Brightness in the Air: Reflections on Literature during the 2020 COVID-19 Pandemic

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1. INTRODUCTION: DUNBAR'S "LAMENT FOR THE MAKERS" AND WELLS'S *THE WAR OF THE WORLDS*

One morning early in April this year, I sat on my balcony in the outskirts of Tokyo and read William Dunbar's poem "Lament for the Makers." Dunbar was himself a *makar* or bard, and he wrote the poem early in the 16th century. Its subject: death. It is a poem which overflows with the ever-present awareness of mortality, not as an abstract concept, but as an immanent event. Dunbar, singing, is a sick man poised at the edge of the eternal:

> I that in heill wes and gladness,
> Am trublit now with great seiknes,
> And feblit with infirmite;
> *Timor mortis conturbat me.*
> [I that in health was and gladness,
> Am troubled now with great sickness,
> And feeble with infirmity;
> *The fear of death disturbs me*] (50)

From his sickness, he looks outward to the world around him and finds it littered with the corpses of the already dead. Much of the poem is a recitation of the names of dead poets, the "makers" of the title: "Chaucer,"

"Maister John Clerk," "James Affleck," and many others, both known and unknown to us now. The rest of the poem is a meditation upon universal death: Dunbar looks at every person, in every walk of life, and sees death within them. Either they are already dead, or they are going to be.

> Our plesance heir is all vane glory,
> This fals world is but transitory,
> The flesch is bruckle, the Feynd is slee;
> *Timor mortis conturbat me.*
>
> [Our pleasure here is all vane glory,
> This false world is but transitory,
> The flesh is frail, the Fiend is sly:
> *The fear of death disturbs me.*] (50)

It was snowing as I read the poem. It was a soft, gentle, out-of-season snow; the cherry trees were almost in blossom in the nearby parks. I did not feel that I was living in a world of death. Johan Huizinga writes of this particularly medieval obsession with mortality in his historical study *The Waning of the Middle Ages*. While he focuses upon French culture (specifical the culture built around the court of the Bourbons), his words are equally applicable to the Scottish poet Dunbar:

> No other epoch has laid so much stress as the expiring Middle Ages on the thought of death. An everlasting call of *memento mori* resounds through life. Denis the Carthusian, in his *Directory of the Life of Nobles*, exhorts them: "And when going to bed at night, he should consider how, just as he now lies down himself, soon strange hands will lay his body in the grave." .... All that the meditations on death of the monks of yore had produced was now condensed into a very primitive image.... namely, the sense of the perishable nature of all things. (126)

Europe in the medieval period was a world steeped in Christianity, a world

where miracles were an expected part of life and angels and demons swarmed thick in the air. To poets such as Dunbar, the afterlife was as concretely real as this life, and death was just a barrier—a thin membrane—that at any moment might puncture and give way, rocketing mortals up the steep ascent to heaven or plunging them into inferno.

The basic facts remain unchanged since Dunbar's time: everything that lives, will die. The intimate presence of death as a universal leveller, however, that sense of impending disaster that can descend upon anyone, anywhere, at any moment—that feeling is not so familiar for those of us living in developed countries in the 21st century. Or at least it was unfamiliar until the beginning of the Covid 19 pandemic, when the shadow of a new Fiend entered into our collective experience.

About the same time I read Dunbar, I had also reread *The War of the Worlds*, H. G. Wells's 1897 novel of interplanetary invasion. Wells is enshrined in the canon of popular literature as a pioneering writer of science fiction, yet his skill at evoking fear and horror is sometimes overlooked. Much of his work is permeated with a sense of dread: think of the far future explored in *The Time Traveller*, a Darwinist dystopia of cannibalistic Morlocks; the pitiful human-animal hybrids encountered in *The Island of Dr Moreau*; and the monstrously oversized lifeforms of *The Food of the Gods*. In those early months of 2020, as COVID-19 solidified from rumour into reality, I was reminded of the disturbing first few chapters of what is perhaps Wells's most famous work.

The novel opens with a Martian spaceship landing, meteor-like, on Horsell Common in South East England. The ship is quickly identified as such, and a crowd of locals, including refreshment vendors, sets up camp around it. While they are awed by the idea of visitors from another world, no one in the crowd suspects hostile intent. In fact, when the Martians turn their deadly heat-ray upon the welcoming committee, the narrator standing nearby is at first unable to comprehend what he is seeing:

> It was as if some invisible jet impinged upon them and flashed into white flame. It was as if each man suddenly and momentarily turned to fire.... I saw them staggering and falling.... I stood staring, not yet realising that this was death leaping from man to man in that little distant crowd. All I felt was that it was something strange. (27)

