

HIGH DOSE OVERDOSE

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University, a course meant to help us find our future path, a ten-page assignment to hand in about that future, Covid and me making wishes. That is why this text exists. But it's also suicides, depression and my distress that led me here. Have you ever thought about your future? About which job you want to do or which countries you want to explore? No doubt you have. But behind these questions, was there the issue of this sacrosanct grade, the one that determines which job you could do and which countries you could visit? That grade that everyone dreads is at the heart of this interrogation, at least I think it is, unless it's just a critique of the school system and the way it operates. Anyway, you've heard of teenage angst, an illusion of society that actually hides the suffering of all teenagers, a trite expression that helps to trivialise young people's pain and allows them to be silenced. This text is also a revindication, a request, an SOS, young people need to be listened to and not just stigmatised in speeches that make them out to be simpletons who don't know how to express themselves. In two years I will have to come back to this text and do a follow-up, I wonder how things will have turned out, and you, are you curious? In the meantime, don't forget to make a wish. And if you want to, take the time to read this text, maybe it will inspire you to write one too.

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Hello. I've been racking my brain for ages about how to start and then I finally thought this would be the most appropriate way to do so. And then I thought about what kind of form I wanted this assignment to take. Something serious, conventional, in keeping with codes and which doesn't sound like me at all. Or else something that is more representative of who I am, a total abandonment of codes, a personal assignment in which I won't be reduced to a student number and where I'll finally be able to exist as a human being and not just as a student.

So I thought about the fact that it was my future that I was going to talk about and that it belonged to me, so I decided on a personal form that would allow me to exist, for a few pages, in this industry that is university. And as for conventions, I say too bad, after all whatever the grade, I'd rather remain human and put my student uniform back on later.

For over a year now, we've all been trapped in a bubble and these webs that oppress

us have reduced us to silence. To be a student in 2021 is to hear people telling you: "you passed your exams thanks to Covid...", "Covid makes things easier because you're at home...", "you're the Covid generation". But what does it really mean to "be the Covid generation"? I think it sounds a bit odd as if to say: "Sorry little guy, but you won't have a future, try your luck again later." Yet it's my future I'm supposed to write about, so what to do in this paradox created by Covid? How can I write about my future when the dice seem loaded? Am I supposed to be dreaming of an impossible future or else talking about reality? Am I now supposed to abandon the idea of having a future because I'm part of this so-called Covid generation? And before even beginning to talk about this virus that locks us up every two weeks, we should talk about the elitist system and culture of success proposed by schools.

It's funny because when I was considering the definition of school, I asked the people around me to define this archaic institution. Of course, everyone painted me a picture worthy of the Olympic contests of ancient Greece, but certainly not a good place for learning. Just a place where you need good grades to move up the ladder. And then before university, there's that big monster "Parcoursup"¹. In the end, it doesn't seem like Covid is the only thing trying to finish off those who are simply looking to learn. And when we do manage to break through into this system, what's there waiting for us? Instability, periods of depression and sometimes suicides.

Well, if I step back a bit, imagining a future seems like a real fallacy, so why continue, why write about what seems to be nothing but a fantasy? Can you imagine, you, being in a system that makes it clear to you every day that you don't belong there? When I was 18, people would ask me every day "what do you want to do when you're older?" and I would simply reply "be a secondary school history teacher, but, well..." The truth is, I got the impression I had to reply with something to avoid being judged. I do want to be a history teacher in a secondary school, but I really don't want to limit myself to just that. And anyway, do I really have what it takes? Am I really qualified? Would I be a 'good' teacher? Imagine being in the middle of building an amazing life for yourself, thinking about your dream job, and then all of a sudden, everything falls apart. You arrive at university, you're overwhelmed, you're no longer able to really live and to top it off: a virus. If there's one thing you want to run away from, it's the future. What future in an industry made to grind down, a factory slaughterhouse that was supposed to be a safe zone for learning new things? Like the animals we condemn each day, everybody knows it, but nobody seems to want to look straight at it. A bleak picture for someone who just wanted to expand their horizons. A future always hanging on the question "what did you get on the test?" or "what degree do you have?" In the end, it's not what I've learnt or retained that's of interest, but what I've produced. There's a kind of competition to see who gets the better grade, who can crush others with their better knowledge or memory in the eyes of the system.

¹Translator's note: Parcoursup is an online platform introduced in 2018 by Emmanuel Macron as part of his election promise to make the selection process for higher education in France more meritocratic. Students must make a non-hierarchical list of 10 'wishes' about what subject they would like to study and where, and as many as 20 'sub-wishes'. The new system has been criticised as being anxiogenic for young people applying for university, for lacking transparency in the algorithms it uses, and for increasing universities' workloads. Its implementation has been met with protests and strikes from students and university staff alike.

