

# What Is It that Makes You Tremble?

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‘**W**hat is it that makes you tremble?’<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida poses this question to discuss the vulnerability that we fear. We see vulnerability as a form of powerlessness, but this fear itself shows our desire to be alive. As Laurence Simmons writes, ‘life entails an openness to alterity and event, which is also an openness to the possibility of an instant death and destruction.’<sup>2</sup> The answer to Derrida’s question seems to be on the tip of every person’s tongue today. It is in the look of the person sat opposite you on the tube line. It is in the barista’s eye when they hand you your coffee. It is in the flicker of your own eyes on yet another Zoom call. The human body, contact, and touch all seem so far away from our present, a present that keeps continuing. The year 2020 played out as a much less comical version of Murray’s *Groundhog Day*. I have found myself ‘Walking round Tavistock Square’, as Woolf did, with only the changing of leaves to tell me the time. But Derrida writes that trembling itself is an example of catachresis, or using language against itself. ‘Death too, is an image of catachresis, a term embodying what is unnameable because we cannot experience it as such, and fiction, in turn is a way of figuring that void.’<sup>3</sup> Therefore, I have turned to literature as the future appears to be on standby whereas the past seems wider and deeper than ever. Through literature I have found that the theme of contagion exists not only in much of our reality today, but also in the reality of centuries ago. The similarity that connects experiences over time is how we use language to describe it or evade it.

Language has always been a means of contact but now it is our only means. Although I cannot touch you, through words I can feel you. As Roland Barthes said, ‘Language is a skin: I rub my language against the other. It is as if I had words instead of fingers, or fingers at the tip of my words. My language trembles with desire.’<sup>4</sup> Language holds meanings that make us tremble: the verbs ‘to isolate’, ‘to distance’, ‘to quarantine’, ‘to live’, and ‘to die’ now each hold a different meaning, perhaps one of more personal significance. Our language describes our experience, it describes our distance from one another. Barthes

suggests that we touch the world through language. We desire to touch each other and therefore literature is a way to summon the body from the untouchable. To read a text is to read a body. It is a body of words but, nonetheless, it is a body. It has a spine, a front and a back. Both a text and a body are inscribed with memories of a past, a past that is desired to be touched and to be returned to. Nostalgia is the greatest contagion of them all.

If language structures our existence, it poses an obstacle for where we desire to travel to, both in memory and in reality. The word remains a mark on the page, both literally and metaphorically a mark we cannot get past. Language is, then, both a barrier and a stepping stone in the boundaries of time, between past and present, present and future. The history of literature proves that the century we inhabit is not the first to experience this kind of distancing. The sixteenth century, for example, experienced a plague; in 1593, 15,000 people died in the city of London, which was one tenth of the English population at the time. As a result, Renaissance literature dwells on the themes of the body, touch and contact. Christopher Marlowe’s poem *Hero and Leander* is a clear representation of this. The poem relays the Greek myth of two lovers living in cities divided by the Hellespont river. Leander swims across the river each night to catch a glimpse of the one he desires most. But the journey brings up obstacles which interrupt the meeting. The poem attempts to reach a climax, a climax both plot-driven and sexual, between the two lovers, but it does not and cannot succeed.

The tension between the fear of and need for touch was therefore topical then as it is now. The poem revolves around the transition of desire to touch. The narrative strives towards the meeting of two bodies, at a time when touch made the general public tremble with fear. But in any poetic narrative, there must be a struggle, an obstacle, or a wall in between the two lovers in order to create tension. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Pyramus and Thisbe erotically speak through a ‘kink’ in the wall, and in Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo and Juliet*, the lovers speak through the glass of a fish tank. In *Hero and Leander*, the lovers are separated by the depths of water, in an extended instance of the Greek motif *paraclausithyron*. *Paraclausithyron* is usually translated as ‘lament beside a door’, meaning that it places a lover outside the door of his mistress. The lover remains trapped outside, unable to reach what he desires. *Hero and Leander*, then, narrates the hopeless aspiration to immediacy, the desire to bring oneself into close contact.

1 Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death and Literature in Secret* (second edn, David Willis tr, University of Chicago Press) 54

2 Laurence Simmons, “Comment Ne Pas Trembler?” Derrida’s Earthquake.’ (2013) 42(3) SubStance 28, 32.

3 *ibid* 35.