What Wells is describing is *normalcy bias*: the strong tendency of people, when faced with sudden and unexpected danger, to underestimate or even dismiss the threat. As sociologist Thomas E. Drabak puts it, "the initial response to a disaster warning" is not life-preserving action, or even panic, but rather "disbelief" (72). In Wells's novel, even as the survivors of the first Martian attack attempt to raise the alarm, people in the nearby towns and countryside carry on their evening strolls and their idle conversations, laughing off the news. He writes:

> Here and there was a burning bush or tree. Beyond was a fringe of excitement, and further than that fringe the inflammation had not crept as yet. In the rest of the world the stream of life still flowed as it had flowed for immemorial years. (41)

I had my own experience of normalcy bias in September 2001, when I watched the Twin Towers burning on my TV screen. It was a hot, humid night, and I had switched on the TV out of boredom: the boredom didn't last long. At first, though, as I watched the smoke billowing out of those tall towers against that clear blue sky—and then as I watched the first tower plummet downwards, as though sucked in by the earth—I simply could not understand what I was seeing. I understood, of course, that the tower was falling—but I could not comprehend what that meant in terms of human lives and human deaths. *That tower must be empty*, I thought; *it's a good thing they've evacuated everyone, otherwise thousands would be dying right this second*. Yet slowly, as the TV stations endlessly repeated the footage, I came to understand that the towers were not empty, that people had died, that people were still dying, and that the world had changed forever.

The state of man does change and vary,
Now sound, now sick, now blyth, now sary,
Now dansand mery, now like to die;
Timor mortis conturbat me.

［The state of humankind does change and vary,
Now sound, now sick, now blithe, now sorry,
Now dancing merry, now likely to die;
The fear of death disturbs me］（50）

In such moments, the entire universe becomes a place of dis-ease.

2. PEPYS'S *DIARIES* AND VARIOUS MEDICAL THEORIES

In winter the skies of Tokyo are blue, clear, and cold, the humid haze of summer replaced with crystalline light. Mt Fuji, if you live within eyesight and no building gets in your way, emerges from the distance like a god returned from space, white robes sharp against the sky. Early in January 2020 I flew through those bright skies, returning from a holiday in my native New Zealand. I flew via Hong Kong, and I had been slightly concerned that the flights might be disrupted by civil unrest. I hardly took notice of the news, on the day I left New Zealand, that there was some new sort of infectious disease present in the city.

One of the most vivid eye-witness depictions of historical epidemics in English can be found in Samuel Pepys's Diaries. In October 1663 he, a busy London civil servant well-informed of the news of the day, notes that "the plague is got to Amsterdam, brought by a ship from Argier; and it is also carried to Hambrough," and of how the English King plans a ban on ships from the infected areas. It is not until 1665 that the disease draws closer to home. What is remarkable, for a modern reader, is how Pepys's life goes on more-or-less as usual during the devastating epidemic. He moves as urgently as ever around London, negotiating business and socializing in taverns and coffee shops. Only every now and then does he pause to mention the

growing crisis. On the 26th of June, he writes:

> So, weary, home, and to my office a while, till almost midnight, and so to bed. The plague encreases mightily, I this day seeing a house, at a bitt-maker's over against St. Clement's Church, in the open street, shut up; which is a sad sight.

The very next day he reports himself "very merry" as he lunches with acquaintances and works late at the office. As the days pass, he shows an acute knowledge of which parts of the city are suffering the worst outbreaks, yet all the while business goes on as usual. The plague does bring with it a heightened sense of urgency: on the 3rd of July he resolves to tidy up all loose ends at work and put his own affairs in order, for "it is much to be feared how a man can escape having a share [in the sickness]." At the same time, his keen eye for attractive members of the opposite sex, typical of Pepy's, is undaunted:

> I found and saluted Mrs. Burrows, who is a very pretty woman for a mother of so many children. But, Lord! to see how the plague spreads. It being now all over King's Streete, at the Axe [a tavern near his house], and next door to it, and in other places.

Perhaps in such moments he thought of the lines of Thomas Nashe, written several decades earlier:

> Beauty is but a flower
> Which wrinkles will devour;
> Brightness falls from the air;
> Queens have died young and fair;
> Dust hath closed Helen's eye.
> I am sick, I must die.
> *Lord, have mercy on us!*

Pepys is no fatalist, though. While in his time a lockdown for the healthy was impossible—there were no Zoom meetings and online grocery orders for a 17th century Londoner—he does what he can to safeguard himself and his family, sending his wife away from the city and trying, albeit with misgivings, some of the recommended prophylactics of the day. These include, on June 7, tobacco—in order to drive away what were believed to be the dangerous odours of illness—and, on July 20, "plague water," a distilled concoction made of various herbs and roots steeped in white wine and brandy.

