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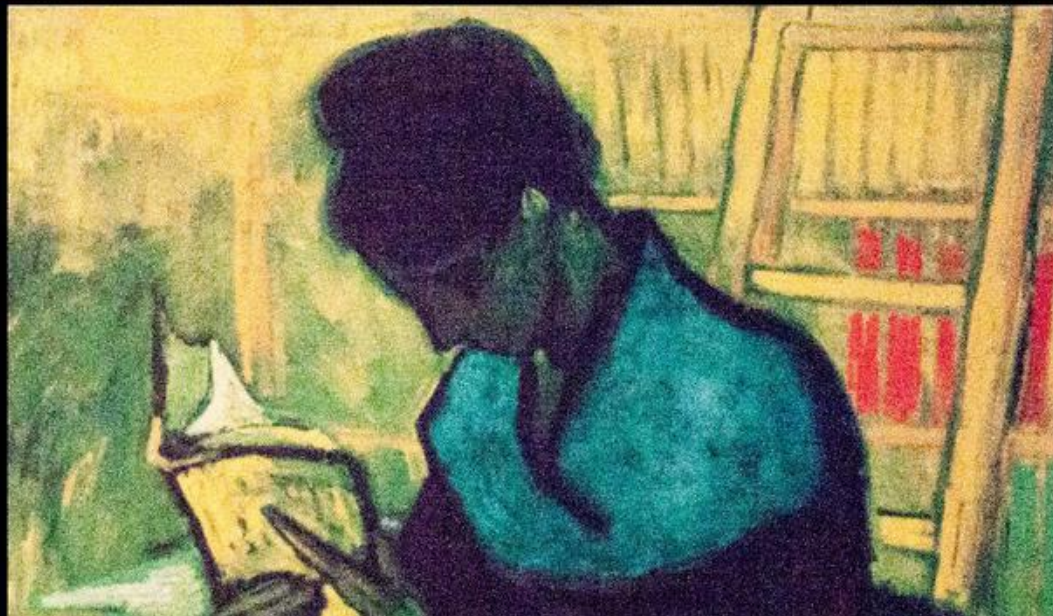
CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

A brief literary companion to solitude in modern classics for the self-isolated reader

How to self-quarantine yourself into a sealed world of words.

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5 hours ago





'The Novel Reader', by Vincent Van Gogh

So little is known about Shakespeare that there are perhaps as many biographies of him as there are biographers. Scholars often read back into his life from either his plays or other extant reports of 16th century London life. One such was Columbia English professor James Shapiro's powerful study: *The Year of the Lear: Shakespeare in 1606*, which has resurfaced recently.

Why? Because 1606 was *also* the year of the plague. Shapiro writes: "We know a great deal more about how a rodent-borne visitation in 1606 altered the contours of Shakespeare's professional life..." Shakespeare, it is understood, interned himself during the lockdown of London stages and wrote, hold your breath *Macbeth*, *King Lear* and *Anthony and Cleopatra*. Surely, isolation has never been more fecund.

Who will grudge the fact that two of Shakespeare's greatest studies of power and frailty – *Macbeth* and *King Lear* – were as if birthed in his isolation from the world? "The prince of darkness is a gentleman", Edgar ponders in *King Lear*, to which, as if, Macbeth retorts, "Come, seeling night,/ Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day,/And with thy bloody and invisible hand/Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond/Which keeps me pale!"

Yet, Shakespeare's greatest study of social isolationism – *Hamlet* (1603) – was behind him in 1606; isolationism embossed in those famous lines which begins by conceding, "what a piece of work is man" but ends with deep, sublime cynicism – "yet, to me", is but "quintessence of dust".

Hamlet in the 20th century

In modern European literature, Hamlet seems to have become *a* motif of recurrent, subliminal ennui. Not unusual, given that the founding giants of literary modernity in Europe – Schiller, Goethe, Nietzsche and Freud – have been preoccupied with him. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *The*

Sorrows of Young Werther (1774) can as well be read as the perambulations of a young Hamlet.

“Not reflection, no – true knowledge, the insight into the horrible truth, outweighs any motive for action, both in Hamlet and in the *Dionysian Man*,” writes Nietzsche in *Birth of Tragedy*. Hamlet’s inaction, ponders Nietzsche, is not a sign of his weakness or even of sorrow but of too much intelligence, an *excess* of insight.

To that end, it won’t be untenable to consider several great works of literature in modern Europe as the *fiction of isolation*, a kind of sequestering from the world at large, a self-quarantine into a sealed world of words. Is this a European symptom? Why, is Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) not about the *long duree* of segregation in remote Columbia? Is not GV Desani’s *All About H Hatterr* (1948) a quirky, tongue-in-cheek utterance to belong? Is not Ralph Ellison’s *An Invisible Man* (1952) about the desertion of black people? Of course they are.

And yet, it is Europe where the acute alienation of man – under no apparent historical indignation – becomes all the more telling, making this form of isolation close to being an existentialist muddle *of an individual* rather than that of ideas, politics, protest and persuasion. To that end, Albert Camus’s *The Plague* (1947) cannot be part of any imagined list of this kind of fiction, it being a political allegory about how fascism fells everyone – turn by turn – more by stealth than force.

