STUDIA UBB PHILOLOGIA, LXVI, 3, 2021, p. 201 - 218
(RECOMMENDED CITATION)
DOI:10.24193/subbphilo.2021.3.13

EPIDEMIC AS METAPHOR: THE ALLEGORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF EPIDEMIC ACCOUNTS IN LITERATURE

MOHAMMED NASER HASSOON[1]

ABSTRACT. ***Epidemic as Metaphor: The Allegorical Significance of Epidemic Accounts in Literature.*** Our paper searches for those common elements in selected literary representations of the plagues that have affected humanity. As a theoretical framework for our research, we have considered the contributions of Peta Michell, who equals pandemic with contagion and sees it as a metaphor; Susan Sontag views illness as a punishment or a sign, the subject of a metaphorization. Christa Jansohn sees the pest as a metaphor for an extreme form of collective calamity. For René Girard, the medical plague is a metaphor for the social plague, and Gilles Deleuze thinks that fabulation is a "health enterprise." From the vast library of the pandemic, we have selected examples from Antiquity to the 19th century: Thucydides, Lucretius, Boccaccio, Daniel Defoe, Mary Shelley, Edgar Allan Poe, and Jack London. For Camus, the plague is an allegory of evil, oppression and war. Our paper explores the lessons learned from these texts, irrespective of their degree of factuality or fictionality, pointing out how the plague is used metaphorically and allegorically to reveal a more profound truth about different societies and humanity.

Keywords: *epidemic, plague, The Decameron* (Boccaccio), *A Journal of the Plague Year* (Daniel Defoe), *King Pest* (Edgar Allan Poe)*, The Last Man* (Mary Shelley), *The Nature of Things* (Lucretius), *The Plague* (Albert Camus), *The Scarlet Plague* (Jack London)*, The War of the Peloponnesians* (Thucydides)

[1] **Dr. Mohammed Naser HASSOON** obtained his PhD in English from the University of Craiova, Romania (2018), with a dissertation on „The writer's quest for identity: the multifold dimensions of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*", which he published as *The Arab Moby-Dick: Bridging the Gap between Cultures* (Craiova, Universitaria, 2019). He has an MA in English from "Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada" University in Aurangabad, India (2014), and a BA in English from the College of Education for Humanities of the University of Thi Qar, in Al-Nasiriyah, Iraq (1997). He attended a number of conferences where he contributed the results of his research, and published articles in academic journals and volumes in Romania and the UK. Dr. Mohammed Naser Hassoon is a lecturer in English at the University of Thi-Qar, in Nassiriyah, Iraq, where he teaches English and American literature.
Email: mhassoon959@gmail.com; mohammednaser@utq.edu.iq

REZUMAT. ***Epidemia ca metaforă: semnificaţia alegorică a relatării epidemiilor în literatură.*** Lucrarea noastră caută acele elemente comune în reprezentări literare selectate ale epidemiilor care au afectat omenirea. Drept cadru teoretic pentru cercetarea noastră, am luat în considerare contribuțiile lui Peta Michell, care echivalează pandemia cu contagiunea și o vede ca pe o metaforă; Susan Sontag consideră boala ca fiind o pedeapsă sau un semn, subiectul unei metaforizări. Christa Jansohn vede epidemia ca metaforă a unei forme extreme de calamitate colectivă. Pentru René Girard, ciuma medicală este o metaforă a ciumei sociale, iar Gilles Deleuze crede că fabulația este o „întreprindere de sănătate". Din vasta bibliotecă a pandemiei, am selectat exemple din Antichitate până în secolul al XIX-lea: Tucidide, Lucreţiu, Boccaccio, Daniel Defoe, Mary Shelley, Edgar Allan Poe şi Jack London. Pentru Camus, ciuma este o alegorie a răului, a asupririi și a războiului. Lucrarea noastră explorează lecţiile învăţate din aceste texte, indiferent de gradul de factualitate sau ficționalitate, subliniind modul în care pandemia este utilizată metaforic și alegoric pentru a dezvălui un adevăr mai profund despre diferite societăţi și umanitate.

