



Poe on Brick Lane

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SPECIAL COLLECTION:
UNMASKING THE RED
DEATH

ARTICLES -
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ABSTRACT

What parallels might there be between Poe's story of a proud prince and his noble acolytes who shut themselves away to take refuge from the red death and the twenty-first-century non-fiction story of Covid-19? The author of this piece take a personal, auto-fictional approach to this question, narrating his own experience of locking down with his family in London's vibrant East End. If Prospero and his nobles devote themselves to revelry and aesthetic pleasure, leaving the poor beyond the abbey's walls to die, so the author's privilege manifested itself in an ability to turn to literature—and indeed, to Poe—and to the communities of online seminars, while the homeless and marginalized of the city around him were left to fend for themselves. This piece uses these parallels to ask questions about the sorts of fantasy that Poe's tale articulates: a fantasy “from below” of come-uppance for the rich and powerful, and a fantasy “from above” of the aesthetic as anaesthetic and a means of combatting death. And it concludes by asking what has changed when the story comes to an end and when Covid-19/the red death has passed: what sort of response might there be to the inequalities that the fictional story of the red death and the reality of Covid-19 reveal and emphasize?

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When lockdown finally arrived in March 2020 (Boris Johnson having seen scientific sense, after vacillation and preference for the continuation of healthy economic life and the Cheltenham Festival over the health of the populace at large), my family and I were living temporarily in a rented flat off the top of Brick Lane in Shoreditch, East London. This is a fashionable and vibrant area, a stone's throw from the financial institutions of the City, where traces of a rich history of immigration (French Huguenot weavers' eighteenth-century terraces now home to a select group of wealthy architects, bankers, and local notables; faded inscriptions in Hebrew script above shops and the twenty-four-hour beigel bakers that are last testament to the now historical Jewish East End are visible alongside the presence of more recent immigration, above all from the Sylhet area of Bangladesh). Here, one of London's most disadvantaged communities lives in poorly maintained council accommodation and run the grocery shops and curry houses that make Brick Lane—in the jargon of municipal marketing—London's "Bangla-town". At the same time, Brick Lane has become a centre of urban regeneration, attracting students, young artists, and start-up entrepreneurs—that is to say, in a word that might already be old-fashioned, hipsters. And these fill its bars and coffee shops with hubbub and life, fuss over second-hand clothes in its vintage shops, and rub shoulders with the European weekend tourists who occupy the Airbnbs that have sprung up like mushrooms after the rain, and with the out-of-towners and suburbanites who throng to its Sunday street markets.

And then, as if by magic, nothing. From more or less one day to the next, all this life stopped: the steel shutters came down on the shops and cafes; the Bengali families retreated to the estates with sacks of onions and bottles of cooking oil; the tourists and day-visitors came no longer; the city workers, who, in normal times, filled the curry houses with their Friday-night celebrations, stayed away in Barnet and Bromley; the hipsters holed themselves up over Zoom and Teams in their lofts and flat-shares. And the city was empty. An empty London that resembles the stunning opening sequence of the zombie film, *28 Days Later*, of an empty Trafalgar Square, an empty Whitehall and Soho—a sequence that had to be shot at the break of dawn at the height of summer, but that now could have been shot at any time of day. But, of course, as in the film, London was not empty and Brick Lane, by no means. Rather, the streets had been given over to those with nowhere to go: the homeless, the alcoholics and those addicted to drugs, the most socially marginalized and abject twenty-first-century reincarnations of the "rejects" of Rilke's *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*¹—not the living dead, but those who visibly, in their damaged bodies, carry their deaths around with them, those whose life and death are a matter of societal indifference. My family and I had shut ourselves in, not with Prospero's bolts and massy hammers perhaps, but shut ourselves in nonetheless; and outside remained others who would not have access to the abbey and its sanctuary.

