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Book Notes:
Reading in the Time of Coronavirus

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Poetry in a Time of Plague

What is a "plague"?

According to Merriam-Webster.com, a plague is a "*noun*: a disastrous evil or affliction; an epidemic disease causing a high rate of mortality; a cause of irritation; a sudden unwelcome outbreak; a *verb*: to smite, infest, or afflict with or as if with disease, calamity, or natural evil; to cause worry or distress; to disturb or annoy persistently". [1]

Well, with Erie County reporting 5,466 cases of COVID-19 resulting in 78 deaths since the pandemic started in late February, with 2,518 cases still active as of Monday, Nov. 30, [2] with schools and businesses disrupted, with masks becoming a public health necessity, a political football and a fashion statement, and hospitals filling not quite yet to the crisis point but approaching it, I think it fair to say that we have been "disturbed, persistently annoyed", yes, even "afflicted" and "infested" by, if not an "evil", then, at least, "an epidemic disease" causing "irritation" and an "unwelcome break" from life's normal and comforting patterns.

As detailed in a June 11 ***Book Notes***, "Pandemic Prose", available here, this has happened before. In 1918 more than 500 Erieites died from the Spanish Flu – The Great Influenza – even after local leaders had imposed quarantine restrictions. For a variety of reasons – quick, prompt action by local leaders imposing restrictions, mask wearing by responsible citizens, and, of course, vast improvements in medical care, COVID-19, while annoying, does not appear as lethal as 1918's flu. The current 78 deaths project to a total of 104 deaths by March 1, 2021. That number could be significantly higher, however, if the death rate continues to increase, with 24 of Erie County's deaths reported since Nov. 5. [3]

Still, all of that is a quibble. We have been afflicted, infested, by a virus invisible to the naked eye, plaguing us with death and distress. This is not new. This is a recurring theme in human history. Those of us who have lived our lives in the

vaccine-rich 20th and 21th centuries thought we had escaped humanity's ancient scourge of pandemic contagion.

We were wrong.

We now know, if not quite so melodramatically, what Michiel Sweerts imagined in his magnificent, if one can use that word to describe pestilential death, *Plague in An Ancient City*

Michiel Sweerts (1618-1664) Plague in an Ancient City.
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But these are ***Book Notes*** – what did the poets have to say about living in a time of plague?

In his *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius, who we encountered in a ***Book Notes*** on Machiavelli available here, attempted to explain "the nature of things." Lucretius believed there is no creator, no Sky-god ruling all, but that nature simply "is," constantly reinventing itself with two results for humans. One, a positive, is that the lack of direction makes freedom possible; the other, more problematic, is that the lack of direction means events are ultimately out of human control, that the notion of human control is but an instance of human vanity, for whatever nature is doing, human needs and wants are but incidental to it. Lucretius concludes his poem with these lines about the Plague of Athens:

"'Twas such a manner of disease, 'twas such
Mortal miasma in Cecropian lands
Whilom reduced the plains to dead men's bones,
Unpeopled the highways, drained of citizens
The Athenian town." [4]

As Christian W. McMillen says in ***Epidemic Diseases and their Effects on History***: "There is perhaps no longer-lasting historical relationship that that between humans and disease, especially epidemic disease". [5] Historiographical debate about the impact of disease on the course of history is both long and deep and beyond our scope. Those who think humans shape history find it specious; those less vain about humanity's ability to impose its will, or at least its enduring will, upon the course of events find the topic humbling. Lucretius was of the latter camp, for he saw how plague changed the course of history. With Athenian victory still possible, "The Plague of Athens" devastated Athens during the second

year of the Peloponnesian War. It killed a quarter of the population totally disrupting the social order leading to a disregard for laws and religious beliefs and the upending of Athenian democracy. It killed the great Athenian leader Pericles. Athens never recovered and was defeated by the Spartans. Had Athens won, then history goes in one direction; the plague set it in another. [6]

Quarantining from plague was the standard practice since the Venetian's invented the concept in the 14th century. The word means to isolate or set aside for 40 days; the Venetians required ships arriving from infected ports to sit at anchor for 40 days before landing. [7] Boccaccio allegedly wrote ***The Decameron*** while in quarantine and Shakespeare wrote his two long narrative poems and most of his sonnets during one quarantine period and ***King Lear*** during another. Written during one of London's periodic outbreaks of plague – in this context an all-inclusive synonym for poorly understood epidemic outbreaks – Thomas Nashe's *A Litany in Time of Plague* (1593), however, captures the experience of disease from the perspective of the sufferer. Anyone who has ever been seriously ill, whether with a particularly nasty "cold" or something much more egregious, will grasp the images. Son of a parson, Nashe was a staunch defender of the Church of England. His refrain – "Lord, have mercy on us" – resonates the sense of helplessness that, although an epicurean, the more stoic Lucretius resisted.

