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# **A ROMANTIC VISION OF MILLENARIAN DISEASE: PLACING AND DISPLACING DEATH IN MARY SHELLEY'S *THE LAST MAN***

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The main topic of this paper is unfortunately fashionable in the context of the *fin de siècle* and millenarianism we are experiencing now in the last years of the twentieth century. Every time the end of a century approaches, there is a sense of uncertainty and uneasiness, the atavistic anthropological seed of our ancestors' belief in an apocalyptic end of the world. I say "unfortunately" because at the end of this protean century new viruses are appearing: new plagues—like the Ebola—co-existing with the older ones—like AIDS—all of them menacing our Western comfort and security. For, as Susan Sontag clearly adduced in her study *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1988), plagues are always conceived of as "other," alien and foreign. This is one of our means of displacing death: death is even worse when it is not "ours," when it does not originally belong to our community. The literary sub-genre known as "plague literature"—including literary classics like Hesiod, Thucydides, Lucretius, Procopius, Boccaccio, Daniel Defoe, Albert Camus, Karel Capek, Michael Ende—deals mostly with "difference" from this perspective, therefore contemplating the plague as the ultimate "other."

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Plague literature written in English is relatively prolific, from Thomas Dekker's *The Wonderful Year* (1603) to, say, Poe's parable "The Masque of the Red Death" (1842). The best example is Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, published in 1722, an *a posteriori* account of the terrible plague of 1665 and its effects in London, then the incipient metropolis of a capitalist Empire. This work (an interesting blending of journalism, fiction and history) provides, in my opinion, the main intertextual source for the images of the plague appearing in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, begun in 1824 and published two years later, a narrative which was eclipsed by the Frankenstein myth and other canonical works and has been systematically excluded from the study of plague literature. This novel—as Anne K. Mellor has described (1989, introd. 1993)—constitutes a pessimistic and dystopian vision, projected from a peculiarly Romantic perspective, of the limits of language, history and art as human inventions and illusions. The book deals with the terror-laden possibility of the human race being exterminated from the face of the earth, and the meaningless fate of the last man, Lionel Verney, the only survivor to the plague, in this situation of utter desolation and despair.

Our main concern here is not with biographical details and other textual and critical possibilities—investigated by Audrey A. Fisch, Barbara Johnson, Morton D. Paley (1993), Anne K. Mellor (1989) and Emily Sunstein (1989)—but rather with a study of the symbolic power and metaphorical referentiality of the plague in *The Last Man* as connected with the representation of death. A comparison between this Romantic dystopia and Defoe's *Journal* in terms of plague imagery will undoubtedly throw some light on the different ways of placing and displacing death in the two works, separated by a century. The fact that Shelley's narrative is set in the last years of the twenty-first century is not arbitrary: it locates the disease within the parameters of the ancestral and atavistic terror of the *fin de siècle*, for human history—according to the prophecy of the Cumaean Sybil at the beginning of the novel—will come to an end in 2100, the year of Lionel Verney's death.

In an interesting intertextual development, Mary Shelley refers to prior examples of plague literature, including Defoe's *Journal*:

Does the reader wish to hear of the pest-houses, where death is the comforter—of the mournful passage of the death-cart—of the insensibility of the worthless, and the anguish of the loving heart—of harrowing shrieks and silence dire—of the variety of disease, desertion, famine, despair, and death? There are many books which can feed the appetite craving for these things; let them turn to the accounts of Boccaccio, De Foe, and Browne. (*LM* 193)

By remitting the reader to other more specific and explicit works on plagues, the writer avoids a definite description of an ineffable event which has to remain in the realm of the "unsaid," of the "other," in order to produce a terrifying picture. Like Frankenstein's monster—a term commonly applied to the plague—the elusive illness defies clear representation. The plague frightens because of its indeterminacy in semantic, scientific and rhetorical terms, aspects that Boccaccio, Defoe and Browne try to cope with, despite their limited knowledge of epidemiological factors.

