



Folie des critiques

**SPECIAL COLLECTION:
UNMASKING THE RED
DEATH**

**ARTICLES -
COMPARATIVE
LITERATURE**

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ABSTRACT

There is a certain kind of romantic mindset that regards literature as prophetic. Such a romantic would not be surprised that a text such as Edgar Allan Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" (1842) seemingly anticipates the lockdowns introduced to curtail the Covid-19 pandemic. Not only because, extraordinary as it might appear to us, Covid-19 is a pandemic like any other, but more specifically on account of what Christine "Xine" Yao, in another article in this special issue, has termed the "toxic positivity" of Prospero's masquerade—an attitude that anticipates our own addiction to the pleasures of global capitalism. Yet, if the text "speaks" to our moment, its message is strictly speaking not inherent in the text itself but emerges only in the act of reading that actualises the text in any given present. This article seeks to actualise Poe's text for my own present by integrating it into my work on Percy Bysshe Shelley's and Walter Benjamin's reception of Plato's *Symposium*. This leads me towards the conclusion that criticism, far from being a linear ascent towards ever more knowledge about a text, is a kind of folly: an elaborate edifice of words conceived in madness.

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I.

Edgar Allan Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" (1842) has a particular resonance for a readership that has experienced the Covid-19 lockdown—a quarantine felt uniquely by a generation addicted to *all the appliances of pleasure* provided by global capitalism.¹ Although we know of the horrors without that fuel our consumption within, we live our lives like Prince Prospero's guests, for whom *it was folly to grieve, or to think*. But the extent to which their situation anticipates our own existence under lockdown is not only an immanent feature of the text; it is co-created by the moment in which the text is read. Friedrich Schlegel's observation that a historian is a prophet turned backwards (176) emphasises the reciprocal relation between anachronism and futurity that distinguishes any interpretation of historical materials: we read works of the past for those moments that are prophetic of our present. Walter Benjamin offered the metaphor of a constellation or dialectical image to describe this reciprocal relation between past and present: "For the historical index of the images not only says that they belong to a particular time; it says, above all, that they attain to legibility only at a particular time. And, indeed, this acceding 'to legibility' constitutes a specific critical point in the movement at their interior" (*Arcades Project* 462–3). This critical point is one in which a particular element of the past becomes legible in a particular moment of reading in the present. "This point of explosion", Benjamin continues, "and nothing else, is the death of the *intentio*, which thus coincides with the birth of authentic historical time, the time of truth" (*Arcades Project* 463).

A constellation enables us to recognise the moments of anachronistic futurity contained in works from the past. That this manner of reading is brought about by "the death of the *intentio*" behind the writing will ring familiar to literary critics schooled on Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author", whose definition of a text as "a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (146) accords well with Benjamin's ambition "to develop to the highest degree the art of citing without quotation marks" (*Arcades Project* 458). But in juxtaposing these two statements can we really disregard the difference between Benjamin's and Barthes's intentions? Whereas, for Benjamin, "the death of the *intentio*" is part of an attempt to determine the temporality of truth against the grain of progressivist historiography, for Barthes it heralds the birth of the reader. Arguing that "a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation", Barthes concludes that "there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader [...] the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that *someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted" (148). From this perspective, the prophetic nature of Poe's text is bound up with its intertextual entanglements with other texts that I have read, from the Bible and *The Tempest* to recent newspaper reports about Covid-19. Yet if I, *qua* reader, am without history, biography, and psychology, it is hard to see how I can respond to this text; that is, what is the basis of my interpretation and how do I measure the soundness of its construction? What follows is an attempt to address this question by completely immersing Poe's text into the study of Percy Bysshe Shelley's and Walter Benjamin's respective engagements with Plato's *Symposium* that I was working on one sunny morning when my former PhD supervisor, Tim Beasley-Murray, phoned to invite me to contribute an essay on "The Masque of the Red Death" for a special issue of *Modern Languages Open*. "Sometimes you can see a celestial object better by looking at something else, with it, in the sky", Anne Carson has observed (viii). And so, without any intention of my own, Prospero's masquerade came to throw a new light on my constellation of Shelley, Benjamin, and Plato.

II.