What did we do inside our off-Brick-Lane abbey? I would be inventing if I claimed that there were scenes of wanton abandon and that we painted each room of the flat in a different colour. In his *Political Theology*, Carl Schmitt suggests (waspishly, if in a roundabout way) that, in a crisis, the first instinct of the bourgeoisie is to set up a committee (62).² My brother writes elsewhere in this collection of the first instincts of crisis-struck middle-class parents and of our establishment of a weekly session of reading and online learning for our children in London and Vancouver. Alongside this family initiative, there was also a professional response, a response that stemmed more from *déformation professionnelle* than instinct: in a crisis, turn to literature and, best of all, set up a seminar, on Blackboard Collaborate, if need be. And so the School of European Languages and Culture Summer Book Club was born, a grand name for a modest exercise: a small group of the most dedicated first-year students (Chloe, Cory, John, Sara, Will, and others who rightly earned the sobriquet "the Immortals" for their unwavering commitment to the cause into the summer, long after other comrades had deserted their posts on the frontline of literary criticism) and colleagues (most of whom are represented in this volume, but, alongside them: Anna, Amy, Hélène, Jann, Peter, Tessa) who came together

1 Rilke's narrator uses the word 'Abgeworfene' to describe these damaged and marginal inhabitants of Paris who appear to be visible to him alone.

2 The fuller and exact quotation is as follows: "Liberalism, with its contradictions and compromises, existed for Donoso Cortés only in that short interim period in which it was possible to answer the question 'Christ or Barrabas?' with a proposal to adjourn or appoint a commission of investigation."

2. ILLUSIONS OF SOVEREIGNTY

Crisis, as Schmitt also tells us, is that moment—the moment of exception—in which sovereignty reveals itself. And so, as other contributions to this collection are likely to observe, Poe’s tale, that tells of the crisis that is the arrival of the red death, has at its heart the question of sovereignty. Thus, just as Foucault observes that Gothic literature, with its dukes and princes, circles obsessively around the question of sovereignty, its excesses and limits, then this text that draws on, incarnates, and parodies the Gothic is no exception.³ Indeed, Poe’s Prospero appears to personify both sides of the coin that is Foucault’s analysis of the historical development of sovereign power: on the one hand, in the excess of his masque, we witness the spectacular display of the power over life and death that is the hallmark of the early modern sovereign; and, on the other hand, in his construction of the abbey and its crenellated defences, we observe the technologies of bio-power—the power to make live and to allow to die—that are the hallmark of the transmogrification of sovereignty into governmentality in the modern period. I say “appears”, however, for the truth is quite the opposite. On the one hand, Prospero’s performance of sovereignty is no spectacle at all, since it is without spectators: he and his one thousand nobles (whom one might think of as the metonymical accoutrements of sovereignty) act on a stage where there are only actors and no audience. And, on the other hand, the story reveals Prospero’s technologies of bio-power to be nothing of the sort: at the end of the story the biopolitical field (whichever side of the fence we find ourselves on—included as nobles, or excluded as the poor) is the site of death, not growth.

3. FANTASIES

“The Masque of the Red Death” is subtitled a “fantasy”. In what way does this subtitle aid us in our reading of the tale? There is no doubt that its fantasies are at least double: on the one hand, and on first reading, the story articulates the ruler’s fantasy of total sovereignty: the power, already alluded to above, to intervene in the moment of emergency and to decide who should live and who should die. And, on the other hand, the story contains a more subversive fantasy, the fantasy that sovereignty itself might be no more than appearance and illusion, a mask behind which lies nothing. In this second reading, then, when, at the climax of the story the revellers seize the figure of the red death and, with gasps of “unutterable horror”, find its “grave cerements and corpse-like mask [...] untenanted by any tangible form”, it is as if the prostrate corpse of Prospero and the “erect and motionless” figure of the red death have become one (304). Both are, behind their masks, mere void. It is as if, in confronting the masked figure, what felled the prince was the encounter with his own reflection in an unspeakable and deadly magnification of nothingness.