Indeed, Pepys and his contemporaries had a variety of remedies to choose from. The variety and number of such preventative measures and treatments accumulated over the millennium—most of them fallacious—stand testimony to the recurring threat of epidemics in European culture. Some of these theories are well-known today: the oddly-shaped masks of the mediaeval plague-doctors, their grotesque beaks filled with aromatic herbs to drive away deadly "miasma" (the same principle as Pepys's tobacco) have become a part of popular culture and cosplay festivals. Less commonly known are the various medications prescribed during the middle ages and the renaissance. The historian Odell Shepard writes how, throughout this period, unicorn horn—in reality the horns of narwhal, antelope, or rhinoceros—was famed as a miracle cure for digestive ailments, poisoning, and plague. People would drink water from beakers of carved horn, or which had been poured through horn funnels: horn was also "sunk into the silver of table dishes" for the rich, while the less wealthy took it ground up into a powder (136–37, 138). Innumerable other potions existed, the majority of them, as Shepard explains, being:

> too foul to name and others too ridiculous to believe in. Hoofs of asses and elks, horns of wild goats and of stags, viper's flesh and Mathoilu's celebrated oil of scoptions, dust of scorpions, powdered swallow's heart—one hardly knows whether to laugh or to weep. (137)

For Shepard, "there is no more pitiful record in the world than that in the scores of books composed during the Middle Ages on methods of avoiding and curing the Plague" (ibid). The pity lies in the fact that people created and used these remedies in futile attempts to save their own lives and the lives of their loved ones. They did what they could against a little understood enemy, and what they did was usually not enough.

While COVID-19 is not, thankfully, as deadly as many of the epidemics of the past, many of us can sympathize with this desire for the miracle medicine, the secret technique that will remove all feelings of powerlessness. Chloroquine, hydroxychloroquine, gargled iodine, the rush to produce a vaccine; as far as I know, no one has yet suggested a little powdered unicorn horn. Even in the past, though, there were dissenters against conventional treatments. Michel de Montaigne, the great French essayist, believed that medical interventions only make illnesses worse, claiming that "we disturb and arouse a disease by attacking it head on." He argued for what we would now call a holistic approach: "it is by our mode of life that we should weaken it [the disease], by gentle degrees, and bring it to its end." Nature, he goes on, does not intend for us to be needlessly sick; thus the animal world is largely in robust good health, despite the lack, in the wild, of animal doctors. People should thus "neither obstinately and heedlessly oppose evils nor weakly succumb to them, but give way to them naturally, according to their condition" (1016). Elsewhere he writes, on the same topic, "let us let things take their course," concluding that: "the scheme of things that takes care of fleas and moles also takes care of men who have the same patience" (705–6). (Ironically enough it was fleas, themselves ill with the virus that cause the Plague, who would infect humans.)

He goes on: "I have allowed colds, gouty discharges, looseness, palpitations of the heart, migraines, and other ailments to grow old and die a natural death within me." This is a nice turning-of-the-tables: Montaigne doesn't die from illnesses; illnesses die from him. Yet he is no optimist, concluding, "We are born to grow old, to grow weak, to be sick, in spite of all medicine"

(1017). Depending upon one's own disposition, he can be read as either pessimistic or realistic: perhaps the two attitudes are not, ultimately, so very different.

More recently, the English poet Richard Le Gallienne takes an even more alternative approach to treatment, predicting a future in which "instead of giving us prescriptions of nauseous drugs, the physician will write down the titles of delightful books—books tonic or narcotic, stimulating or sedative, as our need may be" (quoted in Jackson, 290). Gallienne recommends the works of Alexander Dumas as the best broad-spectrum curative, but cautions against prescribing humorous writers to those with respiratory complaints, due to the risk of laughter bringing on coughing spasms (ibid, 295).

Humour aside, there is something to this idea of cures which focus upon the mind rather than the body. It was sobering and, at times, depressing to read those early chapters of *The War of the Worlds*, to browse through those pages from the *Diaries* and those accounts of futile remedies, and yet at the same time I was somehow reassured. If literature—both fictional and factual—is a mirror reflecting reality, there is both illumination and distraction in considering the reflections, in turning the mirror this way and that, in enjoying the play of light and shadow. And so, as the pandemic grew worse, as the news was filled with grim images of overcrowded hospital wards in northern Italy and New York City, and as Tokyo cases began to rise, I turned back to the page to see what I could find.

3. MANN'S *DEATH IN VENICE* AND CAMUS' *THE PLAGUE*

The border between life and death, as Dunbar reminds us, is thin. One of twentieth-century Europe's greatest meditations upon desire and mortality, Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, makes this idea explicit in its first few paragraphs as Gustav von Aschenbach finds himself loitering in the vicinity of the wall of the stonecutters' workshop opposite a Munich cemetery. Here, Aschenbach sees a strange man, "moderately tall, thin, beardless and remarkably snub-nosed," with a "milky, freckled complexion." He wears

"a straw hat with a broad straight brim," giving him "an exotic air, as of someone who had come from distant parts" (198). He is dressed as for a long journey on foot, with rucksack, rain-cape, and iron-shod walking stick. Though Aschenbach doesn't seem to notice, this is clearly a spectre of death: gaunt, alien, and bound for somewhere beyond the world.

