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BISHNUPRIYA GHOSH

Resilience evokes the long streaking form of the athlete bounding toward nets. It signals physical elasticity resonant of its Latin etymon *resiliens*, to “rebound or recoil,” combining “re” (back) or “salire” (to jump, leap). The circulation of resilience in ecological study encourages a lean toward the natural laws governing the capacity to return to a prior state after deformation (in physics) or disturbance (in the biosciences). Those laws index energy or life force manifest in resilience as a quality (this and that is resilient) or a condition (something exists in a state of resilience). The figure bounding toward the nets signals the subject of this reflection: the romance with resilience in the contemporary biosciences, a celebration of the intrinsic capacity of living organisms to renew their relations with their dynamic milieu. Resilience is living the moving equilibrium.

And so the abiding image of the athlete’s bodily expenditures, the accelerated pant and silky drip of sweat; her reassuring flex of muscles, intimating great reserves of potential energy.

A new vitalism preoccupied with (biological) life itself reminds us the recoil and the jump belongs to both human and non-human biological agents.¹ Ecologists tracking radical upheavals in coevolving ecosystems tune in to the evolutionary grit of living organisms. Amid the periodic “viral storms” of the late twentieth century, the pathogenic virus (Ebola, Marburg, HIV) emerges as something of a biological exemplar.² Historians recall how these ferocious bugs scuttled the post-World War II (and post-penicillin) “war on germs,” while evolutionary biologists debate whether the virus is a pre-Luca survivor from a four-billion-year primordial soup.³ An obligate parasite, the virus clearly exemplifies the act of living indebted to other living organisms; in fact, a piece of nu-

cleic acid with a protein coat, the virus comes alive only when attached to a living host.⁴ As scientific evidence of bacteria, fungi, and viruses living within the human body mounts, the virus motivates a movement toward possible symbiotic futures—of an uneasy truce, if not a mutually beneficial interspecies relation. Learning to live with the virus, we have come to admire its capacity for consistent modifications—its *resilience*.

Across the species divide, the athlete: a promise of human resilience to radical disequilibrium in the ecosystem and to the *milieu intérieur*.⁵ Biomedicine characterizes that internal disequilibrium as disease, a falling away from true health. True health, notes doctor and pacifist Georges Canguilhem, is always lived in the silence of organs; we do not notice true health until pain or discomfort arises. And then we become aware of health as a horizon, a partial restitution of internal balance. In Canguilhem's "negative vitalism," where living is a gradual reduction of life's powers and not infinite *biopotenza*, one can never return to the anterior state of true health; once your organs sound you out, you can never return to their silence. You consult a doctor who offers prescriptions for what the body's new equilibrium with its milieu can be. That equilibrium requires compensations, adjustments, and modifications to internal "constants" (one's CD4 count, pH levels), a self-regulation necessary for the living organism to survive.⁶ How well you are doing is partly objective medical valuation, a measuring of adjustments through instituting norms. But the making of norms is equally the singular practice that the patient undertakes in contingent compromises with her milieu. In such a scenario there are no cures, only healing: "the feeling of the capacity to make the body do what initially seemed beyond its means." It is in this "feeling of the capacity" that "we rediscover the athlete."⁷

Our present media saturations enable us to imbibe the logic of resilience through the falling away and living on of exceptional athletes. In the human-virus story, if there is Magic Johnson, there is Giro Josamu in Zimbabwe and Kunrakpan Pradipkumar in India—all athletes living with HIV—coming out, unrelentingly resilient.⁸ We watch them train; we marvel at their body syncopations. The offbeat *regularities* of a modified life punctuate the ecological disturbance theater of disease. As they fall away into health, like the virus, they captivate us. We watch the run, the bound, the jump, and the recoil.

NOTES

1. For a brief distinction between the new vitalism and its nineteenth century predecessor, see Scott Lash, "Life (Vitalism)"; see also Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*.

2. Nathan Wolfe, the founder of one cutting-edge viral forecasting outfit (the San Francisco-based Global Viral Forecasting Initiative), sketches the late-twentieth–early-twenty-first-century period of viral emergences, multi-leveled unprecedented events, in his recent *The Viral Storm*.

3. See Melinda Cooper’s account of this shift in *Life as Surplus*. LUCA is the “last universal cell ancestor,” a pre-DNA cellular form.

4. A bit of nucleic acid with a protein coat and no cell walls, the virus is an obligate that cannot live without a host (that is, it cannot process all the cellular components it needs to regenerate itself) as opposed to a facultative parasite that can live independently, but becomes parasite under certain conditions (e.g., a flea). It is famously the microorganism that Joshua Lederberg christened the “deadliest” threat to man’s dominance of the planet at an apocryphal conference on emerging diseases sponsored by the National Institutes of Health and Rockefeller University, Washington DC, 1989. He followed his observations in a book, co-edited with Robert E. Shope and Stanley C. Oakes, *Emerging Infections*

5. Canguilhem deploys Claude Bernard’s seminal theory of the cellular and extra-cellular environments in order to foreground nervous and endocrinal adjustments to the radical disturbance of disease (see “Diseases”).

6. Unlike Henri Bergson, however, Canguilhem is not invested in exploring the nature of this vital capacity or *élan vital* any further; his preoccupation is with what happens to that capacity in the irreversible movement toward organismic decay.

7. Canguilhem, “Diseases,” 49.

8. The Zimbabwean and Indian athletes are bodybuilders, subjects of documentaries (Leo Phiri’s *A Fighting Spirit* and Haobam Paban Kumar’s *Mr. India*) whose training regimes exteriorize the processes of internal self-regulation.

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