Curiously enough, the plague appears for the first time comparatively late in the narrative (in Chapter I, Volume Two). This may be because Mary Shelley feels it necessary to describe in detail the state of chaos which leads to the disaster, a chaos which impregnates all the layers of human political, social, historical and gender conceptualizations. The reader's first impression is based on the narrator's metalinguistic allusion to the term *plague*:

One word, in truth, had alarmed her (Perdita) more than battles or sieges, during which she trusted Raymond's high command would exempt him from danger. That word, as yet it was not more to her, was PLAGUE. This enemy to the human race had begun early in June to raise its serpent-head on the shores of the Nile; parts of Asia, not usually subject to this evil, were infected. It was in Constantinople; but as each year that city experienced a like visitation, small attention was paid to those accounts which declared more people to have died there already, than usually made up the accustomed prey of the whole of the hotter months.<sup>1</sup>

Merely thinking about the word—significantly emphasized in the written text by the use of capital letters—despite Perdita's lack of a referent for it, turns its conceptual associations into something more terrible than battles or sieges, which are man-made catastrophes.<sup>2</sup> The terror suggested by the word is linked to the recurrent use of various euphemisms for the disease ("visitation" in this passage). As in the case of H.F., the not very reliable narrator of Defoe's *Journal*, there is no possibility of coping with the lethal attack from a conceptual and literal perspective, the illness becoming thus linguistically "other" and eluding the characters in the book when trying to express their experience of it. In semantic terms, the plague is an agent: it completely transforms human life. But its non-human characteristics entail the linguistic reification of the disease from a pronominal perspective, the sickness becoming IT, a lethally active but unseen cause of unwanted

metamorphoses which convert the body into the ultimate alien. The plague can only be described from the point of view of its effects, because it rejects any other attempt at representation in a linguistic framework.

It is a common feature to writers of "plague literature" that, when dealing with the disease, they suggest rather than say. After the eradication of mankind at the end of the novel, the only certainty left to the reader is that the plague has been the fatal instrument of death, the only utterly unavoidable event in the lives of all those human beings. As Morton D. Paley (1993) puts it, death appears "only as a personification," first in the description of a picture showing the following scene:

All the inhabitants of earth were drawn out in fear to stand the encounter of Death. The feeble and decrepit fled; the warriors retreated, though they threatened even in flight. Wolves and lions, and various monsters of the desert roared against him, while the grim Unreality hovered shaking his spectral dart, a solitary but invincible assailant. (*LM* 139; qtd. by Paley)

Verney describes Death later as "rising from his subterranean vault, girt with power, with dark banner flying." As Paley emphasizes, Death "never crosses the threshold from personification to literal being. This makes its effects more rather than less mysterious" (1993: 119-120).

In contrast with H.F.'s religious and moral fortitude at the end of *A Journal*, the problem in Mary Shelley's dystopian book is that even death seems to be meaningless, for no transcendental value is ascribed to the concept. The writer focuses on the frightening immediacy of the *here* and *now*: there is no future, and no hope for the afterlife is provided. As a matter of fact, the only religious feelings in the book are associated with fanaticism, another means of generating disorder and chaos.

The plague is seen in the fragment quoted above as the great enemy, and like Milton's Satan—a Hebrew word meaning precisely "the enemy"—it is metaphorically depicted as "serpent-head." The use of this epithet places the role of the plague in *The Last Man* within an apocalyptic parameter, for the book contains both the beginning and the end—the *alpha* and the *omega*—of human history. The millenarian background of the story is reinforced by the images of inexorable destruction caused by the plague. As in Defoe's *Journal*—and also as a matter of scientific fact—the disease increases its deadly virulence in summertime. The contrast between summer and winter recurs throughout the narrative, providing a *chiaroscuro* effect of the type

found earlier in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, where the symbolism of fire and ice was more explicitly conveyed.