Inexplicably, at least to Aschenbach, this figure evokes in him "a kind of roving restlessness, a youthful craving for far-off places." He is seized with a vision, a desire to journey into an imagined landscape of phantasmagorical intensity,

> a landscape, a tropical swampland under a cloud-swollen sky, moist and lush and monstrous, a kind of primeval wilderness of islands, morasses and mussy alluvial channels: far and wide around him he saw hairy palm-trunks thrusting upwards from rank jungles of fern, from among thick fleshy plants in exuberant flower, saw strangely misshapen trees with roots that arched through the air before sinking into the ground or into stagnant, shadowy-green, glassy waters where milk-white blossoms floated as big as plates, and among them exotic birds with grotesque heads stood hunched in the shallows, their heads tilted motionlessly sideways; saw between the knotted stems of the bamboo thicket the glinting eyes of a crouching tiger; and his heart throbbed with terror and mysterious longing (199–200).

It is this wanderlust that results in his journeying to Venice for a long holiday, where he falls hopelessly in love with an adolescent Polish boy staying at the same hotel, and then dies suddenly of cholera. It is a story of obsession, the unrequited desire of an aging man for the unobtainable. The Polish boy Tadzio becomes, in Aschenbach's eyes, an unreal creature: impossibly young, impossibly beautiful, and eternally out of reach. He is part of a dream-like world of desire that becomes more real than the physical world in which Aschenbach lives and moves. When the rumours of disease begin, he can hardly bring himself to pay attention. One day the hotel barber asks him,

"in his chattering, flattering manner": "'But you are staying on, signore; you are not afraid of the sickness?'" Aschenbach just stares back at him: "'The sickness?' he repeated" (245).

Like Wells's townspeople, like myself on 9/11, Aschenbach seems incapable of understanding what should be obvious. The omens are everywhere: the authorities warn people to not eat raw vegetables or unwashed fruit; sanitary teams sterilise the pavements from which the sick and dying have been removed; the odour of disinfectant pervades the air. Yet Aschenbach occupies a world that seems to float apart from dull material reality, a world that in many ways resembles Venice, floating mirage-like upon the waters. For him the mirage of the boy, beautiful and unobtainable, is the only thing that is important.

Tadzio can be seen as a herald of death, a luminous figure from another world guiding Aschenbach out into death's rip tide. Or he could simply be an object of distraction, a flash of light in the mirror of Aschenbach's mind. Reality, for the aging and lacklustre writer, has become too heavy a burden, and mortality—both the immediate threat of the epidemic and the slower march into old age—is too grim to bear much scrutiny. Better to obsess over an alluring illusion than face the cold depths of the grave. Consummation exists only in a space and time beyond life: the space that he sees as he dies in a deck chair on the beach, watching Tadzio, in the distance, walking in the edges of the shallow sea:

> to him it was as if the pale and lovely soul-summoner out there was smiling to him, beckoning to him; and if he [Tadzio] loosed his hand from his hip and pointed outwards, hovering ahead and onwards, into an immensity rich with unutterable expectation. And as so often, he set out to follow him. (267)

In *Death in Venice*, competition between the levels of the literal and the metaphorical is acute. Aschenbach himself perceives the world in this way, his artistic temperament colouring everything he sees so that a stranger

outside a graveyard leers with the bared teeth of the Grim Reaper, so that a young boy becomes an angel and that the terminal effects of a deadly fever becomes a voyage towards love. *Death in Venice* is not about an epidemic; it is not really about disease; in a way, it is not even about an individual death. It is a metaphor for the artist confronted with oblivion: the mechanics of how real people meet their own personal oblivions is not so important. In this focus upon metaphorical meaning, it has something in common with another great modernist work, Albert Camus's *The Plague*.

In the early days of the 2020 pandemic this novel, seventy-three years after its first publication, became a sudden bestseller. Many people were quick to point out that Camus wasn't really writing about contagious diseases: he was using plague (specifically, bubonic plague) as a metaphor for fascism. That may be the case, but for many readers in 2020 the literal details of the epidemic in Camus's book became more interesting than their symbolism. Like many others, I reread *The Plague* as the pandemic consolidated itself around me.

As I read the early sections of the book, I made a note to myself: "Camus, at this point, seems more focused on the isolation and alienation of quarantine than the direct effects of the disease." I wrote this in late February and, at that time, this seemed to make the book less relevant to the present moment. But then in April and March many countries entered into extreme lockdowns: people were confined to their homes, businesses closed down or hastily shifted to remote-work. Borders were closed and air traffic dwindle to a trickle. Suddenly *The Plague* seemed all too relevant.