4 Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments* (first published 1977, Richard Howard tr, Vintage 2002) 73.

Marlowe narrates that Leander is pushing through the water, through the *paraclausithyron*, to reach what he yearns for: 'Wide open stood the door ... / And she herself ... had spread the board with roses ...'<sup>5</sup> Hero is there and waiting, but he cannot reach her. He can see that which he desires, but the act of describing it fails to bring it any closer towards him. The poetry itself is pushing through the boundary. Marlowe therefore displays language as the *paraclausithyron*. The words 'herself', 'almost', and 'but' are mere reminders of what Leander cannot achieve because of his own failings and, ultimately, his own condition of isolation. There are dreams of 'he' and 'she' 'touch(ing)', but ultimately the poem leads us back to self-referential pronouns, such as 'she herself'. Back to self-enclosure, to self-isolation. Leander even asserts, 'My words shall be as spotless as my youth, / Full of simplicity and naked truth'.<sup>6</sup> But they are anything but. We desire a language that is not artificial, but we cannot escape its boundaries. The 'roses', symbolic of the female genitalia, offer a glimpse of Leander's own desires. The door is wide open, but he cannot move. Language paralyzes him.

Marlowe implies not only that we use language to gain closer contact with one another, but also that language comes directly from our inward desires—our thoughts become manifest in our speech. The lines 'Therefore even as an index to a book, / So to his mind was young Leander's look', allegorise the idea that what Leander thinks becomes what he sees.<sup>7</sup> The two are inseparable, like an index and a book. Thus, what he thinks becomes the language that he speaks. Likewise, Hero becomes an object of his language. She becomes the object of his very thoughts, as of the reader's. In a sense, then, language precedes their real consummation. Leander's language and gaze has penetrated Hero's body. Additionally, in the lines 'immortal fingers did imprint / That heavenly path', the reader is provided with the image of Leander's fingers 'imprint[ing]' the 'path' he desires to take—both literally across the wide expanse of water, and more metaphorically to Hero's genitalia.<sup>8</sup> It is interesting to note the verb 'imprint', and in particular the prefix '*im-*', which calls us back to other verbs, such as 'impress', synonymous with 'to influence.' It is also possible that language not only describes Hero but inscribes itself onto her. Language comes to define her identity. In this sense, the poem becomes a tragedy on her behalf, where touch was fatal to a woman's status and value.

Today, language can be fatal to anyone's status. Language internalises external government regulation and engenders a collective governmentality. We come to internalise this language and it thus becomes the very thing we fear. It is the matter which stands in between the subject and object, between the signified and signifier. Language, then, not only describes our social distance but also distances us from one another. It seeps into culture, society, and politics. For example, our current Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, constantly evades the ongoing pandemic in his words. Through language, we attempt to find the truth, but there is no centre, there is no truth to uncover. Johnson says of lockdown that 'it is like a nuclear deterrent.' Hero and Leander surrender to their own lustful desires and thus destroy themselves. Johnson's simile seems to suggest that we assure our own destruction if we too surrender. But, according to Johnson, it is also 'the narrow path (that) we have to tread'. This metaphor suggests how we are teetering on a boundary, for very few mistakes can be made. Language itself verges on the boundary, as

our very words tremble with our fear. Johnson told us 'that we can turn the tide'—that like Leander, we can attempt to push through this stasis, through this stagnant time, and create some dynamism and move toward contact. But language lies in the way, the double entendre displaying language's duality. It is both an aid and an impediment. The conjunction 'like' itself suggests that we cannot know, that we cannot describe or ascribe meaning to our current state. Instead, we are stuck in a limbo state of mere wandering.