"An understanding of the Platonic view of the relationship of truth and beauty is not just a primary aim in every investigation into the philosophy of art, but it is indispensable to the definition of truth itself", Benjamin states when setting out the philosophical premises for his interpretative method in his study of the German *Trauerspiel* (*Origin* 30). Furthermore: "If truth is described as beautiful, this must be understood in the context of the *Symposium* with its description of the stages of erotic desires" (*Origin* 31). These stages—which Socrates cites from a discourse by the prophetess Diotima—involve a gradual intellectualisation of erotic desire: the

¹ Quotations from "The Masque of the Red Death" are in italics; citation marks and page references are omitted in order to more seamlessly integrate Poe's text into my own writing.

philosopher, etymologically a lover of knowledge, is “proceeding as on steps from the love of one form [σώματα lit. body] to that of two, and from that of two, to that of all forms which are beautiful; and from beautiful forms to beautiful habits and institutions, and from institutions to beautiful doctrines, [until] they arrive at that which is nothing else than the doctrine of supreme beauty in itself” (“Symposium” 159). To be sure, there is no *long and straight vista* from bodily beauty to the Idea of Beauty; rather, much like the chambers of Prospero’s *imperial suite*, the stages in the philosopher’s ascent to knowledge are *so irregularly disposed that the vision embraced but little more than one at a time*. Nonetheless, the philosopher’s ascent proceeds with a *deliberate and stately step*, much like the *mummer who had gone so far as to assume the type of the Red Death* passes through the chambers of Prospero’s suite.

If the Platonic philosopher at length arrives at the contemplation of the Idea of Beauty (which is identical with the Idea of Truth), the mummer’s path terminates in the seventh chamber, where he finds himself in the shadow of a *gigantic clock of ebony*. The sound that emanates *from the brazen lungs of the clock* interrupts two temporal measures that run in parallel through the short story, and that can be mapped onto the two opposite ends of the philosopher’s ascent: at one end, the *dull, heavy, monotonous clang* with which the clock’s *pendulum swung to and fro* and which resembles the “eternally uniform and consistent” Idea of Beauty (“Symposium” 158); at the other end, the music of the orchestra and the *glare and glitter and piquancy and phantasm* of the masque, whose participants flitter about like manifestations of the “idle and unreal shapes attendant on mortality” associated with phenomenal experience in Platonic thought (“Symposium” 159). These two temporalities—of the eternally uniform and of the transitory and mutable—exist side by side and only touch *when the minute-hand made the circuit of the face, and the hour was to be stricken*. Then comes *a sound which was clear and loud and deep and exceedingly musical, but of so peculiar a note and emphasis that, at each lapse of an hour, the musicians of the orchestra were constrained to pause, momentarily, in their performance to harken to the sound; and thus the waltzers perforce ceased their evolutions; and there was a brief disconcert of the whole gay company*. This sound interrupts the phenomenal rhythms of life (the waltz) and the noumenal persistence of Ideas (the pendulum’s clang) and, through this simultaneous interruption, connects them. Acting as a bridge between ceaseless mutability and eternal uniformity—which can also be understood as a metaphor for the relation between the shifting experience of reading and the fixed characters that make up the words on a page—the chiming of the clock captures the nature of critical interpretation. Giving pause to the *giddiest* no less than to the *aged and sedate*, interpretation requires people to stop, think, maybe *pass their hands over their brows as if in confused reverie or meditation* in the face of a text whose words have lain in wait for them, unmoved, for years.

III.

There were 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 in Prospero’s masquerade. *To and fro in the seven chambers there stalked, in fact, a multitude of dreams. And these—the dreams—writhed in and about taking hue from the rooms, and causing the wild music of the orchestra to seem as the echo of their steps*. If we read the masquerading dreams as phenomena, then the elaborate orchestration of how they move through the seven chambers of Prospero’s suite corresponds to what Benjamin would call a concept (*Begriff*). Concepts are distinct from Ideas. Whereas phenomena “determine the scope and content of the concepts which encompass them” (*Origin* 34), Ideas exist in and for themselves, they “are simply given to be reflected upon [*der Betrachtung gegeben*; lit. given to contemplation]” (*Origin* 30). In other words, concepts are shaped by our experience, whereas Ideas exist independently of how or even whether we experience them. Thus, the Idea of Beauty is “supreme beauty itself, simple, pure, uncontaminated with the intermixture of human flesh and colours, and all other; the divine, the original, the supreme, the self consistent, the monoeidic beautiful itself” (“Symposium” 159). In its remove from embodied existence, the Idea is not wholly unlike the Red Death mummer who is *untenanted by any tangible form*—both are available to contemplation (*Betrachtung*), but they cannot be grasped (*begriffen*). The affinity is confirmed by the result of Prospero’s pursuit of the mummer. *He bore aloft a drawn dagger, and had approached, in rapid impetuosity, to within three of four feet of the retreating figure, when the figure turned suddenly and confronted his pursuer. There was a sharp cry—and the dagger dropped gleaming upon the sable carpet,*

upon which, instantly afterwards, fell prostrate in death the Prince Prospero. In his attempt to unmask the mummer, Prospero shares the fate of the protagonist in the parable of Saïs that Benjamin evokes to illustrate the essence of truth:

Truth is an intentionless being, made up of ideas. The proper approach to it is not therefore one of intention and knowledge, but a total immersion and absorption in it. Truth is the death of intention. This, indeed, is just what could be meant by the story of the veiled image at Saïs, the unveiling of which was fatal for whomsoever thought to learn the truth. It is not some enigmatic cruelty in actual meaning which brings this about, but the very nature of truth, in the face of which even the purest fire of the spirit of inquiry is quenched. (*Origin 36*)

So how can writing attain truth? For Benjamin, this will certainly not be achieved by dressing up truth in language like a mummer dresses herself in a costume. Instead, truth can only be “bodied forth in the dance of represented ideas” (*Origin 29*). Ultimately, this means that writing that seeks to capture the truth must do so through its arrangement of concepts, a form of choreographic mimesis through which the dance of words mirrors the dance of Ideas.

The essence of Prospero’s masquerade is found in its total composition and not in its individual actors, who are but *movable embellishments* in the *seven chambers* that are its setting. *There were buffoons, there were improvisatori, there were ballet-dancers, there were musicians, there was Beauty, there was wine.* Diotima claims that all “things are beautiful through a participation” in the Idea of Beauty (“*Symposium*” 158); Prospero’s masque participates in this Idea not as an assemblage of beautiful things but through its total choreography (i.e. dancers + costumes + music + décor). It follows that his *thousand hale and light-hearted friends* are not guests, not audience, but components of Prospero’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Their “total immersion and absorption” in his masterpiece is fulfilled through the peculiar lighting arrangements: *in no one of the seven apartments was there any lamp or candelabrum, amid the profusion of golden ornaments that lay scattered to or fro or depended from the roof. There was no light of any kind emanating from lamp or candle within the suite of chambers.* The suite can be read as an extravagant counterpart to the cave that is the setting of another Platonic parable of the philosopher’s ascent to knowledge. Here the philosopher-to-be is discovered bound with his face towards the wall, watching shadows projected by a fire behind him, mistaking the shadows so produced for true things. The light that *so glaringly illumined* each of Prospero’s chambers is similarly *projected* through a *tall and narrow Gothic window* made of *stained glass whose color varied in accordance with the prevailing hue of the decorations of the chamber into which it opened.* This is a light that is quite literally stained and illusive, adapted to suit the surroundings. It emanates from a *heavy tripod, bearing a brazier of fire* placed in a *closed corridor which pursued the windings of the suite.* The medieval overtones are clear—Gothic arches, mosaic windows, braziers—this light radiates from the so-called “Dark Ages”. In Plato’s version, the steps of contemplation lead the philosopher out of the cave and into the real world illumined by the light of the sun, whose radiance symbolises knowledge and truth. In Poe’s story, in contrast, the path leads to a chamber that is *closely shrouded in black velvet tapestries that hung all over the ceiling and down the walls, falling in heavy folds upon a carpet of the same material and hue* and which has *blood-tinted panes* that produce a light *ghastly in the extreme.* The only person to venture here willingly is the Red Death mummer. As he passes with that *solemn and measured step which had distinguished him from the first, through the blue chamber to the purple—through the purple to the green—through the green to the orange—through this again to the white—and even thence to the violet,* this is not so much an ascent towards Truth and Beauty as a descent into *Darkness and Decay.* Yet, here I am, arguing that this figure embodies Benjamin’s definition of truth as the death of *intentio* and that the *blood-colored* light illuminating the seventh chamber shines on a Platonic realm of Ideas. What folly is this?

IV.

The claim that the Red Death mummer represents the Idea of Truth has little value for an interpretation of Poe’s text. More or less any element in a literary text can be read as a metaphor

representing something else, but this will never get to the truth contained in the work. This truth is to be found “solely and exclusively in an arrangement of concrete elements in the concept: as the configuration of these elements”, Benjamin explains (*Origin 34*). With regard to literature, words are the “concrete elements” or phenomena. “It is the function of concepts to group phenomena together” (*Origin 35*) in which sense, a text—as an arrangement of words—is a concept. A literary criticism oriented towards truth will attain its aims through the configuration of concepts, which is to say, by leading a dance of words cited from diverse texts. The procedure can be modelled on Prospero’s orchestration of *an assembly of phantasms* to realise his *delirious fancies*—which works a charm until it inadvertently summons a figure that *out-Heroded Herod* by going *beyond the bounds of even the prince’s indefinite decorum*. The figure reveals the limit to a man who, in his hubris, thought he had none. And it is precisely in its quality of delimiting the bounds of idiosyncratic propriety that Prospero’s death in the face of his own creation can be read as a cautionary tale for the critic who attempts to seize and unmask the truth captured in her own choreography of words. Although there is no definite limit to what a text can be made to mean when filtered through the medium of her *own eccentric yet august taste*, any critical interpretation has a point at which its *extensive and magnificent structure* risks being revealed as nothing but a folly—an “example of foolishness; a foolish action, error, idea, practice, etc.; a ridiculous thing, an absurdity” and more specifically a “costly structure considered to have shown folly in the builder” (*OED*, *folly*, *n.*¹ 1.c and 5.a).