In short, far too many questions that can't be answered, or at least not straight away and definitely not in this assignment. Anyway, this future I'm supposed to be talking about, I have the impression that it's getting lost in all this machinery and off to a really bad start. Will the following pages really help me, or will they just lead me further into a long maze? Well, I think it's time to talk a bit about what I want to do with my future. But first, I think I should say a few things about myself. Like everybody, I went to primary and then secondary school. In secondary school, I studied for a scientific "baccalauréat"². But after various problems, I found myself doing a literary baccalauréat and wondering what was going to become of me. So on Parcoursup, I drew a straw and then went to university. So currently studying for a double degree in history and Italian, I'd like to at least get my degrees, which seems quite difficult. As for what comes next, I would like to do a master's degree in history and get a teaching qualification. From there, I'd like to start teaching in a secondary school. At the same time as working as a teacher, I'd like to do an undergraduate and a master's degree in psychology. And there, you're probably asking yourself "what's that idea doing there?" I think it's essential for a teacher to be able to understand what they have in front of them and therefore be able to better help their students.

As I follow the order of the student leaflet to write this text, I realise I'm supposed to talk about any failures and mistakes experienced while working, so here goes. First off, starting to work on it so late, I write a little bit every day at midnight when I can't sleep because I'm too anxious about university. Then the second error, or perhaps it's the first, is to have begun writing or maybe to have gone to university in the first place, unless it's just the subject that doesn't fit, although it feels more like it's the system that doesn't suit me. I feel a bit like Chaplin in "Modern Times", consumed by a dark machine that crushes me between its teeth. When it comes to my failures, I could also talk about my lack of interest in the future and strategic direction. I've never really been interested in knowing what I "should" do in order to get this or that job. I just think that if I manage to get by, I'll be able to do it, at least I hope so. I think in reality I have imposter syndrome, I don't feel legitimate in anything. I don't know why I write, to what end, to go where. It's a strange situation, I have to talk about my future, I'm graded on it and by an outsider too. In the end the future is always rigged, there's always a higher force (we're back to that sacred catharsis and tragedy, so university could be a play by Racine or a simple "Go, I don't hate you" by Chimène).

I want to help teenagers not sink into what school is today. In becoming a teacher I want to avoid being the stereotype described in the job information sheets or being the teacher who encourages success without ever placing value on failure. I don't want to learn about a student committing suicide because of pressure at school. Because today that's what is happening, and nobody cares. Suicide rates are rising among young people and all we are worried about is success. No, the system is not

² Translator's note: Much like A levels in the UK and some Commonwealth countries, the baccalauréat (often referred to as "le bac") is typically completed in two years and by the age of 18. Students attending general secondary schools, as opposed to specialist or vocational colleges, have the choice between three 'streams': a "bac L" places importance on grades for modules on French literature, philosophy and foreign languages; a "bac S" focuses on the sciences as well as maths and geology; and a "bac ES" on economics and the social sciences.

always at fault, although... Globally, the chief reason for suicide among young people is bullying related to sexuality, and one of the most common insults in schoolyards in France is "faggot". I'm wandering off topic a bit, I admit, but at least it avoids running out of steam, a good story always needs twists and turns to give it rhythm. In fact, I really think of teaching as an exchange. I don't think it's enough to just talk, you have to exchange. I want to know what interests my students, to try to adapt to each class to make it less tedious and get them interested in history. Most of all, I want to avoid trivialising success, I don't want them to think it's normal to get 15 out of 20 and terrible to get 10³, in fact, if I could avoid giving grades and setting exams, I probably would.

In truth, I'd like school not to be the monster I've too often seen in nightmares. Oh and above all, what I don't want to do as a history teacher is to deliver a Westernised, Christianised and Europeanised version of history. I can't stand the saying "history is written by the victors". I think it's a shame to dress European mistakes up as "Great discoveries", when in fact it just hides massacres and acculturation. I'm coming across as a revolutionary who wants to bring down walls, but I think those walls will probably end up falling on me. It's funny how each letter I type makes me think about what grade I'll get. You see, that grade again, which comes back to disrupt the harmony, an obsession that becomes more and more unbearable over the years. Ultimately, I'm afraid sometimes of becoming a teacher but not being able to do anything in the face of this system, to be powerless against towering threats. What's special about the teaching profession is that teachers associate with both students and parents. Indeed, they interact with both. I admit that if I ever become a teacher and I'm faced with a problem with a student, I won't contact the parents directly, it's never helpful for either party.

What's funny is that, in the job information sheets available online, they talk about the psychological side of a teacher's role. Yet it seems to me that teachers are never trained in psychology. This is one of the reasons why I want to do a master's degree in psychology, I want to make up for this lack of training, which I consider essential, especially given the current climate.

