



The Count

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UNMASKING THE RED
DEATH

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COMPARATIVE
LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Poe's short, sharp story moves with menace along precisely measured lines of space and time and text that take it, in just a few pages, to the end of the world. Specific measurements of space and time convey a sense of inexorable progression, culminating in the universal devastation that follows the final confrontation of the prince with the "pestilence" in person. At the same time, though, the tale introduces other features that work against the plausibility of this evidence and conclusion. This essay seeks to bring out these scattered elements of other possible times and logics: other possible outcomes of the plague.

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What happens in “The Masque of the Red Death”? It is hard to figure that out, whether figuring is imagined as a matter of hard facts or numbers, incontrovertible in their own terms—the tally of who and how many and when—or whether, instead, it is seen as a set of images, how a plague might have felt or been dealt with, somewhere and sometime or other. Both possibilities are there, depending on how you see the story. Such uncertainty, stretched and divided between incompatible types of description, may be the measure of the predicament into which the story casts its (vast) population of characters—and, by extension, its readers. How does it play out in Poe’s brief pages? That is what we are about to explore.

Poe’s narrative seems in one way to be straightforward, but in others entirely perverse: so far out as to be beyond any normal boundaries of credibility. On the straightforward side: at the beginning there is an established state of national crisis. “The Red Death had long devastated the country” (Poe, 299). Efforts are made to mitigate the impact of this. But in the end everyone dies. And on the perverse side: a “pestilence” (Poe, 300) of mythically destructive power gives way to strange modes of pleasure and play in peculiar settings. It is a freak situation, with a freak show—a masked ball—as the central exhibit. A weird uninvited individual shows up at the end of a party, and then the world comes to an end.

What does it all amount to? It would seem that the sense of the simpler version, to begin with that, derives in part from a language of exactitude, with many numerical and abstract specifications. Thus a lockdown of sorts is initiated when the country is “half depopulated” (Poe, 300), a quantified fact that implies an objective culture of census and statistics. Those who are chosen for the prince’s elite confinement number “a thousand” (Poe, 300). Within the exclusive domain where these people are subsequently domiciled, a series of connected rooms is minutely described; “There were seven” (Poe, 300).

Another register of numerical precision emerges when the clock in the seventh of these chambers is given pride of descriptive place at the end of the passage. Quintessentially quantitative, this is an object that both shows (on its face) and sounds (with its chimes) the regulated hourly numbers of human life. But it is here, with this distinctive timepiece, that the story’s strangeness starts to come out. The clock sets going a further stage of numbering, as the story quietly shifts its focus from the spatial to the temporal, pressing on into the unique night of the ball. During this time the chiming and turning of the hours are pointedly marked, as if each such occurrence were heard and received as a disturbing event, rather than as a neutral marker and a reassurance of normal continuities. This charged moment of the change of the hour is told in slow detail within the story no fewer than four separate times. It becomes like a countdown—or a count-up—to the final hour, the “twelve strokes” (Poe, 302). This, the last, is the only one of the four recountings whose number is stated, when the chimes are most and the echoes longest.

At one point the numbers themselves appear to take off into a kind of madness. Amid the description of the clock and its regular movements comes a sudden, delirious multiplication of one hour into all of its smallest separable units, now given as a vast and precise sum total, “three thousand and six hundred seconds of the Time that flies” (Poe, 301). If or when that Time flies, whether as seconds or minutes or hours or months, it is surely far above earthly boundaries, confined neither within nor without the walls of the suite and the abbey itself. Yet at the same time the three thousand and six hundred seconds of the hour amount to no more than a simple fact. Any given hour consists, in the counting of convention, of its sixty minutes (and thus of its sixty times sixty seconds), which are the same as the one before and the one after. That sexagintal system is naturalized as normal temporality; we live in it all the time; we are here in it now, as I write this and as you read it. Yet once called out, as Poe does here, with this sudden and seemingly pointless incursion, the arbitrariness of the scheme is suddenly apparent, in a world where the decimal system is standard. Why units of sixty? Furthermore, at the next level up from the sexagintal seconds and minutes, the hours are part of a different unit again, either dozenly or double dozenly, depending on whether you count twice over from one to twelve, or all the way up to the twenty-four hours of a day. In both cases, apart from the last in the sequence (of twelve or twenty-four), any hour is given as being one more than the previous one, and one less than the one that follows. The hours proceed, mount up, start over.