While the bubonic plague described by Camus is a very different affliction from COVID-19, the line: "the first thing that plague brought to our town was exile" (65) will resonate with many in 2020. Early in the novel, the city of Oran is sealed off from the outside world in order to stop the spread of infection. The quarantine is extreme: not only are people forbidden to leave, but also "all correspondence was forbidden, to obviate the risk of letters carrying infection outside the town" (62). Trapped within the borders of the

town and spending most of their time indoors, the people went "through life rather than lived, the prey of aimless days and sterile memories" oscillating between fantasies of escape and acceptance of bleak reality(66). They are alienated from themselves and their surroundings, because the here and now is simply too appalling to endure. Thus they drift psychologically, "like wandering shadows that could have acquired substance only by consenting to root themselves in the solid earth of their distress"(66). As I read this, I wondered if, by reading it, I was doing just that: refusing to consent to the solid earth around me. The lockdown in Japan was voluntary, but the streets emptied and social life slowed to a low hum. At times I wandered, taking care to avoid occasional other pedestrians, through familiar areas that now seemed strange and sad. Automated emails from the New Zealand government advised me to either return as quickly as possible or hunker down. The phrase "shelter in place" had entered the lexicon.

4. BOCCACCIO'S DECAMERON AND POE'S "THE MASQUE OF THE RED DEATH"

Perhaps one of the earliest descriptions of such a retreat from the outside world forms the frame story of Giovanni Boccaccio's 14th century collection of tales, *The Decameron*. In the prologue of that book, we find Italy caught up in a devastating plague epidemic which "originated some year earlier in the East, where it had claimed countless lives before it unhappily spread westward, growing in strength as it swept relentlessly on from one place to the next"(12). All efforts at containment fail and, presumably, plague water and unicorn horn prove ineffective. The plague, which in an unpleasant synchronicity comes to its worst "between March and July"(12), kills not only humans, but animals and livestock: pigs fall dead in the street after snuffling the rags of a fresh corpse(12). Boccaccio describes how

> ... when all the graves were full, huge trenches were excavated in the churchyards, into which new arrivals were placed in their hundreds,

> stowed tier upon tier like ships'cargo, each layer of corpses being covered over with a thin layer of soil till the trench was filled to the top. (Ibid)

As in Mann's vision, death is pictured as a kind of voyage. This is, however, a considerably less aesthetic journey: the dead are stacked like sacks in the back of a truck, destination nowhere. To avoid such morbid sights and, with luck, save themselves, ten young Florentines—seven women and three men—flee the city and take shelter in a secluded villa. There, as one girl explains to her companions beforehand, "we shall hear the birds singing, we shall see fresh green hills and plains, fields of corn undulating like the sea," undeniably a more pleasant prospect than mass graves and spasming pigs. Her attitude is an unsettling mix of privilege and pragmatism: "although the farmworkers are dying there [in the countryside] in the same way as the townspeople here in Florence, the spectacle is less harrowing inasmuch as the houses and people are more widely scattered"(16). Furthermore, they can always turn their eyes away from such sights, upwards, where they "shall have a clearer view of their heavens, which, troubled though they are, do not however deny us their eternal beauties"(16). At the end of the world, find yourself a house with a pleasant view.

Once ensconced in the relative safety of the villa, the Florentines take their seats in the garden and resolve to pass the time by storytelling: it is these stories of love, deceit, and misadventure that make up the body of *The Decameron*. Yet in 2020 it is the image of those ten people, seated comfortable in their idyllic walled garden, that resonates the most with our contemporary situation. Some of us had gardens to retire to; for many, the sphere of daily activity shrank to the interiors of houses and apartments. Within those interiors, we turned inwards towards other spaces: the screens of our televisions, our computers, our phones and tablets. In our rooms we gazed through those portals into the rooms of others, communicating with colleagues, students, and teachers; trawling the net for information; looking

for distraction from the solid earth. Many popular US talk show hosts, such as Stephen Colbert and Conan O'Brien, abandoned their studios and broadcast "lockdown shows" from their homes. Bill Maher even delivered several monologs from his own (presumably walled) garden, one of them during a fall of light spring rain.

> Unto the death gois all estatis,
> Princis, prelotis, and potestatis,
> Baith rich and poor of all degree;
> *Timor mortis conturbat me.*
>
> [On to the dead goes all estates,
> Princes, prelates, and potentates,
> Both rich and poor of all degree;
> *The fear of death disturbs me.*] (51)

A more macabre reflection of lockdown can be found in Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Masque of the Red Death" (1842). In this story, the rich and powerful of an unspecified land take shelter from a nightmarish plague within the walls of a fortress. The interior of this fortress is a luxurious palace, every detail given over to aesthetic pleasure. As the climax of the story approaches, the privileged inhabitants of the palace put on a masked ball. Just as they have put a barrier between themselves and the outer world, so now they retreat behind the anonymity of their masks. In the tradition of European carnival masks function as a way to temporarily suspend the established social order. Through the anonymity of a mask, the individual is able to interact with others in ways that would be unacceptable at other times: peasants can flirt with aristocrats, the social pariah merges unnoticed into the communal fold. Yet in Poe's story, the established social order has already been destroyed. The revellers' masks seem, then, a continuation of their retreat from external reality. They can even be thought of as signalling a repressed sense of shame, the shame of the survivor after the bulk of

humanity has perished. They are not really survivors, however, for when the revels are at their height a figure costumed as a plague victim reveals himself to be the personification of Plague itself, and the deadly contagion is released (188).