The causes of the plague are never clear: no scientific explanation is provided—systematic data about the plague dates from 1894, with the discovery of the bacillus which causes it, the *Yersinia pestis*. However, its geographical origin is emphasized in *The Last Man*: it appears “on the shores of the Nile.” Several associations can be deduced from this location; first of all, there is the Biblical connotation of the Ten Plagues of Egypt as described in Exodus. Of significance, too, is the classical tradition which described the “spontaneous generation” of life on the banks of the Nile, as in Alexander Pope's *Essay on Criticism*. But, more relevantly to this paper, as the feature of “otherness” is hinted at, the plague comes from “an-other” continent, Africa—supposedly the land from where AIDS, Ebola and other contemporary diseases are being transmitted, according to the Western interpretation, and possibly Verney's goal at the end of the novel. Although Egypt was the site of one of the most influential and prosperous of ancient Mediterranean civilizations, the cultural model is rejected by Mary Shelley in favour of the classical European tradition: the hieroglyphs are replaced by the writings of Greece and Rome, the literary cradles of the Western—and consequently European—modes of writing, including the Cumaean Sybil's prophecies and Verney's apocalyptic account. For this is a metaliterary book, which contains fragmented and scattered embryos of the history of European literature. Verney significantly carries with him the works of Homer and Shakespeare on his final pilgrimage.

Little by little, the fearful itinerary of the plague places and displaces death in geographical terms, moving from the sphere of otherness to the domains of the Western World, embodied in England. From the shores of the Nile, the plague is transmitted to the liminal setting of Constantinople (*LM* 136), the capital of the Turkish Empire, the crossroads in the middle of Asia and Europe. Turkey means for Lionel Verney, as it did for H.F., the narrator of Defoe's *Journal*, a locus of radical difference which has to be “purged” and then assimilated to the European model. Raymond, the *alter ego* of Lord Byron in the novel, wishes “to eradicate from Europe a power which, while every other nation advanced in civilization, stood still, a monument of antique barbarism” (*LM* 127). Verney also shares with H.F. his “awakening curiosity,” a feature which will make them perfect witnesses and experiencers of the disaster, surviving in the end its deadly attack.

Lionel's premonitory dream about the plague as “a gigantic phantom, bearing on its brow the sign of pestilence” (*LM* 146) becomes tragically true.

Western Europe is then the last territory to suffer the consequences of the disease, which, as is commonly the case, comes from “somewhere else.” Contagion spreads from the East (*LM* 162), promptly devastating Thrace and Athens. In a fragmentary way, the narrator tells us that the plague appears in South America, once again a site of otherness and difference (*LM* 168)—the place where Frankenstein’s creature, a metaphorical reminder of the plague for Victor, would tentatively settle with the female monster. The Mediterranean countries soon suffer the effects of the disease, which at the same time spreads throughout the United States and reaches Ireland. In the wake of crowds of Italian and Spaniards, the Americans—former British Crown subjects—and the Irish, in an attempt to avoid the destructive effects of the plague, migrate to England (*LM* 171). A cruel war, followed by the definitive outbreak of the disease, spreads to London. The situation contains clear connotations of an ideological nature: it is the ultimate nightmare of the post-colonial world, a context in which, once again, Mary Shelley subconsciously plays the role of an ignored Cassandra: the colonies will “invade” the Metropolis and the site of the Empire, producing an ironical inversion that the Western World today, in our millenarian context, is very much aware of. Moreover, commerce and trade increase the risk of contagion, in which case the colonial system becomes doubly dangerous: a source of richness and prosperity that bring with them now the possibility of utter annihilation. When the plague stalks London—descriptions at this point resemble Defoe’s source—Verney’s lament reflects the hopeless inevitability of an event which, despite the many attempts at restoring law and order, cannot be stopped:

The plague was in London! Fools that we were not long ago to have foreseen this. We wept over the ruin of the boundless continents of the east, and the desolation of the western world; while we fancied that the little channel between our island and the rest of the earth was to preserve us alive among the dead. (*LM* 179-180)

