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A Tale of Two Competing Pandemic Experiences

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Abstract

How does a teacher and scholar react to a pandemic? One might ask fifteen people that question and get fifteen different answers. In this paper, I outline my own experience with COVID-19 and how I managed to use the situation to focus on my research, despite tremendous institutional and professional difficulties.

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. Being an academic is not easy, even when a pandemic is not around to ravage an already difficult job market; being specialized in medieval English literature within French academia only tends to make things worse. When this particular crisis hit us, we found ourselves locked down and thus deprived of the ability to physically escape the daily consequences of this crisis. Whereas Boccaccio's characters found a way to flee the plague in the Tuscan countryside, we ended up locked in our homes in fear of another sort of scourge.

So how does a teacher and scholar deal with this situation? I am convinced you might ask fifteen people that question and get fifteen different answers. In France, the *confinement* started in March of 2020 and I found myself in a surprisingly awkward situation. Most of my colleagues throughout the world had the pleasure of having teaching responsibilities and of being able to share the fruit of their labour with students—I was not. I had been working for a few years in a private school (in Grenoble, France), teaching business English to future bankers and sales representatives, but the situation had gradually become unbearable. Teaching had become impossible for me mainly because of an unsupportive management and seemingly endless harassment. By December 2019, I was teaching two different groups in two different rooms (fortunately in the same building) in the same time slot, thus basically doing the task of two teachers. It was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness. Some friends and colleagues have praised my productivity in the past, but I am yet to master the art of ubiquity. By January 2020, I was on sick leave as my health had deteriorated because of my work conditions; between February and May, I was forced to legally fight my employers to be freed from my contract as the mere thought of going back to that school gave me nightmares. In other words, when COVID-19 truly hit France and forced us to work from home, I was technically no longer 'working'. If you set aside the hours spent fighting my employer, I had all the time in the world to focus on my research, namely editing a new bilingual edition of Geoffrey Chaucer's work. It was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.

In effect, time seemed to have stopped, leaving me with literally nothing to do but translate the words written centuries ago by a poet I have long admired and who helped me get through the COVID crisis, just as poetry helped Boccaccio's *brigata*. During the three months of this first French lockdown (I write these words in the midst of the second), I managed to finish the first of five volumes of my new bilingual Chaucer, with nine months to spare. My publisher was, as you can imagine, ecstatic. During the following months (May to December) I finished correcting the proofs of a book published by De Gruyter and MIP in October and edited a collection of essays for Routledge.

Yet, this apparently positive outcome was balanced by isolation, the sustained harassment from my employer and the necessity to find a new university—various hard blows. I had been a research fellow at the Université Grenoble Alpes for six years when the head of my research unit told me to be gone by September 2020. I had never been paid a cent for my research—which had nonetheless boosted the statistics of my team and accordingly increased their government funding—and despite my numerous job applications I was systematically refused teaching jobs. In the end, colleagues told me I had effectively been sacked for being too productive as a scholar while the rest of them were overwhelmed by a staggering amount of administrative work—quite ironic when you think about it. We had everything before us, we had nothing before us. The lockdown was made even more

harrowing by my need to find a new academic affiliation to welcome my modest contribution to the field of medieval studies.

In addition to my ongoing quest to find a new university, access to my local university library—still the one in Grenoble—remained impossible during the year’s crisis (I blame university policies). I have been systematically refused access to documents, even though I am still duly registered at the library because I am considered an ‘outsider’. I was feeling increasingly isolated, not so much as a human being—I was fortunately locked in with my girlfriend and two cats—but as a scholar. 2020 was meant to be my ‘jubilee’, celebrating ten years as an academic with three international conferences in Durham (UK), Oxford, and Moscow, plus a few others in France. But as spring turned into summer, all these conferences were postponed one by one and it soon became clear that the year I had been expecting and planning for would turn out to be quite different. We were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way. Missing conferences and the thrills of intellectual arguments was one thing, but the most powerful absence for me was missing the friends that I only get to see at those events.

So how does a scholar deal with a pandemic like COVID-19? In my case, by working, writing as if my life depended on it. Many days, I felt it did. As Charles Dickens would put it, some of the noisiest authorities of the time insist on our period being received for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only. It turns out that the only way I can make sense of this period is by comparing the positives and the negatives and acknowledging the period’s paradoxical nature. I was thrilled to be able to spend so many hours a day writing, it was indeed the best of times. Yet it was also the worst of times. I became increasingly productive while being struck by a professional anxiety I had never experienced before and the obvious financial difficulties that usually come with it. I ended up broke, incapable of borrowing books (not to mention buying any!), harassed by my employer, sacked by my university and cut off from my friends and colleagues. But I had the one thing that has always sustained me: academia.