If we follow this second thought further, we might come to see “The Masque of the Red Death” as a continuation of a tradition that comes from the people and their yearning for justice, a tradition of cautionary, sometimes eschatological folk tales, tales that warn that the mighty shall be put down from their seat, that temporal power is limited and only ever temporary, and that, in the long run, for all the theological trappings of politics, sovereignty belongs to God alone.⁴ One thinks here paradigmatically of the story of Belshazaar’s feast in the Book of Daniel (originally a book of folktales that came out of the Jewish people’s experience of captivity in Babylon), which contains a range of structural similarities to Poe’s tale: an arrogant and blasphemous king who sequesters himself away with a thousand nobles to feast; the shocking apparition of an intruder (the hand that writes upon the wall); the ultimate downfall of the

³ ‘[Gothic tales] are always about the abuse of power and exactions; they are fables about unjust sovereigns, pitiless and bloodthirsty seigneurs, arrogant priests, and so on’ (212).

⁴ One might also suggest that “The Masque” represents another Gothic reworking (like *Frankenstein*, for example) of the theme of human hubris: the description of the masque as ‘consisting of much of the beautiful, much of the wanton, much of the bizarre, something of the terrible, and not a little of that which might have excited disgust’ (302) reflects the Aristotelian definition of hubris as a violation of the natural order and as the taking of pleasure in acts that ought to be seen as shameful. And Prospero’s demise can be seen as the undoing of hubris at the hand of the divine.

king and the reassertion of God's sovereignty. And, hence, we might also see "The Masque of the Red Death" as a revenge fantasy, the revenge of the poor and weak enacted on the rich and strong. Thus, our story finds echoes in Poe's later tale "Hop-Frog", in which the much-abused dwarf and court jester Hop-Frog take revenge for his ill-treatment on the king and his courtiers. This he does in a way that reworks the themes of "The Masque". Hop-Frog stages a midnight masquerade in which he persuades the court to don masks of orangutans and to chain themselves together, before setting them alight in a chamber that, like Prospero's abbey, is locked and from which there is no escape.

Finally, we might suggest that the fantasy of "The Masque of the Red Death" is, above all, an aesthetic fantasy. It is not for nothing that (after some apparent vacillation) Poe settles on the spelling "masque" for his title. "The Masque of the Red Death" contains, as much if not more than a performance of sovereignty, an aesthetic performance, a *masque*. Prospero's response to the red death's coming is a carefully and aesthetically constructed edifice (the abbey and its coloured chambers) that is the stage for a wild, but still recognizably aesthetic act: the masque, and its fantastic excesses. How should we understand this? Prospero's escape into an aesthetic realm, we might suggest, constitutes a turn to the aesthetic as *anaesthetic*. The masque, then, is a hedonistic and Dionysian frenzy of intoxication that blinds its participants to their inevitable fate and that numbs them to suffering. Eat, drink, and dance, for tomorrow you will certainly die at the hand of the red death. Thus, in a fashion that corresponds to Nietzsche's conception of the function of art in *The Birth of Tragedy*, the intoxication of art is a way for Prospero and his nobles to affirm life, albeit futilely, and to respond to the super-charged version of the wisdom of Silenus (the notion that, given the suffering that is life and the inevitability of death, it would be better not to have been born at all) that is the knowledge of the red death. And, alongside the Dionysian elements of dance and wanton possession, there is also the self-possession of the calculated construction of the abbey and its architecture. In both Apollonian and Dionysian guises, then, Prospero's aesthetic creation is an illusory, temporary, but defiant affirmation of life in the face of death.

What is more, the element of aesthetic fantasy in "The Masque" can also be understood in relation to the failures of the sovereign's political fantasy that I have discussed above. In this light, Prospero's retreat into the abbey *qua* artwork and to the masque *qua* aesthetic act, then, is not an attempt to perform sovereignty in the political realm. Rather, Prospero, as artist, lays claim to a total sovereignty over an aesthetic realm that he separates off *from* life, responding to the powerlessness that he experiences *in* life. Art compensates *for* life, for our powerlessness in relation to it, and for its suffering and inevitable end. Its limitless excesses are a heroic, if doomed expression of ludic freedom in a world in which we find ourselves limited—by the walls that we throw up around ourselves, by the seriousness of suffering, and by our own mortality. And still, as embodied in the clock that Prospero sets within the abbey and the red chamber that he builds into its sequence of rooms, art is a sphere that, conscious of its own illusion, reflects an awareness of those limits, of the fact that, at some point, the dance must stop.

