Learning During Coronavirus: “The Masque of the Red Death”

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ABSTRACT

This reading of Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death” emerges from a collaborative, online, transatlantic reading group that sprung up during the COVID-19 pandemic as an extension of homeschooling for a set of cousins and their parents. I ask what it means to read with children, and to learn from the ways in which children read. I suggest that, among other things, this involves reading more literally and less for metaphors and symbols or the other paraphernalia that tend to be features of formal teaching of literature in schools. Indeed, in the context of pandemic and lockdown, “The Masque of the Red Death,” if read with children or through a child’s eyes, might teach us very literally about enclosure and boundaries, about life and death, and about the always-failed ambitions of constituted power. It might teach us, moreover, about the ongoing importance of literature, and learning to read it well. We might seek to know things the way in which Virginia Woolf’s moth (in another struggle of life and death, read in the reading group) knows things: immanently, absolutely, with all the strength of the very weak.
Soon after the coronavirus lockdown went into effect in British Columbia, as the schools closed and we were increasingly confined to our homes, my wife, Fiona, and I decided, along with my brother and sister, who live in London, to organize an online reading group for their and our younger children. It was Fiona who first suggested the idea, and I suppose that part of the point was to lessen the burden of homeschooling. A weekly chat on Zoom would also provide the chance for some social contact. And it might even in some small way make up for the fact that we were beginning to doubt our plans for a summer holiday in England. We were supposed to be meeting up in July, for a week in a rented house on the Suffolk coast with my parents and all the cousins and aunts and uncles, plus my friend Charles. It was no longer clear, however, that those of us based in Canada would be able to enter the UK without immediately spending fourteen days in quarantine. Though surely all this would be over by then? In the meantime, we were looking for a bit of distraction, as well as ways to occupy and entertain the kids; in a family of readers, the chance to share and discuss some short stories sounded like it might even be fun, some light relief from the anxiety that surrounded us.

But the very first text we chose to read was Shirley Jackson’s classic dystopian tale “The Lottery,” published in the New Yorker in 1948, which opens breezily enough (“the flowers were blossoming profusely and the grass was richly green”) before gradually unfolding a narrative of community-sanctioned violence (“’It isn’t fair, it isn’t right,’ Mrs. Hutchinson screamed, and then they were upon her.”). This was an early sign both of our over-ambitious parental pedagogical zeal and of the fact that we were picking the stories as much for ourselves as for the kids. Still, we figured we would see what our offspring (ranging in age from eight to twelve, and more accustomed to J. K. Rowling or Philip Pullman) made of stories that were not particularly, if at all, aimed at children. On the blog (“Learning During Coronavirus”) that we set up for them to share their first impressions of the readings, the oldest, Raphi, wrote of “The Lottery”: “Umm ok? […] This wasn’t a ‘happily ever after’ story.” And they were all struck by how very long ago the story was written. As our David put it: “Mummy told me that it had been written 72 WHOLE YEARS AGO!!!!!!!” It was as though they were reading the Ancient Greeks. But they were intrigued, seemed to enjoy the experience, and took the discussion seriously (but also, yes, as fun). A tradition had started; we were learning to amuse them and ourselves in new ways as the unseen virus kept us cooped up within our four walls.

So it only seemed appropriate, a couple of weeks later, to read a plague-themed story from the nineteenth century (178 whole years ago!) that might incidentally also shed light on our own, obviously therefore not so “unprecedented,” times. Moreover, this, too, was a tale about people trying to entertain themselves during confinement, as a fatal illness stalks without, and perhaps within. Picking up on the hint, David’s comments on “The Masque of the Red Death” note that “The way the prince takes precautions reminds me of how people are self-isolating right now with the coronavirus. One difference is that we aren’t having party’s.” Suddenly, and for all its evidently allegorical features (the coloured chambers, the mythic setting), Edgar Allan Poe’s story could be read as a tale about an actual pandemic, not simply a figurative one. There was something about the “red death” that was now real, no longer a “fantasy” as the text’s original subtitle declared. Indeed, it was perhaps almost as real as the virus that had closed our children’s schools, a virus rendered as red-flecked molecules in the scientific illustration (itself something of a work of fiction) that adorns our blog.