The deaths of the revellers suggest an act of divine justice, though exactly what justice this may be does not hold up to scrutiny. The privileged few have sought to isolate themselves from inflection, leaving the world outside to suffer and die: yet given the 100% infection-rate and 100% mortality of Poe's imagined illness, it seems that the party-goers could have done little good by staying outside. As Nashe put it:

> Rich men, trust not in wealth,
> Gold cannot buy you health;
> Physic himself must fade.
> All things to end are made,
> The plague full swift goes by;
> I am sick, I must die.
> Lord, have mercy on us!

At least they had a good time before Death, the great leveller, made his entrance.

5. PORTER'S "PALE HORSE, PALE RIDER" AND WOOLF'S "ON BEING ILL"

In *The Decameron*, those ten Florentines spend two weeks days spinning yarns to one another, then decide to return to the city. The end of the book tells us how "three young men went off in search of other diversions; and in due course the ladies returned to their homes." It is unclear what exactly awaits them at home; the plague, after all, does not seem to have run its course. Their time spent in the villa may not, however, have simply been an escape from infection, but also a sort of health retreat. Martin Marafioti has argued that "reading, storytelling, and singing," the kind of activities

they engaged in during those two weeks, would have been thought to have a beneficial effect on resistance to disease: what he calls a form of "narrative prophylaxis"(unpaginated). The storytellers, then, return to the world of danger and disease strengthened by the tales they told, and the tales they were told.

Nonetheless, to a reader with epidemics in mind, the end of the book seems somewhat perfunctory. After the vivid descriptions of plague in the introduction, its absence from the brief conclusion is striking. The ending is too neat, the terror of the epidemic too extreme to go unresolved. Have those youths, at least, learnt something from their experiences of disaster and seclusion? And yet, what is there to learn? Surely, there is some lesson other than just Dunbar's old refrain? Just what this lesson might be lies at the core of Katherine Anne Porter's brilliant short novel, "Pale Horse, Pale Rider."

If Camus used disease as a metaphor and Mann (basing Tadzio on a real Polish boy he observed from afar during a holiday in Venice) created a fictional cholera epidemic as a plot device, Porter's story is grounded more concretely in the personal experience of illness. In 1918 Porter caught the Spanish Flu, and nearly died from it. It is this life-threatening illness that forms the core of her fictionalised narrative.

The book can be divided into three parts: first there is a long slow build-up to illness, then the torturous experience of illness itself, then finally a brief period of recuperation. The first part recalls those early chapters in *The War of the Worlds* and *The Plague*, for the central character Miranda is slow to realise the danger. An independent young working woman of the 1910s, she exists in a perpetual state of exhaustion brought about by late nights working at a newspaper, cheap meals in 2 am diners, cigarettes, and bittersweet flirtations with Adam, a young soldier waiting to be sent off to the battlefields of Europe. Caught up in the exhausting parade of events, she mistakes the early symptoms of her illness for the normal fatigue of everyday life.

Once Miranda is unmistakably ill, Porter devotes many pages to vivid and disturbing descriptions of the psychological effects of the illness, paying

particular attention to the hallucinations of high fever. Aschenbach's strange vision of a jungle landscape has its parallel here: Miranda hallucinates a nightmarish jungle pulsating with sickly inhuman life. It is

> a writhing and terribly alive and secret place of death, creeping with tangles of spotted serpents, rainbow-colored birds with malign eyes, leopards with humanly wise faces and extravagantly crested lions; screaming long-armed monkeys tumbling among broad fleshy leaves that glowed with sulphur-colored light and exuded the ichor of death, and rotting trunks of unfamiliar trees sprawled in crawling slime. (232)

As in Mann, illness and death becomes a journey into this visionary landscape. It is a vision which is both horrifying and compelling: it has both fertility and decay, as the rank life of the jungle swells and expands and predatory forces lurk in its overgrowth. As her fever heightens, Miranda experiences a fracturing of personality, a precursor, perhaps, to death's rending of self from self. She sees a beautiful ship poised magically at the edge of the jungle, and

> Without surprise, watching from her pillow, she saw herself run swiftly down this gangplank to the slanting deck, and standing there, she leaned on the rail and waved gaily to herself in bed, and the slender ship spread its wings and sailed away into the jungle. (Ibid)

As in *Death in Venice*, there is beauty here: the beautiful ship, the voyage into possibility, and the comforting (though irrational) sense, that this is all happening to *someone else*. Yet as Miranda grows even sicker, the imagery changes. The jungle and the sailing ship are gone, and in their place is a vision of the immediacy of oblivion: "a whirlpool of gray water turning upon itself for all eternity" (251). The story continues: "she lay on a narrow ledge over a pit that she knew to be bottomless, though she could not comprehend it." She is trapped in this position, able to hold herself away from death

yet apparently unable to escape, straining "back against a reassuring wall of granite at her shoulder, staring into the pit, thinking" (ibid).

