my attention, and this tells me that I have come to a deep awareness of my maturity. Feeling and writing about oneself in the complexity and cacophony of the pandemic [...] helps to manage responsibilities and to govern thoughts and to help think of more than one person to care for, love, support and nourish, and it is a feeling of maturity at its peak.[41] Feeling and writing about oneself in the complexity and cacophony of the pandemic [...] helps to manage responsibility and govern thoughts and helps to think of more than one person to look after, love, care for, nourish and is a feeling of maturity that has reached its peak. Writing about myself in this time of a pandemic helped me to see beyond where my gaze previously did not reach, to give centrality to vicarial and ancillary things and issues, for an ephemeral and passing happiness. It helped me to understand that we must not push ourselves to the limit, that we must not get used to living the deviations and the boundaries as if it were normal, But by practicing a culture of silence and meditation, we can go back to the origins, to when little was enough to be happy, to rediscover the beauty and harmony of the world, which today seems confused by so many shadows That silence that amplifies the inner receptivity to let the divine word[42] take effect within us. A divine word which, by becoming a writing of itself, becomes a saving medicine for the mind and heart, helping us to identify our inner centre, and to understand what are the essential principles that indicate our life's path[43].

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[41] Demetrio, D, 1996, Raccontarsi. *L'autobiografia come cura di sé,* Cortina, Milano, p. 28.
[42] Stein, E, 1998, *Chemins vers le silence intérieur, Parole et Silence*, Saint Maur, p. 27.
[43] Mortari, L, 2019, *Aver cura di sé,* Cortina, Milano, p. 15.

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