In short, the lines between child and adult, past and present, literal and figural, art and science, literature and life, were all proving surprisingly porous as we read a story that is, in the end, precisely about the difficulty of establishing secure borders. Yet the very fact that we were reading the story in this way (online, via Zoom and blogs, coordinated through Telegram) was a consequence of unexpected restrictions on our collective mobility and barriers to our movement: the kids were
no longer going to school; we were probably no longer travelling to England. Just when some distinctions and distances no longer seemed so hard and fast, others grew and solidified. The notion of “homeschooling” was an instance of this paradox, too: at the same time that David was unable to enter his school building, a now oddly unbridgeable five short blocks away from our house, the difference between home and school tended to blur, and could only be (somewhat tentatively) resurrected through the establishment of routines such as our reading group, at set times that Fiona and I (and my brother and sister) could carve out from “working from home.”

In Poe’s story, the Red Death brings “dissolution” as those it infects suffer “profuse bleeding at the pores” (299); it gains its name from the “scarlet stains” that spread “upon the body and especially upon the face of the victim” (299), indicating its breach of the membrane that is our human skin, as it fatally attacks the biological constitution. Blood, which should remain inside the body as a matter of its ongoing integrity, instead escapes to inscribe a visible mark or sign of the pestilence on the surface of those infected. But that sign is then incorporated into a division that separates out the healthy from the sick, bios (social life) from zoe (bare life): the stains become the “pest ban which shut [the victim] out from the aid and the sympathy of his fellow-men” (299). Subject to the ban, the sick are abandoned by the law, “exposed and threatened,” as Giorgio Agamben puts it in his discussion of homo sacer, “on the threshold in which life and law, inside and outside, become indistinguishable” (28). And yet the ban, in establishing the exception (of those who are no longer subject to or protected by the law), also delineates the contours of the social world from which the sick are banished. Dissolution both unravels and enables the constitution of social bonds. Dissolution and constitution, in other words, are themselves not so easily unraveled.

It is in this context that the story’s Prince Prospero moves his court to “the deep seclusion of one of his castellated abbeys,” surrounded by a “strong and lofty wall” that has “gates of iron.” The bolts of these gates are then welded shut: “With such precautions the courtiers might bid defiance to contagion. The external world could take care of itself” (300). The prince announces and exercises his sovereign power—potestas, the power to decide on the exception—by removing himself and his privileged associates from the fray. Yet one might ask how much he continues to rule the territory beyond his gates, which he has effectively abandoned to the plague. Moreover, the ambivalence and fruitlessness of this gesture of exclusion are evident from the outset, in that we are told that the intent is as much to contain any “sudden impulses of despair or frenzy from within” (300) as it is to ensure that the sickness is kept out. It is as though the court were already aware that this way madness lies, however much that recognition is deferred by the injunction that “it was folly to grieve, or to think” (300). For the décor and amusements inside the abbey are characterized by grotesquerie and distortion, not least when everything is set up for a masked ball, after five or six months of seclusion: it is “a volupitous scene,” with “sharp turn[s]” and “novel effect[s],” all “as might have been expected from the prince’s love of the bizarre” (300; emphasis in original); the “imperial suite” in which the ball takes place is furnished with garish colors and “heavy folds” of tapestries (300) to produce “a multitude of gaudy and fantastic appearances” (301). Among the masqueraders, there are “arabesque figures with unsuited limbs and appointments” and “delirious fancies such as the madman fashions” (302). It is as though the revellers are daring the Red Death to make its appearance; the ball is already decadent and dissolute, with “something of the terrible, and not a little of that which might have excited disgust” (302). Or perhaps the logic, such as it is, is immunological: a small dose of the disease is to protect against the full impact of the thing itself; circumscribed frenzy is to ward off absolute destitution.

But the combination of lockdown and vaccine fails. It is hardly unexpected, in fact, that the Red Death finds its way through the abbey’s defences—or perhaps it was there all along. (David complained: “I liked the other stories better because this one lacked surprise.”) As the “revel went whirlingly on” towards midnight, until it is momentarily hushed by the chimes of the giant clock that dominates one of the suite’s chambers, a “new presence” is discerned among the multitude, a figure who “had out-Heroded Herod, and gone beyond the bounds of even the prince’s indefinite decorum” (302, 303). Most shockingly of all, this previously unseen masquerader violates the terms of the festivities in that he “had gone so far as to assume the type of the Red Death. His vesture was dabbled in blood—and his broad brow, with all the features of his face, was besprinkled with the scarlet horror” (303; emphasis in original). Refusing the play of mask and reality, surface and depth, outside and inside, exclusion and confinement, this physical incarnation of the pestilence is all image, all surface. The prince demands that he
be unmasked—“that we may know whom we have to hang at sunrise, from the battlements!” (303)—but the mask is all, the surface is everything. There is nothing, no hidden essence or truth, to be revealed when the courtiers finally throw themselves upon him, to gasp “in unutterable horror at finding the grave cerements and corpse-like mask which they handled with so violent a rudeness, untenanted by any tangible form” (304). And so, as Raphi observes, “It ends in the circumstance of them all writhing in death and blood.” The clock stops, the lights are extinguished, and what wins out is a savage necropolitics (the “subjugation of life to the power of death” [Mbembe 39]), leaving the Red Death with “illimitable dominion over all” (304).