But then we come to the clash of the two series, or the sleight of the Poe rhetorical hand whereby it can come to seem in the tale as if here and now, for once and for all, the hours (and the minutes and the seconds) do cease, along with the stopping of the words on the page and

the narrator's narrating. Last words (of the story, as written and as told): "And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all" (Poe, 304). The party is over!¹

Along with its surreal expansion, followed by the final shutdown of time, the story shows comparable twists in the commensurate dimension of space. The sequence of the seven open rooms is presented by the narrator as some sort of generic design, an "imperial suite" (Poe, 300). As with the regular arrangement, this particular series has its end, its final room—just as any building, as a building, produces an inside and an outside, a within and a without, in a capsule version of the general setting described for the story's lockdown: "All these [appliances of pleasure] and security were within. Without was the 'Red Death'" (Poe, 300). In reality, as in this narrative, there is a boundary, here clearly marked not only by the advance announcement, before the narrator's guided tour, which is itself before the (account of) the party, that there will be seven rooms to go through, but also because there is a stated direction through the rooms, from east to west. This comes over as a reversal of the traditional orientation of a church, which moves from a western entrance towards an east-facing altar; the stark counter-symbolism attracts attention away from the plainer descriptive features on the ground. In walking us through the set of rooms, one after another, culminating in the last one, Poe gradually makes it seem as if there can only be an ominous end in prospect—not just an ordinary outside wall or a future memory of a great night. And in the final scenes of the party itself, first the intruder and then the prince make their way, all the way, from the first to the final room—as though the venue of the ball, as a place to move through, were coterminous with the midnight curfew time. It has to stop right *there*, in the same way as it has to stop right *then*.

Thus everything in the narrative seems to point towards a definitive end, even though nothing in the reality described does that at all: all buildings have walls and all evenings build up to midnight. By finishing everything off in this way, with his convergences of temporal and spatial destinations, Poe brings about what amounts to a naturalization of the catastrophe narrated—the death of the prince and of all—by way of the familiar unfamiliar reality of the ever-latening hours that fly. By the end, there is nothing. Without explanation, the plague is understood to have taken over—"illimitable dominion"—in spite of the practical endeavour to halt its progress which was the premise of the beginning.

The case of the final hours and the final room is only the first, or the last, of a number of bizarre but persuasive distortions of everyday cultural logic that Poe provides or purveys in the short course of this tale. Another has to do with the trend of the disease from beginning to end. At the start the Red Death is said to have "long" been active and the country to be "half depopulated." A sense of repeated inexorability is produced by a description of the typical symptoms and course of the disease. With Poe's characteristically perverse use of "And," like a biblical portent, the last sentence of the first paragraph sums up: "And the whole seizure, progress and termination of the disease, were the incidents of half an hour" (Poe, 299–300). It is a three-part "whole" in separate acts—beginning, middle, and end. Just as there are no individuals to be seen in a country that is said to be half "depopulated"—any more, for that matter, than there are in one that is half populated—so in this sentence there are neither bodies nor subjects to which, or for whom, the short sequence of "incidents" occurs. Instead, in this formulation it is "the disease" that is granted its brief but effective time, the vital and fatal "half an hour" that goes through a full life history in each case. At the other extreme, there is a striking instance of an anguished vitality that does not belong to a living being: the great clock, with its bawling "lungs" and its "stricken" hours (Poe, 301)—*stricken*, not "struck," as in the normal usage. The disease appears as a living cause of abstract effects on unspecified cases (not shown as people); the clock is like a suffering victim, a dying animal, loud in its cries but breathing its last.

Throughout the story, there is a dearth of individual people. The prince summons those "thousand" associates to accompany him into a private confinement. They are described as his "friends," but in a world without Facebook it is a curious category for such a number, round and vast. All these friends, as if as one, go along with the prince's call to collective retirement. In the same way all are "entertained" (Poe, 300) at the masked ball planned by him and all, implicitly, do as they are told, down to the specifications of the dress code—bizarre but not

¹ Incidentally, isn't midnight a somewhat early hour to be shutting down a party?—like the 10pm closing time for pubs and restaurants summarily introduced in England in September 2020 to combat a new wave of the Covid-19 virus.

too bizarre—which is then found to have been violated by the late, uninvited arrival. At the ball those convened in this way are shown only as pairs, not single bodies or subjects. They are “waltzers” (Poe, 301, 302) who whirl and whirl, until they pause for a short while at the stroke of each new hour: that is their unique and repeated action, like clockwork. Like a single body, they are united by the great clock’s imposition of its hourly regime and their identical response to it. There are also “musicians,” who equally stop what they are doing, with equal corporal cooperation, automatically and regularly, when it comes to the chimes and echoes of the clock. They too are all “constrained to pause” (Poe, 301) by the strangeness of the other sound (the sound of not music); and they also, each time, says the narrator, “looked at each other” (Poe, 301), promising not to repeat what they then do repeat: the same involuntary halt at every hour, and all of them at once.

The only person in the story who is shown as having powers of choice and action is the prince himself, who acts autonomously to control his land and (a selection of) his people. Following the elaboration of the three-part “seizure, progress and termination” of the plague for each body it takes hold of, the next sentence, introducing this personage with blithe and symmetrically triple assurance, informs us that “Prince Prospero was happy and dauntless and sagacious” (Poe, 299–300). He summons the crowd of his choice and convenes them to his special “fête” (Poe, 302); its dress requirements come from him. No one else, and no group or pair, is said in the course of the narrative to do what he does: to make a decision or to create an event.