England’s insularity proves valueless. *The Last Man* shares with Defoe’s *Journal* the obsession for control and order. When the origins and the scientific causes of a plague remain completely unexplained, human beings fantasize about and tend to create an ideological illusion of order, control and authority, as if our desire to remain untouched by the disease were enough to eradicate its physical consequences. As the plague is conceived of as “disorder,” communities threatened by it tend to delude themselves into thinking they can escape from it and evade disaster by imposing a strict

discipline in their lives. Michel Foucault (1977) wrote perceptively on those measures as signs of the carceral nature of our society, the dream of a disciplined community which creates the utopia of health by excluding otherness and difference. *The Last Man* coincides with Defoe's and Foucault's descriptions of a community in danger of contagion adopting an illusory order. Like H.F., Verney emphasizes England's supremacy using the language of discipline:

The cleanliness, habits of order, and the manner in which our cities were built, were all in our favour. . . . If manly courage and resistance can save us, we will be saved. We will fight the enemy to the last. Plague shall not find us a ready prey; we will dispute every inch of ground; and, by methodical and inflexible laws, pile invincible barriers to the progress of our foe. Perhaps in no part of the world has she met with so systematic and determined an opposition. Perhaps no country is naturally so well protected against our invader; nor has nature anywhere been so well assisted by the hand of man. . . . Remember that cleanliness, sobriety, and even good-humour and benevolence, are our best medicines. (*LM* 178)

Unlike Defoe's narrative but anticipating Foucault's ideas, *The Last Man* focuses on the fact that the plague—death—is ultimately inescapable, and Verney's illusory words mean nothing when the reader reaches the fatal *dénouement* of the novel.

Adrian's attempts at safeguarding control and order, culminating in Verney's scrupulous discipline even when alone at the end of the book (*LM* 338), are meaningless, for his measures show Mary Shelley's total rejection in this narrative of any political and philosophical system, especially Burke's, Godwin's and Percy Shelley's visions of perfectibility, amelioration and belief in human progress. The plague (death) is, paradoxically, the only "democratic event," very much in the millenarian and *fin de siècle* fashion of the medieval *danses macabres*. Like Defoe's *Journal*, *The Last Man* presents death as the only means of achieving social levelling (*LM* 198, 223...). Mary Shelley goes one step further: no human being except Verney (temporarily) escapes from the plague or a hubristic death.

Thus, the idealized picture of the English "welfare state" on page 76, with the futuristic claim that "disease was to be banished," is cruelly shattered by an enemy, a monster of natural origins which exterminates the proud human race. There is no remedy for the disease, and nature—in contrast with the nurturing mother described in *Frankenstein* (Mellor

1989)—is absolutely inexorable and remains indifferent to human sufferings. This is probably the reason why Mary significantly changes the anaphoric IT for the feminine pronoun *she* when referring to the plague in the passage above, associating it/her with a natural female principle. Mary Shelley may be seen here as a forerunner of the contemporary scientific theories about the earth as Gaia (Lovelock 1979, 1988), that living organism always in flux in a very Heraclitean fashion, a dynamic “being” which was there before man appeared, and will perhaps remain after the human race is extinguished. In this novel the earth is metaphorically tired of irresponsible progress and unfair social, political and gender relationships among her human inhabitants, even if moral implications are blurred. It is undoubtedly appropriate, from the point of view of realizing Mary Shelley’s ethical purpose, that animals are not infected with the disease (*LM* 200). In effect, a dog is Verney’s only companion at the end of the book. This is the futuristic sign of an ecological “poetic justice” (the anachronism should be forgiven).

It is significant that the plague is accompanied by other natural catastrophes, catalysts of nature’s hubristic and vengeful powers: a black sun, a furious wind—very different from Wordsworth’s and Percy Shelley’s sources of inspiration—(*LM* 166), floods (*LM* 194), and, above all, the superbly described catastrophes taking place in apocalyptic Dover, illuminated by “three other suns” (*LM* 270). The intertextual links with *King Lear* seem obvious.