Miranda is beyond metaphors of travel. Suspended between the light of consciousness and the final self-dissolving darkness, she has plenty of time to think about death. The irony of this, of course, is that death itself will put an end to all such thinking: "soft carefully shaped words like oblivion and eternity," as she puts it, "are curtains hung before nothing at all" (252)

Yet Miranda recovers—unlike Adam, who cares for her at first but later, as she lies oblivious in hospital, himself sickens and succumbs. She is left hollowed-out by the trauma of the experience: having come so close to death, having almost taken the first step (which, ironically, is also the final step) of that journey, she re-enters life like a kind of living ghost. Indeed, *recovery* seems the wrong word here. While no longer in immediate danger, she has seen the true nature of the world, the true destination of all things: a whirlpool of dirty water into nothingness. She has regained life, but lost hope.

6. CONCLUSION: FORSTER'S "THE MACHINE STOPS"

Hope in a worldly sense (as opposed to hope in an afterlife) is largely absent from Dunbar's lament. Huizinga, summing up that morbid mediaeval preoccupation with mortality, points out that such hope was missing from the literature of the era. Trapped by the weight of sickness, age, and death, the only positive outlook lay in the promise of bliss in the Christian afterlife. On earth, there was nothing more to be done than to fear Hell and hope for Heaven. Nashe is still repeating this lesson, centuries later, at the end of his own poem:

> Haste, therefore, each degree,
> To welcome destiny;
> Heaven is our heritage,
> Earth but a player's stage;

Mount we unto the sky.
I am sick, I must die.
Lord, have mercy on us!

It is a different kind of hope that Virginia Woolf expresses in her 1925 essay "On Being Ill." Hers is not hope of heaven, but neither is it the possibility of returning to full health. Rather, it is the idea that the experience of illness can bring a kind of illumination, revealing the world to us in a valuable new light. She writes of the "tremendous... spiritual change" the experience of illness brings:

> how astonishing, when the lights of health go down, the undiscovered countries that are then disclosed, what wastes and deserts of the soul a slight attack of influenza brings to view... how we go down into the pit of death and feel the waters of annihilation close above our heads. (32)

Grim as those "waters of annihilation" might be (note the resonance with Porter's images), there is a sense of elevation here. Illness can lift us, in Woolf's view, to a heightened appreciation of life. She writes of the changes in perception: the "precipices and lawns sprinkled with bright flowers [that] a little rise of temperature reveals," and also of the shifting of our preconceptions and assumptions, the "ancient and obdurate oaks... uprooted in us by the act of sickness" (32). We become aware of things that normally go obscured by health and movement, illness wreathing "the faces of the absent (plain enough in health, Heaven knows) with a new significance, while the mind concocts a thousand legends and romances about them for which it has neither time nor liberty in health" (33－4). All the while, the sick person is aware of the world of the healthy from which they (temporarily or permanently) is excluded: for outside the wall of the sickroom

> the army of the upright marches to battle. Mrs. Jones catches her train. Mr. Smith mends his motor. The cows are driven home to be milked.

> Men thatch the roof. The dogs bark. The rooks, rising in a net, fall in a net upon the elm trees. The wave of life flings itself out indefatigably. (38–9)

One of the key points here is that only the ill learn the lessons of illness; that it is the contrast between illness and health that brings illumination. And yet, with COVID-19, the contrast has become less clear. The relatively long incubation of the virus, coupled with the fact that many infected people are asymptomatic or experience mild symptoms, has meant that anyone could potentially be a carrier. It is this ambiguity that has led to not just the isolation of the sick, but the society-wide lockdowns imposed around the globe. Someone may feel and appear healthy, but still be contagious: everyone is suspect.

If one thing has clearly changed, then, over the course of this year, it is that any sense of complacency has gone. We no longer resemble the townsfolk in *The War of The Worlds*, taking our strolls while the Martians barbeque the village next door. If anything, many people seem to have become hyper sensitized to any new possible threat. When will people no longer have to think about COVID-19? What will come after? Once people have got used to a world of social distancing, masks, and limited freedom of movement, at what point does the world become safe enough to go back to the way things were?