Even Marlowe deploys these literary obstacles for the reader. Jones asserts that, although Marlowe does not use the word in *Hero and Leander*, 'plague hovers menacingly in its margins'.<sup>9</sup> The structure of the poem prevents the very meeting Leander desires. Marlowe repeatedly refers to classical and Greek mythology, as in 'The way to new Elysium',<sup>10</sup> 'Than for the fire filched by Prometheus',<sup>11</sup> and 'Yet there with Sisyphus he toiled in vain'.<sup>12</sup> Literary allusions throughout obstruct the relation between the reader and text. They become objects rather than words. 'Elysium' is a place of ideal happiness inhabited by the blessed dead in Greek mythology.<sup>13</sup> It is therefore interesting that Marlowe chooses to create a 'new' one. Leander is striving for a place of perfect happiness, a place he believes is with, or perhaps even inside, Hero. Our utopia is intertwined with the body. However, the allusion to 'Sisyphus' is significant as he 'was condemned to Hades and made to roll a stone uphill forever'.<sup>14</sup> We are Sisyphus, unable to reach the climax of the poem, and unable to reach the end of this pandemic. Uncertainty is like a disease bleeding into our language. Marlowe prevents progress of chronological time through this back-and-forth motion, mirroring the very waves Leander fights against. Our reading experience then becomes that of our reality. Language makes us tremble, because it reminds us of our present. Marlowe evades the topic of the plague and yet, in doing so, he discusses it. In using language, one cannot escape its plague. Its transmission is just as deadly, for its speechlessness is given a voice.

Adam Islip, the printer of the original published poem, stated that Marlowe's version is an 'unfinished tragedy'. It may seem 'unfinished', or at least to cut off abruptly, if one agrees with the interpretation that Leander prematurely ejaculates. The finishing point that both Leander and the reader crave is not permitted by the poet. Dreams of intimacy and touch are cut short both literally and metaphorically. The last line inscribed in Latin, 'Desunt Nonnulla', translates to 'something is missing' or 'something is lacking', summarising this incapability of touching what one desires the most.<sup>15</sup> The poem then informs us how time is a continuum. Like the 'tide', we cannot control it. It rushes on, moving forward and backward, creating some kind of whirlpool around us. Meanwhile, we find ourselves stuck in stasis. The year 2020 was left unfinished. Relationships lacked touch, intimacy was missed, maybe life was abruptly stopped.

Language, then, defines our experience. It is how we interact with the world and reality and how we describe change. But, since there is no change, no future proposing itself, are we forced to go back to the past? Not only does our language describe social distancing, its very words also distance us from each other. The government imposes guilt, responsibility, and conformity on the individual, urging us

5 Christopher Marlowe, 'Hero and Leander' (first published 1598) in Margaret Ferguson, Tim Kendall, and Mary Jo Slater (eds), *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* (sixth edn, 2018) First Sestiad 207–08.

6 *ibid* Second Sestiad 129–30.

7 *ibid* First Sestiad 67–68.

8 *ibid* First Sestiad 54.

9 *ibid* First Sestiad 411; Katherine Duncan-Jones, *Ungentle Shakespeare: Scenes from His Life* (The Arden Shakespeare 2001).

10 Marlowe (n 5) First Sestiad 439.

11 *ibid* Second Sestiad 277.

12 *ibid* Second Sestiad 259.

13 *ibid* Second Sestiad 266.

14 Christopher Marlowe, *The Complete Poems and Translations* (Stephen Orgel ed, Penguin Classics 2007).

15 *ibid*.

to 'Act like you have it' and proposing that if we 'Stay home' we can 'Save lives'. But the pronoun 'it' again separates us by its very meaning. The sibilance between 'stay' and 'save' propels us further into a condition of stasis. It places emphasis on our own moral responsibility. The words follow one each other, leaving us behind in the past. The phrases exemplify how language communicates and perhaps even structures our social distance. Therefore, beneath this simple affirmation is a realm of complexity and questionability. It holds as much ambiguity as Descartes' phrase 'cogito ergo sum' ('I think, therefore I am'). It asks us to seal off from the external and move to the internal. But where do we go? Where do we go when we cannot move forward? The answer is literature.

Literature provides momentum, it provides perspective. It is no 'narrow path' but a broad spectrum of experiences. The present is a mere echo of the past. The present is born out of the past. Like Marlowe's allusions, echo is like a stark figure on the page. It is a shadow across the lines. But the next page is blank—unwritten and uncertain. So, we look to literature, to language, to our past for answers. We desire to move back to a time where things were more certain, back to a time when language made us tremble not with fear but with feeling, with desire, and with love. Because language—the word on the page, the whisper between two bodies—is all we have left.