



The Horrifying Real at the Mountains of Madness (Part I)

A Response to [Jamieson's 'Rethinking the Hard Path of Education as We Emerge from Covid-19'](#)

Nicholas Stock*

The mountain or the summit is a troubling metaphor for education, or more precisely as in [Victoria Jamieson's post](#), for schooling. As I have claimed before, the desire to 'aspire to ascend' (Stock, 2021: 152) towards light is a problematic logic that plagues the symbolic order of

education – the symbolic order for Lacan (2006: 12) being the linguistic formation that gives shape and structure to reality or ‘the Real’ (235). Such logic causes us to rush in educational endeavors and miss the importance of the darkness at the so-called bottom; it upholds a myth of education moving us from ignorance to knowledge, or more broadly, to redemption. Jamieson takes aim more specifically at the status of schooling in the contemporary moment and its futile drive towards catch-up (as critiqued in [my previous post](#)), noting how this upholds the logic of aiming towards light. For Jamieson, students must not try and climb the mountain; they must strive to be-with the mountain and overcome the urge to accelerate to the light at the peak. In considering this symbolic structure in the Lacanian tradition, however, one might wonder whether this overlooks the ‘Real’ darkness, and consequently what lurks *within* the mountains that students might be-with.

My proposal to dwell in the darkness (Stock, 2021: 154) rather than hasten towards the mythical light at the top threatens to explode the horizon of the educational symbolic order, though this is rarely seen in educational thinking. In considering the commonly held ‘topology of the mountain’ that students are thrown into every day, a peak with an

upwards path that can be ignored but ultimately still remains, we might see how darkness does not exist at the foot of the mountain but rather *beneath* it. Indeed, if we are asking students to be-with the mountain, what *is* this place? I contend that by considering schooling as a mountain that students should take slowly and contemplatively, we must see how the mountain is not any old peak, but rather one of Lovecraft's 'Mountains of Madness' (2018).

Lovecraft's is a tale we should take heed of. *At the Mountains of Madness* recounts the expedition of Dr William Dyer and his group of explorers to Antarctica. Their geological search takes them to an undiscovered mountain range, and they do not ascend but go *within*. This journey is one plagued by true darkness, as their descent into 'the black abyss' (Lovecraft, 2018: 109) is haunted by a 'hateful, pallid mist' (112). Dyer and his companion Danforth uncover the remains of an ancient civilization that existed long before humans – the Elder Things – who built their vast settlement assisted by the formless creature of the shoggoth. They see 'fallen masonry' and cower 'from the oppressive nearness and dwarfing height of omnipresent crumbling and pitted walls' (60). Amidst this eerie and ancient stone city, a place where the

‘symbolic structures which made sense of the monuments have rotted away’ (Fisher 2016: 63), both narrator and reader are unable to properly comprehend it; we encounter the horror of the *breakdown* of the symbolic order. The stability of the world the explorers thought they knew is thrown into turmoil, compounded by their pursuit from the necropolis by a shoggoth that still lurks amongst the ruins:

Formless protoplasm able to mock and reflect all forms and organs and processes—viscous agglutinations of bubbling cells—rubbery fifteen-foot spheroids infinitely plastic and ductile—slaves of suggestion, builders of cities... (Lovecraft, 2018: 110).

This confrontation represents an encounter with the Lacanian Real: the shoggoth ‘are something impossible to describe, which escapes language because [of] its own frightening unknown nature’ (Luque, 2013: 189). Dyer’s attempt to impose order and meaning onto the beast only results in describing it as a shapeshifting monstrosity – it is always out of linguistic grasp. Even as Dyer and Danforth are chased away to the chorus of its ‘eldritch, mocking cry’ (Lovecraft, 2018: 117), they cannot rationalize nor understand it. They try and capture its

sound in their own tongue, a sound that Danforth remains haunted by forever more:

At the time his shrieks were confined to the repetition of a single mad word of all too obvious source:

“Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!” (123)

But even this is an attempt to symbolize the horrifying Real. Lovecraft’s tale is a portent to those of us that attempt to impose the symbolic order on the mountain, and an omen that some horror lurks beneath. Thus, if we are to perhaps consider that the mountains of madness might metaphorize the school as the peak does in conventional educational discourse, what does this mean for the students that Jamieson asks to be-with the mountain? In a future post, I shall take us deeper into the mountains and confront the crumbling architecture and the formless shoggoth to navigate breakdown of the symbolic order.

References

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***Nicholas Stock** recently completed his PhD, which he received from the University of Birmingham. He is a lecturer of English Literature in a sixth form college. He is interested in ironic approaches to education, particularly those that embrace literature, media or poststructuralism, and in radical educational ontologies.



Website: <https://ironisteducator.wordpress.com/>

Twitter: @89stock