E. M. Forster's 1909 short story "The Machine Stops" provides a possible answer. In Forster's story, humans live alone in small self-contained rooms buried beneath the surface of the earth. The location of each room is unimportant: people rarely travel. All of their needs are taken care of by the Machine, an immense automated infrastructure spanning the globe. There is little work to be done, so every day is filled with entertainment and what we would now call "remote learning":

> Imagine, if you can, a small room, hexagonal in shape, like the cell of a

> bee. It is lighted neither by window nor by lamp, yet it is filled with a soft radiance. There are no apertures for ventilation, yet the air is fresh. There are no musical instruments, and yet... this room is throbbing with melodious sounds. An arm-chair is in the centre, by its side a reading-desk—that is all the furniture. And in the arm-chair there sits a swaddled lump of flesh—a woman, about five feet high, with a face as white as a fungus. It is to her that the little room belongs. (13)

People have turned inwards, away from the open sky and the surface of the earth, into the privacy of their cosy artificial environments. Airships soar slowly around the world, but only to transport technicians to different parts of the machine for unavoidable maintenance. Most people are content to stay in their rooms. They remain connected, but it is a kind of detached connection: there is no emotional engagement, no subliminal hum of normal human contact. All that has been replaced by the *exchange of information*. Everyone, in Forster's future, is an authority on something—marine biology, old languages, the arts—and they spend their time either delivering lectures via the screens, or passively absorbing information from other people's lectures. It is all dead knowledge, without purpose: fish are studied not in order to understand fish, or the ocean, or the global ecosystem, but simply to add discrete units of knowledge to the whole. As with fish, so with languages, histories, arts: everything is fodder for the idle mind, equally important and equally unimportant.

The COVID-19 lockdowns have not led (yet) to such societal change. People have relied upon screens for work, for study and, in their leisure time, social interaction. But those screens have not quite replaced the unmediated world: there has remained a complementary relationship between the virtual and the real. In Italy during lockdown, people took to singing and playing musical instruments on their balconies. Their neighbours watched, listened, and sometimes uploaded videos to the internet. And millions of people around the world, some of them sitting on their own balconies—in Paris, or Buenos Aires, or Tokyo—watched those videos of balconies far away. The

sounds and images may have spread via technology, but their attraction was the sense of a more open way of life, a world of engagement outside the borders of any screen.

Yet the inhabitants of Forster's introverted future do seem to have, like us, initially moved into lockdown due to the dangers of the outside world. As a character explains to her nonconformist son: "The surface of the earth is only dust and mud, no life remains on it, and you would need a respirator, or the cold of the outer air would kill you. One dies immediately in the outer air." Even wanting to explore the surface is disapproved of. Leaving the shelter of underground and going outside is, as she says, "contrary to the spirit of the age"(19).

Foster's story is the story of the end of that age. The monotonous, information-fed idleness of humanity falters as the Machine begins to break down. The reasons for the decline are unclear—perhaps it is sabotage, or perhaps simply entropy, that force older even than death—but the results are terminal. Information ceases to flow, the artificial environments collapse, the rooms are split open to the sunlight. At the end of the story, the two main characters, mother and son, come together in a rare moment of physical closeness and talk of the end of this world:

> As he spoke, the whole city was broken like a honeycomb. An air-ship had sailed in through the vomitory into a ruined wharf. It crashed downwards, exploding as it went, rending gallery after gallery with its wings of steel. For a moment they saw the nations of the dead and, before they joined them, scraps of the untainted sky. (85)

It is a strange thing to read a story of apocalypse and compare it, not to possible futures, but to current events: but that is just one of the strange things about 2020. In comparison with Forster's future, and in comparison with the factual and fictional epidemics described by Pepys, Camus, and Poe, 2020 may well appear in a favourable light. As I write this, in late September,

there have been two apparent waves of COVID-19 in Japan: the second wave, largest in cases but smaller in fatalities, is now (apparently) subsiding. It is unclear what comes next. Winter is almost here in Tokyo, at the best of times a season of chills and fevers: will the epidemic find a new lease of life along with them, or will it continue to follow its own new and unpredictable pattern? The story remains unfinished, and we are all still living as part of it.

What the literature of the past gives us, then, is perspective. It may be a misleading perspective, for the events we are living through are not the same as those we find in those stories, diaries, and essays. Many of us may feel we understand Miranda's emotional exhaustion, and some of us may have gained something of the illumination described by Woolf, but we have not yet forsaken the open air for eternal life in underground cells. The mirror of literature reflects many things at once, and the parade of images can dazzle the mind. This, perhaps, is what draws us to the mirror in the first place. We need those perspectives if we hope to keep our balance in the midst of the ever-changing present. When I look out from my balcony now, the clear skies of summer have been replaced by muted cloudscapes: the leaves on the trees are just on the edge of beginning to turn. The future, as always, remains somewhere other than on the page.

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