If this cautionary tale seems a bit strained and somewhat far-fetched, it nonetheless indicates why criticism will fail to convince as long as it approaches texts primarily as the phenomenal costume of some noumenal content. Insofar as the poet does more than simply dress up Ideas in metaphors, the critic should go beyond the supposition that a text means something other than the words on the page—as if Prospero’s *gay and magnificent revel* was just a roundabout way of representing critical interpretation. What my reading achieves more successfully (if I may say so myself) is locating the moment in our pandemic present from which Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death”, Shelley’s translation of Plato’s *Symposium* and Benjamin’s methodological reflections become legible in terms of one another, regardless of any actual historical connections between them. This choreographic configuration is a constellation. “Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars” in Benjamin’s resonant analogy (*Origin 34*). As James McFarland has noted, this implies a manner of reading situated in the present of the reader: “Constellations as such are not ‘out there’ at the edge of the cosmos, they appear to us, from our position, eyes raised, on the surface of the earth” (474). The becoming-legible of a constellation includes both the person viewing it and the time at which it can be seen. Far from being a linear ascent towards ever more knowledge about a text, criticism is best conceived as a prism in which the words that make up a literary work are refracted through the embodied and historically grounded preoccupations of the reading self. The present constellation was conceived in the *deep seclusion* of my rose-clad garden *while the pestilence raged most furiously abroad* and I was working on what I at the time termed the “Love” chapter, which subsequently became the second part of my book *Shelley with Benjamin* (51–94). For me, this constellation performs a minuet in which earnest critique dances with idle folly as a reminder that criticism is also play and serendipity and experiment, that things are not less true because they are fun.

V.

The only historical fact I cared to discover about “The Masque of the Red Death” is that Poe was thirty-three years old when he wrote this text. Incidentally, that is also my age as I write this text. For my birthday, I remember taking pleasure in the symmetry of being 33 in 2020, yet this is set to become a year without time. As the presentations, seminars, dinners, trips, conferences, and holidays that I had planned for the spring and summer were cancelled—at first tentatively, one by one, and then, eventually, in one fell swoop—I developed a morning habit of crossing out what I would have done on that day. As the lockdown progressed, and even this melancholy way of marking the passage of time petered out, the *blood-bedewed* days of my menstruation became the only notation interrupting the unfolding blankness of my calendar. Like the Red Death, my period normally arrives with *sharp pains, and sudden dizziness, and then profuse bleeding*; and, from one perspective, it is a monthly red death, marking the expulsion of another ovum, another child that could have been, but was not, conceived.

“Love is the desire of generation in the beautiful, both with relation to the body and the soul”, says Diotima. “The bodies and the souls of all human beings are alike pregnant with their future progeny” (“Symposium” 153). Just as the attraction to physical beauty is the first rung on the ladder leading towards the Idea of Beauty, so childbirth is in a continuum with the birth of intellectual progeny—one is the corporeal and the other is the intellectual route towards attaining “something immortal in mortality” (“Symposium” 153).

Those whose bodies alone are pregnant with this principle of immortality are attracted by women, seeking through the production of children what they imagine to be happiness and immortality and an enduring remembrance; but they whose souls are far more pregnant than their bodies, conceive and produce that which is more suitable to the soul. What is suitable to the soul? Intelligence, and every other power and excellence of the mind, of which all poets, and all other artists who are creative and inventive, are the authors. (“Symposium” 156)

The *masked ball of the most unusual magnificence* is Prospero’s attempt to *bid defiance to contagion* and mortality by turning life into art (which is to say: beauty and truth). *There are some who would have thought him mad. His followers felt that he was not. It was necessary to hear and see and touch him to be sure that he was not.* “For a poet is indeed a thing ethereally light, winged, and sacred, nor can he compose anything worth calling poetry until he becomes inspired and as it were mad”, Socrates says in the *Ion* (473). Perhaps Prospero’s contagious madness is the *folie* of all creation and in which criticism—in its beauty—also participates.

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