Again in contrast with Defoe and other writers of “plague literature,” Mary Shelley widens the spatial parameter: instead of an enclosed and segmented space, she introduces an ample choice of geographical locations—theoretically speaking, the whole world—in order to show up the limitations of human resources when it comes to trying to avoid the lethal spectre of the plague. The factual and allegorical pilgrimage of the now dwindling number of human beings, desirous as they are to re-construct the history of our race (*LM* 226), is hopeless, and consequently past and future have no meaning whatsoever, just like all human illusions and inventions. Literature, culture, art... disappear with the last representative of the human race. Music provides a relevant instance in this respect, as the most sublime art form according to the romantic aesthetic. Music will leave no trace of its existence the moment the last player, or the last listener, dies. Verney’s feelings when listening to Weber’s “wild eastern air” become prophetic: “Ye are all going to die, I thought; already your tomb is built up around you. . . . Not one of you, O! fated crowd, can escape—not one! not my own ones! not my Idris and her babes! Horror and misery!” (*LM* 173-4). Later on in the narrative, a chorister



ironically dies while interpreting a song, his death mocking Verney's earlier reflections identifying "heaven-winged music" with a means of "commun(ing) with the Supreme." However, the most ironical and painful episode in *The Last Man* is the moment when Verney and his fragmented "family" hear the echoes of Haydn's "New-Created World," played by a blind musician and his daughter—the counterparts of De Lacey and his daughter in *Frankenstein* (Mellor 1989). Since characters like these are the embodiment of the ideal bourgeois family for Mary Shelley, their instantaneous death while playing this music on the organ destroys Verney's romantic and exalted words:

Music—the language of the immortals, disclosed to us as testimony of their existence—music, "silver key of the fountain of tears," child of love, soother of grief, inspirer of heroism and radiant thoughts, O music, in this our desolation we had forgotten thee! (*LM* 306).

For music, like literature and other human creations, does not exist outside human referentiality. What is the use of our artistic works when no one is capable of perceiving them or endowing them with meaning? This is the fearful and pessimistic lesson that Mary Shelley wants the reader to learn, and in writing *The Last Man* she becomes a forerunner of Derrida's theory of deconstruction, as Anne Mellor and other critics have argued. The destruction of human language entails the destruction of human life, for "all conceptions of human history, all ideologies, are grounded on metaphors or tropes which have no referent or authority outside of language" (Mellor 1993: xxi-xxii). Verney's grim fate is similar to that of Robinson Crusoe—one of the comparisons used by Mary Shelley at the end of the novel—but the protagonist of *The Last Man* is utterly without hope. He is even more wretched than Frankenstein's monster, for, unlike the latter, Verney has enjoyed friendship, love and social relationships. He will have to go on living without any human company, writing a meaningless book for no one to read, fictionally speaking.

As a corollary, *The Last Man* offers a pessimistic romantic interpretation—different from other creative works dealing with the topic of "the last man" contemporary with Mary Shelley's narrative—drawing attention to the limits of human history, science and art when facing a plague of unknown origin and with no known cure, apparently caused by man's (and woman's) irresponsible behaviour. For our age of millenarian malaise and *fin de siècle* viruses and plagues like AIDS and Ebola, a highly relevant lesson of the novel might be that Verney reaches salvation by embracing "a negro

half clad, writhing under the agony of disease” (*LM* 245). Although he later on contracts the disease, this random act of holding a black man—significantly, the only black man to appear in the book—turns him into a survivor. Does Mary Shelley seem to imply that admitting and accepting “otherness” is the only viable future for the human race? However ambiguous the passage appears to be, the writer is concerned with this specific instant of unwitting solidarity which provides Lionel Verney with one means of “displacing” death, and incidentally points to a form of moral behaviour which might constitute one of the few hopes for the future.<sup>a</sup>

## NOTES

1. Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*. Ed. Hugh J. Luke, Jr., introd. Anne K. Mellor. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1993. All parenthetical references hereafter are to this edition (abbreviated as *LM*).

2. Later, Verney will not be able to pronounce the frightening word: “My beloved friends were alarmed—nay, they expressed their alarm so anxiously, that I dared not pronounce the word *plague*, that hovered on my lips, lest they should construe my perturbed looks into a symptom, and see infection in my languor” (*LM* 174).

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