

Pandemic Positives

F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote to fellow writer, Sheilah Graham, “That is the beauty of all literature. You discover that your longings are universal longings, that you’re not lonely and isolated from anyone. You belong.”¹ This is the resounding truth that I have discovered over this period. That there is unity in isolation. That the human experience, although defined by individual circumstance, is more united than divided. We all experience this lifetime in a finite number of ways. In seeing this time of uncertainty directly reflected in the writings of those who have never experienced anything remotely similar clarified this universality to me. That is why Jane Austen and William Shakespeare still infiltrate literature courses today. Past and present; male and female; Romantic and Utilitarian. There is no need for dichotomy and boundary in literature, nor in life. As simple as it may sound, this pandemic has allowed me to read more. When I found out about the cancellation of my GCSE exams, I felt my world was grinding to an adamant halt, like it was screeching past, a missed train that I was feebly chasing down. My world became an inaccessible space of chaos, so naturally I searched for an alternative. I found quiet in the worlds of others. Virginia Woolf, Donna Tartt, Oscar Wilde. This year has led me to some of my favourite authors and for that I can be nothing but grateful. As Fitzgerald states, I found that my longings were universal longings. Literature is contained chaos. A world as vibrant and intense as your own that you can enter and leave as you wish.

As the daughter of an antiquarian book dealer, literature has always been a part of my life, guiding me through life milestones. Every novel is a state of mind, being, existence. My father’s profession is not one of extensive profit. He read economics at university, in his parents desperate attempt to funnel him in to the acceptable career of banking, so naturally he opened a book shop. With a limited online presence and the restrictions on travel, as well as uncertainty around government support for small businesses, lockdown was a time of financial unease. My father missed his shop. It was a tangible presence throughout our home. A festering yearning for the cramped room of walls lined with bookcases, the overpowering scent of aged novels and the bustle of Bloomsbury. So at home we did what we could. I rather unsuccessfully attempted to set up a Twitter account for the shop, and we all started thinking about ideas for the future. Focusing purely on possibility rather than restriction gave us purpose during this time, a sense of action. Utility seeped into our household running: We reformed our ‘Brexit bunker’ of microwavable meals and toothpaste into our ‘Covid-19 bunker’ and converted our kitchen table into a table tennis table. We began to focus more on the things we have and the people around us. We learnt the beauty of the mundane. Systems of regularity and repetition need only innovation and perspective to become an experience.

In Virginia Woolf’s essay, *A Room of One’s Own*, she argues that “a woman must have money and a room of one’s own to write fiction”². Unlike many this year, I was fortunate enough to have access to both these requirements, so I did as Woolf advised: I began writing fiction. I make no claim for the writing that I produced, but it illuminated yet another truth to me: the vitality of creation. Life is a process of creation. We forge our actions, our personalities. We create each other. Yeats argues that:

Life is a journey up a spiral staircase; as we grow older we cover the ground covered before, only higher up; as we look down the winding stair below us we measure our progress by the number of places where we were but no longer are. The journey is both repetitious and progressive; we go both round and upward.

¹ Recounted in: Graham Sheila and Gerold Franc, 1959, *Beloved Infidel: The Education of a Woman*, Book Club Publishers

² Woolf, Virginia, 2019, *A Room of One’s Own*, Penguin Books, London

I would agree. There is a roundness to life in its routines and patterns. Although I would argue that there are chances to rupture the pattern, to expand the circle. To do so we must create. In creating we find an extension in our world, perhaps, even a gateway to another. We are able to reach feats of no boundary. During lockdown, I felt whispers in my ear urging me: "Find your art. Embrace it with the entirety of your being. Let it consume you." So I did my best, let the process of fiction wash over me and just allow myself to write without judgement.

Certainty in the future had diminished. Society bares the the scars of the pandemic. But society has always been dented, corrupted by subtle evils. Looking forwards we must hold on to what we know. New truths and old truths, public and personal truths, spoken and unspoken truths. My new truth is this: Life will always hold inspiration. The silent muses of the people around us and ourselves. Art will always exist, even if we are stripped of all that we thought fundamental to our existence. In the ability to think freely and fully we create. This is the beauty of the human condition and what I hope never to forget. The pandemic will stay with us, a resounding tragedy, as so many of the tragedies before us have remained, infiltrating the air. We breath in these past sorrows, we let them shape us and the world around us. As memories of the events of 2020 and 2021 fade into obscurity, they too will form the culture and people of the future. Yet through this all, art will prevail continuing to make the world wider.