4. BACK TO LIFE

Let us return from the abbey of Poe's story and from the image of utter devastation and desolation with which it ends to our own contemporary landscape on which we hope Poe's story will throw light. Our own lockdown was not so complete—one-by-one we could leave our houses and apartments and perform the masque of the empty shopping aisles in Sainsbury's or Coop. Our leaders showed extraordinary hubris, whether Johnson's shaking hands with Covid patients, his blustering optimism that the virus would be beaten within twelve weeks, or Trump's maskless machismo and the abbey-like revel that was the Rose Garden announcement of his pick for the Supreme Court. But while their sovereignty was shown to be limited and they themselves were brought low (Johnson cared for by the immigrant nurses of St Thomas' Hospital; Trump the recipient of cocktails of experimental drugs in the Walter Reed National Military Medical Centre), they were not brought so fatally low as Prospero. Meanwhile, our own abbeys (the London-Vancouver Seminar for Children and the SELCS Summer Book Club) were indeed spheres over which we could exercise control (compensating for the lack of control that we had over the world outside), spaces where we could explore an aesthetic realm of freedom and its possibilities of play (acts of defiance in relation to the unfreedom and seriousness of the

pandemic raging around us), but also—and here the parallel with Poe’s abbey ends—places where my extended family were fortunate enough to be able to continue to exist and where, likewise, through good fortune and privilege, relations of collegiality and friendship could grow and flourish. And, again unlike in Poe, at some point our dance will end and—thanks to the nature of Covid-19, to vaccination, and to a functioning health service—we have a better chance than Prospero’s courtiers that, *inshallah*, it will not end with our deaths.

Poe’s story tells of an exceptional event—the all-destroying coming of the red death—and hence it has led me, in this piece, to think about power and inequalities in relation to moments of exception. But, of course, there is another way to considering the lockdown landscapes that Covid introduced to us. With lockdown on Brick Lane, the waters of life appeared to subside and retreat, as if at the highest of high tides, perhaps one of those eerie tides that pull back far back further than usual and portend a tsunami of devastating power that may or may not come; the sound of the surf could no longer be heard and had given way to an uncanny silence. What one then saw on the streets of the city in the figures of its underclass was something that had been there all along but had never been so visible: rock formations and sandbanks that lie beneath the sea near the shoreline but that the tide does not normally expose, lurking beneath the paddling feet of holiday swimmers. As much as to say: the pandemic had brought about an exceptional and strange situation, but, in the inequalities that it unearthed—whether the inequalities of homelessness and addiction in a pleasure-spot of London or broader inequalities tied to the higher mortality rates from Covid in the BAME population of the country as a whole—it had revealed the pre-existing abnormalities and injustices of our so-called normal life that we either do not see, or do not wish to see, in our self-absorbed hedonism, locked away in the abbeys that we have been occupying all along.

In Camus’s *La Peste*, as Jacqueline Rose has recently pointed out in a piece in the *London Review of Books*, the plague is “at once blight and revelation. It brings the hidden truth of a corrupt world to the surface.” And so too in Poe: while it is the coming of the Red Death that spurs Prince Prospero into action and to barricading himself and one thousand nobles like him in the crenellated abbey, leaving his subjects beyond its walls to die without a thought, this act does no more than reveal the reality that had existed before the plague: a situation where some may live and others may die. And while the final sentence of Poe’s tale (“And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all” 304) is chilling in its grim and brutal finality, the final sentence of Camus’s novel is perhaps more chilling in its insidious suggestion that, beneath the waters of a restored and healthy normality, the pestilence still lurks in the depths. Or rather, in Camus’s less watery metaphor: the plague has scuttled down to its dark and dusty hiding places, patiently biding its time in “bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city” (296). This ordinary landscape, one that contains inequality and injustice and the bacilli of plagues to come, is the landscape to which we shall return once the coronavirus pandemic has passed. And it is this—more than Poe’s final scene of desolation—that presents the real challenge.

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