Illness, Susan Sontag reminds us, lends itself to metaphor, and to forms of thinking through allegory that invoke moral judgements or political rationalizations. Disease, for instance, is taken to be an analogy for civil disorder; the body politic is said to be ailing and in need of treatment, its cancers to be excised, its immune system boosted. Sontag insists, however, that in fact “illness is not a metaphor, and that the most truthful way of regarding illness—and the healthiest way of being ill—is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking” (Illness as Metaphor 3). And, indeed, though “The Masque of the Red Death” is, perhaps like Prince Prospero himself, at times over-indulgent in its heavy-handed symbolic overlay (in my niece Clara’s reading, “the seven rooms all symbolise a certain stage in life: blue is birth, purple is childhood, adolescence is green, adulthood is orange, white is old age, violet means that death is just round the corner”), ultimately the lesson that it, too, provides is surely a warning against such allegorical readings. After all, metaphor works through displacement, through an identification that is also a separation: this (the “black velvet tapestries” [300], the “clock of ebony” [301]) means that (a Gothic refusal of Enlightenment, a reminder of mortality). But when the Red Death arrives, it puts a halt to such deferral of meaning. It is what it is, and this is what causes the panic and consternation among the assembled gathering.

There can be something refreshing about a child’s reading of literature, which still resists (however tenuously) the rote reduction of texts to a series of symbols or biographical or historical references, a process that seems to characterize the teaching of literature in schools. (This when teachers do not give up on reading altogether, by setting students exercises in “creative interpretation”: “Rewrite the story from the perspective of one of the characters!” “Make a poster!” “Make a mask!”) In our reading group, we were mostly able to avoid such a deadening approach, which assumes that the meaning or point of the text is always somewhere else, and which both stems from and encourages a fear of literature, thought to be too difficult or demanding for young minds (and perhaps old ones, too). As Sontag (again) puts it, here in her manifesto “Against Interpretation”: “To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world—in order to set up a shadow world of ‘meanings.’ [...] Real art has the capacity to make us nervous. By reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting that, one tames the work of art. Interpretation makes art manageable, conformable” (7, 8). In place of hermeneutics, Sontag calls for an “erotics of art.” But her plea for criticism to “make works of art—and, by analogy, our own experience—more, rather than less, real to us” (14) is equally comparable to children’s play (or riding a bike, climbing a tree), which is not about anything else; it is what it is, and it is that immersion in the activity itself that is its joy and exhilaration.

Refusing metaphor (and so forestalling interpretation, giving up on the pursuit of endlessly deferred meaning) can, then, cause both panic and joy, consternation and exhilaration. It can seem both to bring death, as when the plague strikes with its stunning literalness, and also to bring texts to life, when they are no longer seen as mere stand-ins for some hidden truth elsewhere. Perhaps, indeed, these are two sides of the same coin. Risk (and so accident, the chance even of death) is inherent to life. The fatal mistake of Prince Prospero and his revellers is to believe that they can, quite literally, wall themselves off from the threat that confronts them. When it arrives regardless, and despite all their best efforts, they are paralyzed: “there were none who put forth hand to seize him; [...] the vast assembly, as if with one impulse, shrank from the centers of the rooms to the walls” (303). Only Prospero himself, fired up by a boundless sense of entitlement anchored in his vain attempt to fix boundaries, makes a move on the intruder. Pursuing the uninvited guest with a “drawn dagger [...] in rapid impetuosity” (304), the prince cannot survive the confrontation when the Red Death finally turns to face him. Ultimately, the sovereign ban is revealed to be a weak fiction. It collapses at an encounter with the real.

Similarly, no child’s play, no exhilaration worth its salt, is exempt from risk. Attempts to cushion or coddle children, to eliminate all chance of injury or upset, are doomed at best and counterproductive at worst. When, at the beginning of June, elementary schools reopened
This Be the Verse

4. Death is inevitable, but the moth does not give in. This is an unconscious knowledge (for what would it mean to say that a moth has a consciousness?) but it is a knowledge even so, immanent and fragilely embodied, pure event.