A Litany in Time of Plague

Adieu, farewell, earth's bliss;
This world uncertain is;
Fond are life's lustful joys;
Death proves them all but toys;
None from his darts can fly;
I am sick, I must die.
  Lord, have mercy on us!

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!

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!

Strength stoops unto the grave,
Worms feed on Hector brave;
Swords may not fight with fate,
Earth still holds open her gate.
"Come, come!" the bells do cry.
I am sick, I must die.
  Lord, have mercy on us!

Wit with his wantonness
Tasteth death's bitterness;
Hell's executioner
Hath no ears for to hear
What vain art can reply.
I am sick, I must die.
   Lord, have mercy on us!

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! [8]

Daughter of a country attorney, Mary Latter was an 18th century English poet, essayist, and playwright. She, alas, did not meet with much success. Living most of her life in Reading, she described herself in the appendix to her ***The Miscellaneous Works, in Prose and Verse, of Mrs. Mary Latter*** as residing "not very far from the market-place, immersed in business and in debt; sometimes madly hoping to gain a competency; sometimes justly fearing dungeons and distress." [9] Amidst her fears, she managed to pen an evocative description of life during a time of plague.

Soliloquy XVI

Now calumnies arise, and black Reproach
Triumphant croaks aloud, and joyful claps
Her raven wing! Insinuations vile
And slanderous spring from pestilential breath,
And tongues thrice dipped in hell. Contagion foul
Steams from th' infernal furnace, hot and fierce,
And spreads th' infectious influence o'er his fame!
Then each unworthy, ignominious fool,
Each female basilisk with forky sting,
And outward-seeming, heart-unmeaning tear
(Offspring most loathsome of Hypocrisy,
The vile, detested, double-damning sin:
Confusion and perdition overwhelm
And blast them, execrable, into ruin!),
Chin-deep in malice shoot their bitter darts
Of mockery and derision: adding, sly,
Th' invidious wink, the mean, contemptuous leer,
And flouting grin, 'emphatically scornful'.
Nor less th' insidious knave, supremely dull!
Mixture of monkey, crocodile and mole,
Yet stupid as the ostrich, ass and owl;
In high redundance of Typhonic rage,
With harsh stentorian tone, disdainful, flings
Unmerited reflections, vehement, long,
Nonsensical and noisy. Vain, he struts
With domineering insolence replete,

And, lordly, tramples on distress in anguish. [10]

Although he ended up freezing to death – literally! – Philip Freneau has been called the "Poet of the American Revolution." Better known as one of Thomas Jefferson's – hmmm, *flunky* is probably too strong a word, so, let's say –*minions*, Freneau edited the ***National Gazette***, Jefferson's newspaper attacking George Washington and the Federalists. Freneau also wrote some very forgettable poetry, including this describing the Yellow Fever outbreak in Philadelphia in 1793:

Pestilence

Hot, dry winds forever blowing,
Dead men to the grave-yards going:
    Constant hearses,
    Funeral verses;
Oh! what plagues—there is no knowing!
Priests retreating from their pulpits!—
Some in caves, and some in cole-pits
    Snugly hiding,
    There abiding
'Till the town is rid of culprits.
Doctors raving and disputing,
Death's pale army still recruiting—
    What a pother
    One with t'other!
Some a-writing, some a-shooting.
Nature's poisons here collected,
Water, earth, and air infected—
    O, what pity,
    Such a City,
Was in such a place erected! [11]

Technically not about living through a plague, Emily Dickinson's*I felt a Funeral, in my Brain* speaks to the emotional numbness when death becomes common.

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading - treading - till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through -
.
And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum -
Kept beating - beating - till I thought
My mind was going numb -
.
And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space - began to toll,
.
As all the Heavens were a Bell,

And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race,
Wrecked, solitary, here -
.
And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down -
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing - then — [12]

Similarly, Christina Rossetti's *The Plague* evokes the horror of contagion as it transforms the living into the dead with little note and no remorse.