If there is any other agent to be found in the room or in the story, then it can only be the one who arrives, or is seen to have arrived, at the end, and who is ultimately understood to be the pestilence in person. But as such, he (or it, or they) is not what kills the prince, who falls on his own sword once he has caught up with and confronted this being, in the seventh of the suite of rooms. And this is surely not only the last but the most dramatic of all the story’s covert assimilations or insinuations. Here, at the end of the narrative, at the end of the night, at the end of the rooms, is the Red Death; here, at the same time, in the same place, in the same paragraph, is the death of the prince. Contiguity of plague and person appears to be the cause of death, even though the case is clearly stated otherwise: the prince is not felled by the other but falls on his sword. And all the rest follow suit: “one by one [...] the revellers [...] died each in the despairing posture of his fall” (Poe, 304).

Strange again: the final hours and seconds occur without reference to the general history or situation of the disease, with which the story had begun (“The Red Death had long devastated the country”). They take place, and time, at a party that is organized for one night only, within the prince’s segregated section of the country. The rest of the (remaining) “population,” those who do not belong among the chosen thousand, is discounted—abandoned or ignored, alive or dead, at any rate out of view for the narrative’s duration. It is not accounted for in any way.

The idiosyncratic line or circuit of “The Masque of the Red Death” has much in common with that of another well-known story of Poe’s. “The Man of the Crowd” is equally odd-but-ordinary in its times, and equally stripped down to the putative but peculiar subjectivity of merely two individuals out of a massive group. One of these men obsessively pursues the other through an apparently inexorable sequence of night hours and different urban locations. In “The Masque of the Red Death,” in addition, there is a quasi-doubling of just two figures who are the ones singled out by the story from a large population. Between these two there is an implied correspondence, in specified yards or feet, between the point when the ruler is first confronted by him who “passed within a yard of the Prince’s person” (Poe, 303) to the final moment, shortly afterwards, when he has “approached [...] to within three or four feet of the retreating figure” (Poe, 304).² At both times, in both places, exactly the same measure of separation between the two, with each of them in turn taking the initiative in the distancing from the other.

Given the formal likenesses, it is striking that the end of “The Man of the Crowd” is so different from what happens in “The Masque of the Red Death”. Instead of universal obliteration, there is no change at all. Having followed the other man for twenty-four hours, the narrator finds himself back at the same point in both place and time at which he set off in pursuit of him the day before: once again, he is in front of the same hotel at the same hour. Thus there is simply a return to the where and when of the story’s beginning. Normal life apparently goes on, and the


2 A yard equals three feet.

story itself peters out in its own acknowledgement of indefinite suspension as to whether there may be or have been any meaning or mystery in the first place (and first time): “it cannot be read”, “*er lässt sich nicht lesen*”, the very last words of the tale, themselves enigmatically given (within an English narrative) in German.³

“The Masque of the Red Death” has its own depths of unreadability, of promise and threat that touch on the possible states and futures not just of one man (or one prince), but of all. Working alongside and against the times of the clock, both the cyclical (the round and round of the hands) and the end-stopped (reaching the unique midnight of this one day’s final hour), there are two further temporalities that are different again, two more forms of timely *disconcert*—a rare, rare word, twice used in the story (301, 301). First of all, for all its semblances of the surreal and the quasi-mythical, this plague is time-located in a definite and recent cultural history, marked by an unelaborated but specific allusion, as if well known for the story’s readers, to the provocative *gilet rouge* donned by the poet Théophile Gautier for the first night performance (in Paris, at the prestigious Comédie-Française, in early 1830) of Victor Hugo’s play *Hernani*. This was seen—in all senses—as a key moment in the ongoing struggle between classical and modern (Romantic) conceptions of dramatic representation.⁴ The red event is mentioned in relation to the time of the ball and the blood-bespattered visitor—“what has been since seen in ‘Hernani’” (Poe, 302)—so that *that* event, within the story, is definitely situated in relation to a particular and doubly staged night in the fairly recent real historical past (Poe’s story was published in 1842).

Second, the masked figure of the finale is “like a thief in the night” (Poe, 304) and, therefore, allusively, “like” the one whose future arrival in the New Testament is referenced by that same simile, translated in the same English words from the straightforwardly same Greek words, *ὡς κλεπτης εν νυκτι*:⁵ so that here—or now—the narrative is momentarily transported to a theological time, with the unknowable situation and moment of the second appearance of the Messiah: the *parousia*, or presence. The biblical passage inverts expectations: and Poe draws on that for the undermining of all the half comprehensible coordinates of his own story. It becomes impossible to know the death-dealer from the life-bringer, plague from protection, inside from outside, before from after. Impossible—*er lässt sich nicht lesen*—but also vital to think about why: to try to know where and when and what or who we may be, whether one by one or collectively, in a real time of pestilence and potential global catastrophe.

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3 Poe, ‘The Man of the Crowd’, 91.

4 See, for instance, Brooks, 651.

5 Thessalonians I, 5:2. The same comparison is also made, in a more extended mode, at Matthew 24:43.

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