5. Virginia Woolf’s “The Death of the Moth” is (despite or even because of its title) as much about life as it is about death. Drawn to the small, unglamorous creature flitting across her window, the narrator muses that “it seemed as if a fibre, very thin but pure, of the enormous energy of the world had been thrust into his frail and diminutive body. As often as he crossed the pane, I could fancy that a thread of vital life became visible. He was little or nothing but life” (4). In short, it is precisely because of the moth’s insignificance, the fact that its life is utterly untranscendent, goes virtually unnoticed, does not signify anything beyond itself, that this small creature incarnates a form of bare (unqualified) life far removed from any “pest ban.” This little, precarious being is all that it can be (it is what it is) and does all that it can do: “What he could do he did.” Rather than potestas, a form of power defined by negation, through the drawing of limits and boundaries, this is a purely positive or affirmative potencia in action. But such power, too, eventually fades. Some time later, the narrator notices that the moth is now “in difficulties; he could no longer raise himself; his legs struggled vainly […] it came over me that the failure and awkwardness were the approach of death” (5). Yet the moth does not give in.

Gripped by a titanic struggle between life and death, being and its extinction, all played out on a minor scale, unnoticed by the rest of the universe, the narrator is spellbound by “the extraordinary efforts made by those tiny legs against an oncoming doom” (6). Death is inevitable, but the moth’s endeavour, as Spinoza would put it, to “persevere in its own being” (Spinoza 102) is almost heroic: “It was superb this last protest, and so frantic that he succeeded at last in righting himself. […] Again, somehow, one saw life, a pure bead” (Woolf 6). And then, all of a sudden, “the struggle was over. The insignificant creature now knew death” (6). But perhaps it had always known death—known it in a way that Prince Prospero and his court never do—in that the moth had lived out its brief life on the threshold, the thin, translucent pane between outside and inside, public and private, the world and what Woolf would elsewhere call her “room of her own.” It had known death because it had known life, a life, “an impersonal and yet singular life that releases a pure event” (Deleuze 28). This is an unconscious knowledge (for what would it mean to say that a moth has a consciousness?) but it is a knowledge even so, immanent and fragilely embodied, which thus points to the diversity of ways of knowing and of learning.

If our little reading group did anything, I hope it helped the kids to realize that there are many ways of knowing, and that learning does not simply consist in uncovering pre-ordained facts, in revealing and recognizing what is already known (by their teachers, their parents, or whomever), I hope it has encouraged them to take risks, to see the virtues of articulating and exchanging ideas, to experience learning as a collaborative effort and as something that is not necessarily confined to the classroom. Not least, I hope it has also helped them to see literature itself as a way of knowing. For some time now, we have been living through a time of retrenchment, in which the humanities and the arts are seen as optional extras, at best. The likely effect of the coronavirus pandemic will surely be to exacerbate this crisis, whether via the immediate economic impact of the closure of theatres and other venues for performance and
collaboration or via the further restructuring of higher education in terms of what is seen as “useful” either for individuals or for society as a whole. Online instruction may well turn out to be mostly more goal-oriented, programmed, and pre-packaged and less open to serendipity or accident than teaching and learning face to face. But the stark divide between the useful and the “useless” should also be challenged, which is not the same as the self-defeating drive to qualify (let alone quantify) the “uses” of literature and the like, or to measure the impact of scholarly production, or of thinking itself. Literature, as a way of knowing, questions and even resists the distinctions on which such value judgements are made. Indeed, it can help us to think through, without pretending to resolve, the kinds of paradox and contradiction thrown up by an event such as our global pandemic, the ways in which it upended our habits and routines, as well as offering the chance to create new ones.

In Poe’s story, Prince Prospero thinks himself all-knowing and wise—the text describes him, in a phrase dripping with irony, as “happy and dauntless and sagacious” (300). No doubt the extreme lockdown he imposes is “following the science” (as we say nowadays). But his is a knowledge, of fixed fundamentals and delimited spheres of enquiry, that is inimical to thought—again, he pronounces that “it was folly to grieve, or to think” (300). And while we would hardly wish grief on anyone (though we should not try to banish it, if it is appropriate), surely one of our tasks as teachers as well as parents is to encourage our children and also our students to think: to think adventurously, riskily if necessary, but also for fun and amusement. You never know who or what will show up, unbidden, when they do. And, unlike the revellers in “The Masque of the Red Death,” one would hope that our children and our students will be ready for it when it does.

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REFERENCES