The Plague

'Listen, the last stroke of death's noon has struck—
The plague is come,' a gnashing Madman said,
And laid him down straightway upon his bed.
His writhed hands did at the linen pluck;
Then all is over. With a careless chuck
Among his fellows he is cast. How sped
His spirit matters little: many dead
Make men hard-hearted.— 'Place him on the truck.
Go forth into the burial-ground and find
Room at so much a pitful for so many.
One thing is to be done; one thing is clear:
Keep thou back from the hot unwholesome wind,
That it infect not thee.' Say, is there any
Who mourneth for the multitude dead here? [13]

More positive, and definitely more contemporary, are these two selections from the ***Best American Poetry 2020*** blog edited by Paisley Rekdal, series editor David Lehman. They are both by Hilton Obenzinger, author of numerous books of and on poetry. He notes about himself on his website "Born in 1947 in Brooklyn, raised in Queens, and graduating Columbia University in 1969, he has taught on the Yurok Indian Reservation, operated a community printing press in San Francisco's Mission District, co-edited a publication devoted to Middle East peace, worked as a commercial writer and instructional designer, taught writing, comedy, and American literature at Stanford University". [14] Here is his

Flatten the Curve: a plague poem

How heroic are the grocery clerks
And the fast-food fry cooks
How brave are the ordinary workers
And the priests wandering through empty churches
How courageous are UPS drivers who risk their lives
How stoic are the cashiers and the bus drivers
And there's no way to thank them all
All will be well once we unbend the horizon
I weep when I see a happy baby
Blissful and unaware that the Angel of Death
Is trying to erase the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel
How tender are the smiles of life
How wonderful the professional calm of nurses

How sublime the persistence of doctors
How moving the faces of anxious waiting
How close we are in our distance
I want to use big words for such big feelings
But the words keep getting smaller and smaller
Flatten the curve and rise up [15]

A week earlier, echoing Christopher Marlowe's *The Passionate Shepherd to His Love's* first line – "Come live with me and be my love/And we will all the pleasures prove," Obenzinger had this offering about social distancing during a time of pandemic:

Our Social Distance

Stay away and be my love
We're so close together when we're so far apart
I take solitary walks with multitudes
I talk to myself but mostly I hear your voice
We follow each other at a distance
Songs ring down empty dark Italian streets
Windows of all the apartments fill with harmonies
Woody Guthrie is already singing the Rambling Virus Blues
Bach has written a new version of the Corona Variations
I can hear music winding through all the avenues
But there's no guitar and no piano in sight
We're all alone with each other
Keep your distance and make happy sex
Dance with each other in different continents
Everyone can be magnanimous and fart
And what our neighbors don't know won't hurt them
Let me be kind to you by way of the Internet
Swimming through our brains
All alone we can open our doors
Yet keep far away from each other
As far as any of us can spit
So keep your distance and be close
Speak splendid poems and deeper wit
Stay away and be my love [16]

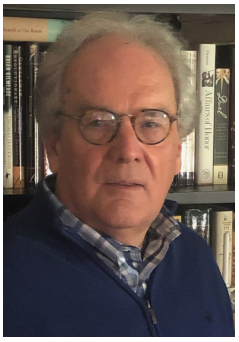
Let's end this excursion into Pandemic Poetry by parting on an aspirational note. As ***The Daily Kos*** reported "the following poem by Laura Kelly Fanucci has been shared over 85,000 times since she first posted it on Facebook. Fanucci lives in Minnesota and is Program Director of the Communities of Calling Initiative. She writes a syndicated column, *Faith at Home,* published in Catholic newspapers nationwide. She has also written six books. She says, 'The words came to me in the middle of the night. Our youngest child is only 3 weeks old so I'm up with him at all hours. Everything feels darker and more frightening at night, so I started wondering what small good I could offer to people as a writer. Since then, it took on a life of its own. I've simply been sitting back and watching. Hoping it offers people some hope and comfort in such an anxious time.'" [17]

When This Is Over

When this is over, may we never again take for granted
A handshake with a stranger
Full shelves at the store
Conversations with neighbors
A crowded theater
Friday night out
The taste of communion
A routine checkup
The school rush each morning
Coffee with a friend
The stadium roaring
Each deep breath
A boring Tuesday
Life itself.
When this ends
may we find
that we have become
more like the people
we wanted to be
we were called to be
we hoped to be
and may we stay
that way — better
for each other
because of the worst. [18]

So, sheltering in place from today's plague, watching the local news for COVID updates – infection rates and climbing deaths, school closings, and what to do about Christmas – and wandering will this ever end, hunt out some more poetry, for in many ways, the poets show us the now and help us through it with their literary precision, and remember this quote from Mary Oliver: "If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy, don't hesitate. Give into it."

Peace – and remember to wear your mask and social distance!



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End Notes

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3. Ibid.
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Happy Thanksgiving! Be Grateful for Hale, Child, too written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Andrew Roth**

Brenda Pundt Made Mark as City Controller written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Judith Lynch**

West Fourth Street Music Scene written by prolific author, historian, and Jefferson presenter, **Dr. David Frew**.