Same for the extraordinary literary multiverse of Leo Tolstoy, Marcel Proust, Mikhail Bulgakov, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Robert Musil, Italo Zvevo, Alfred Doblin, Stefan Zweig, Dorris Lessing, Witold Gombrowicz, Italo Calvino, Curzio Malaparte, Georges Perec, Clarice Lispector, Milan Kundera and Michel Houellebecq (among others). Theirs were – and are – literature of ideas and hence cannot be forged into this list. They are for another day.

Notes from Dostoevsky

The vastness of the Russian landscape gives any literature of isolation from that country a palpable topographical tangibility, as if the interminable land is a haptic stage for the desolation of human life to unfold, something that Shakespearean director Grigori Kozintsev mined, twice, in his cinema versions of *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. We see the same in Boris Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago* (1957) and Vassily Grossman’s *Life and Fate* (completed 1960) in spectacularly epic proportions, but nowhere is the individual more isolated from a system than in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* (1864).

All of Dostoevsky's grand inquiries about life can unsettle the most wearied of readers, but nowhere is he more devastating than in this uncompromising, sordid, wilful self-mockery – which *The New Yorker* called “the fictional confession of a spiteful modern Hamlet”. In that [2012 essay](#), David Denby says that the underground man's opinions “were inseparable, like all opinion, from personal strengths and weakness, even personal pathology.”

Among the book's numerous progeny of pathological talking heads was that greatest of inspirations, Albert Camus's *The Fall* (1956). Opposite of Dostoevsky's unnamed reactionary sophisticate in *Notes* was Ivan, Alexander Solzhenitsyn's unlikely, Gulag-trapped simpleton in the eponymous *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962). In this breakout novella from Soviet Union's most famous post-Stalin literary dissident, the Gulag became immortalised not just as a physically debilitating Siberian hellhole but also as a mythic station for one to be forcefully sent for lifelong isolation, a physical estrangement matched only, if at all, by Mistah Kurtz losing himself to the wilderness of Congo in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899).

Close to the unnamed narrator of Dostoevsky is also the barely-named, troubled wanderer of Knut Hamsun's *Hunger* (1890), which is both a coming-of-age tale and that of the inexplicable cruelty and alienation of life in the modern metropolis, something that became the *raison d'être* of modern writing. Hence, Hamsun's cold, Scandinavian Oslo becomes glittering Paris in Rainer Maria Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910), the German poet's only work of fiction.

Apprenticed in Paris thanks to a commissioned work with sculptor August Rodin, Rilke let his fictional alter-ego roam the french capital like a disenchanted *flâneur*, alternately stupefied and isolated by the casual malady of everyday life. If there was ever a true heir of Brigge, it surely was Bernardo Soares - the magical antibody of the real Fernando Pessoa.

Pessoa led an obscure life in Lisbon – modernity's distant hinterland – and to sequester himself from the trials of his clerical drudgery, took refuge under seventy-two heteronyms, several of which had parallel lives like him. Soares was his umbrage for *Book of Disquiet* – a quiet, meandering but dulcet speculation on modern life by a reclusive clerk, written in short, sharp vignettes as entries in a diary. Never published in his lifetime, the book has been only recently (editions of 2002, 2010, 2019) solemnised as one having genuine modernist genes.

Kafka and after

Like Pessoa, Prague-born Franz Kafka had an utterly, inviolably insignificant life, letting loose in fiction the ferocity of his imagination, most memorably consecrated in *Metamorphosis* (1915) – the scariest indictment of the modern family. Gregor Samsa's transformation into a bug, described with frightening minutia, is at the end of the day, about his irrevocable and excruciating isolation from everything he felt attached to.

But he still felt a sense of longing nevertheless, a prospect that is summarily withheld from Meursault in Albert Camus's *The Outsider* (1942). He is the most iconic of strangers in modern fiction – an animal of habit and hormones – whose godless, banal survivalist instinct is misconstrued as taunts of an ungrudging, pitiless, devil-may-care, *agent provocateur*.

A literary successor to Meursault is another one of similar persuasion and name – Marcello Clerici, the cynical, bored, cunning adjudicator of Fascist nihilism in Alberto Moravia's *The Conformist* (1951), who sets on a lonely mission to avenge his teenage rebellion against a defrocked priest on all things resolutely Italian.

Camus's *The Outsider* was, in some ways, a literary threshold – a kind of climax of what the *man* would look like in the mirror of modernity. What was left was to explore were the extremes of time and history or even the limits of the race.

German modernist Herman Broch's *Death of Virgil* (1945), often eulogised as the one genuine advancement of fiction since Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), is a profound, hallucinatory, monologue of the talismanic Roman poet, who on the verge of death, feels himself tottering, lonesome, at the precipice of his period and under a singular, unutterable sense of an ending.

Such a sense of an ending also stalks Jacques Austerlitz in WG Sebald's dreamily bleak and defiantly genre-bending *Austerlitz* (2001). If Broch's Virgil is hoarding the past against the inevitable butchery of the future, Sebald's Jacques is hoarding the felt agony of Holocaust against the slaughter of forgetfulness. Both of them are acutely, painfully, irreconcilably lonely in their epic pursuits against the monstrous ministrations of time itself.

Finally and expectantly, Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris* (1961) bends time itself *in* space, invoking Einsteinian *spacetime* into one continuous human consciousness, which finally relents to the unbearable *weightlessness* of our solitude in the whole of the universe. The rest, as Hamlet would say, is dust.

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