Researching this text, I spoke with one of my old secondary school history teachers. The main theme of our conversation was "connection". A connection that seems to have to bend, like the reed in La Fontaine's fable, over time. A connection that would then allow students not to be subjected to intellectual education, but to enjoy it and broaden their knowledge without suffering. She thinks that to be a teacher, you have to be close with the students, in a way, and not only deliver a lesson but show them a presence. What's important is to motivate the students and lift them up, and to do that you have to constantly renew and re-examine your teaching techniques. Be able to adapt to situations and question your ways of teaching, not just "rest on your

³ Translator's note: In France, from the age of 10, pupils are marked out of 20 for all their assignments and exams. An average out of 20 is then calculated for each subject. Such is the presence of this grading system in French education, that it is not uncommon to hear students comparing these grades and obsessing over their rising or falling averages or, later in life, for adults to still recall what their marks out of 20 were ("I always got 11s in maths...").

laurels" as she told us every day in class. Mistakes are just as formative as school, they allow you to question yourself, to change your way of seeing things and to work differently. No, the culture of success does not help us move forward, on the contrary, it makes us regress and often destroys the students subjected to it. In this culture of success, what counts is not knowledge but grades (which reminds me a bit of what I said at the beginning, I'm sure I'm not the only one to see this problem). This goes to show that fate gets it right sometimes and someone who was not necessarily good at school can still succeed. That's what makes me think that despite not being the perfect profile of a good student, I could still succeed on my chosen path. She envisages, in the future, a teacher who will be more attentive towards the students and have better relationships with them. Teaching that gives students time, as opposed to setting a race against the clock like Top Chef. That students have time to work without rushing, that teaching not be 8 am til 6 pm. Balance the work so that everyone can also have a life and not just dive into an ocean of textbooks for eight months. Students work without really knowing how to work, and that's what she would like to change. Make sure that students have time to understand how to work and not just throw them into shark-infested waters like in the film "Jaws". The current situation is problematic, according to her, because continuous testing means there is no longer any formative assessment but only summative assessment, and not all students can stand the pressure this creates. The situation has meant teaching methods have changed a lot, perhaps for the better in the long term, but for the moment the results are not promising. Educational continuity has been reduced because students are moved into half-groups.

Today, danger has become an overwhelming norm. I myself feel in danger so often, no matter where I am. Secondary school was really awful for me, simply because I don't fit the norm. And as a teacher I want to be trained in these kinds of situations, to be able to anticipate them and act before something terrible happens, before a child loses their life. I had already spoken to my teacher about this, about the fact that teachers aren't sufficiently trained, or even trained at all, to deal with this kind of problem, which is becoming more and more present and recurrent.

It's as if the fact that we are young should prevent us from suffering. Yes, I often hear "but you're young, you can't be depressed". Yet, I experienced my first depressive episodes when I was in nursery/primary school. I think this lack of consideration for young people on the pretext that we are younger is a shame, it's not age that builds experience, it's the trials faced. With this text, I want to carry a message of alarm from young people. A youth that is tiring, a youth that is dying, a youth that is drowning. A youth that, despite being the seed of the future on which the world depends, feels increasingly crushed and side-lined, a youth that feels stifled by current policies. I think my unusual academic route will be an advantage in this profession because it will enable me to better understand and help the students. I

hope that this text wasn't too tedious to read and that you enjoyed reading it. I'd like to finish on a hopeful note by quoting a famous wizard: "But you know, happiness can be found, even in the darkest of times, if one only remembers to turn on the light" (Dumbledore). So, when it gets a little dark on my path to becoming a teacher, I won't forget to turn on the light.

SAT ON A BENCH

Metropolis of knowledge, necropolis without knowing it
No doubt should have avoided drinking too much
Of this acrid drink that wanted to teach us a lesson.
At the back of this room I can't make a sound
I don't know the answer to the question.
From autumn to spring, these walls are my prison
So I can't come back to my senses.
Yet it was supposed to teach me a lesson.
Came to class to endure this dark playground
It was actually just about competition.
Never again learn or even understand
Just have to produce, cheat or else recite
And for the grand finale fight against insecurity
To avoid jumping or attempting suicide,
Finding ashes like that 12th November.
Metropolis turned necropolis, it's no longer a school,
A factory gnawed by this corticolous institution.
Humans forgotten to become students
Dark animals that we raise
Or else degrade, culture of success
Which like a stupid tacit agreement
Leads to this strange escape
Towards a new and long intoxication.
A future then that makes you smile or even laugh
Because nothing is remembered
Of a time spent on the benches of this metropolis
Turned sad necropolis

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Translated from French by Annie-Rose Harrison-Dunn.