Cuvinte-cheie: *epidemie, ciumă, Decameronul* (Boccaccio), *Jurnal din anul ciumei* (Daniel Defoe), *Regele ciumă* (Edgar Allan Poe)*, Ultimul om* (Mary Shelley), *Despre natura lucrurilor* (Lucretius), *Ciuma* (Albert Camus), *Ciuma stacojie* (Jack London)*, Războiul Peloponesiac* (Tucidide)

1. Allegory and metaphor: framing the pandemic

The way an epidemic is viewed at each historical stage reflects not only the worldview of the author who chose it as a literary pretext, but also, to a certain extent, Der Zeitgeist, the spirit of the time with which the writer identifies. What literature favors, when dealing with epidemics and other scourges, is not the search for a hypothetical vaccine, but rather the singular conjunction of an "agency" between the devastating impact of the scourge and actions carried out against it, often unsuccessful but sometimes crowned with success, and of a field, of a territory, "local" first, then more and more "global", thus joining the march of world. If, according to Peta Mitchell, a global pandemic suggests contagion, that is "a destabilization of narrative structure" then, it is a metaphor because,

> Metaphor, so often metaphorized as an 'infective', 'parasitic' and 'viral' form of language, is virtually unthinkable without contagion, while contagion has never been able to be contained within the literal or the proper. The cultural forms of contagion that have been my focus here are at once novel and age-old, metaphorical and yet strangely literal, and, as always, they highlight the very contagiousness of contagion. (Mitchell 2012, 144)

It is clear that in social discourse as in fictional representation, evil exceeds all clinical definitions. In the world of humans and in the world of books, illnesses are equated with a punishment or a sign, the subject of a metaphorization that Susan Sontag uncovered in her work *Illness as Metaphor*. She demonstrates that "it is diseases thought to be multi-determined (that is, mysterious) that have the widest possibilities as metaphors for what is felt to be socially or morally wrong" (Sontag 1989, 61). It is therefore necessary to distinguish between individual diseases mainly considered as the reflection of a personal fault, of a dilemma or of an internal contradiction, from epidemic diseases (from the Greek *epidemos*: "which circulates in the people") which would be more able to reveal a social and collective evil. However, this metaphorization of evil poses a problem for him insofar as it ostracizes the patient: the demonization of the disease which has become an enemy to be fought tends to make the patient responsible, even guilty of his disease:

> The metaphor implements the way particularly dreaded diseases are envisaged as an alien "other," as enemies are in modern war; and the move from the demonization of the illness to the attribution of fault to the patient is an inevitable one, no matter if patients are thought of as victims. Victims suggest innocence. And innocence, by the inexorable logic that governs all relational terms, suggests guilt. (Sontag 1989, 11)

Etymologically, allegory designates "another way of saying" which consists of expressing an idea using a story or a representation. The allegorical text therefore creates an equivalence between two levels of reality, passing from one to the other in a simultaneous double reading that makes possible their analogical permeability. The reader must understand the meaning intended by the author, a univocal meaning often conferring a moral function on the work. Despite this clear definition, the notion of allegory raises the question of its relationship to metaphor. While some equate allegory with a spun metaphor, we will insist on the dramatization and narrativization specific to allegory: in this way, it differs from the point figure to become the elaboration of a vision of the world via the fiction. However, we will distinguish allegory as writing (from the staging of characters who embody abstract entities to the construction of a symbolic plot) from allegorical reading, a work of deciphering – initially theological – which sometimes goes beyond the intentions of the author.

If Camus's *The Plague* has often been called an allegory, this assertion should be questioned. On the one hand, the realities that we perceived as being those of the Second World War are also those of any epidemic, as evidenced by Daniel Defoe's *Journal of the Year of the Plague* in which he offers

a testimony on the plague of London in 1665. On the other hand, if the allusion to the crematoria inevitably recalls the Holocaust, these ovens are a prophylactic measure taken by the volunteers of the health services. Thus, the main reference to the history of the twentieth century is an ambiguous sign. Moreover, this reading is not the only possible reading. The polysemy of the work is claimed by Camus himself in a letter to Roland Barthes in January 1955:

> The Plague, which I wanted to be read on a number of levels, nevertheless has as its obvious content the struggle of the European resistance movements against Nazism. The proof of this is that although the specific enemy is nowhere named, everyone in every European country recognized it. […] In a sense, *The Plague* is more than a chronicle of the Resistance. But certainly it is nothing less. (Camus 1970, 425)

If the allegory traditionally implies a univocal meaning, what to think of this polysemy claimed by the author? Can we speak of modern allegory? Thinking of the articulation of the social and the literary, our work is in line with Susan Sontag and her analysis of an anthropology relating to the domain of the phantasmatic, the imaginary, the affect, the reactions and the interpretations of the subject in what is most irrational. But if we maintain that the fiction of an epidemic conveys a vision of the world, of a knowledge of man, we do not forget the literal nature of the texts.

2. Coping with the pandemic: the plague metaphor

In his seminal essay, "The Plague in Literature and Myth" (1974), René Girard develops on the idea that "the theme spans the whole range of literary and even nonliterary genres, from pure fantasy to the most positive and scientific accounts. It is older than literature" (Girard 1974, 833). As a consequence of the devastating effects of any plague, with its social and mythical components, "the medical plague has become a metaphor for the social plague; it belongs to what we call literature" (Ibid. 835).

The literature of the world, a reflection and mirror of everyday life and of society, has seized each time these effects, even anticipating them with a vivid imagination. But reality has these surprises and catches up with even the unimaginable by snare, as through the blow of an evil magic wand with mind-boggling effects. There has always been pandemic literature, because there have always been pandemics. Through the narrative codes of fiction, the literary plot tries to engender, if not some explanation, at least a sense for the human experience of panic, horror, and despair.

Writers, poets, artists are always on the lookout to surprise their audiences, because they add another string to their inspiration and talent. But these epidemics, as dark and appalling as they are, have often generated literary masterpieces in which society is called into question in its structures, its vision, its greed for gain, its negligence towards the environment and its disrespect for ecology, not to mention the disaster of wars whose health consequences of this crushed, torn flesh are an endless chain of sinister grievances.

And each time, after these disasters, this laxity, this carelessness, this extreme violence and this distraction, societal changes have necessarily taken place. But it's a wake-up call that we often tend to forget, despite the discovery of penicillin and other providential and miraculous drugs born out of the urgent need to heal, to save lives. Against this scourge that is the coronavirus, there are barriers, imperatives, gestures, an integral part of "social distancing", whose *raison d'être* we can clearly see. Nothing like literature, however, to enable us, in these times of confinement, to reconnect with others and to go beyond the walls that separate us from our fellow human beings.

Better, if we at least believe Gilles Deleuze in *Critical and Clinical* (1998), in its relation to "life" and therefore to death, fabulation is indeed a "health enterprise". Literature is a huge storytelling. But, for Deleuze, fabulating does not consist, in imagining and projecting his ego: "These visions, these auditions are not a private matter but form the figures of history and a geography that are constantly reinvented" (Deleuze 1998, iv).

Fabulating consists in rising to those visions and hearings which are impersonal, supra-individual and collective becomings, beyond the subject as well as the object (and their agreement as truth). Literature neither reveals the world (nor the being to the world in its original experience) nor does it express an author subject. It has no other subject or object than these visions or hearings, the precepts of life which shatter perceptions and affections experienced to tend towards the limit of all language. These "figures of history and geography" are invented by delirium and, "when delirium falls back into the clinical state, words no longer open onto anything, we no longer hear or see anything through them except a night whose history, colors and songs have been lost. *Literature is health*" (Deleuze, emphasis added).

Moreover, far from derealizing the world, fiction on the contrary captures its deeply anthropological truth: it is fiction that captures the profoundly anthropological truth: "the world is all the symptoms whose illness merges with man." And he continues:

> Literature then appears as an enterprise of health: not that the writer would necessarily be in good health […], but he possesses an irresistible and delicate health that stems from what he has seen and heard of things

> too big for him, too strong for him, suffocating things whose passage exhausts him, while nonetheless giving him the becomings that a dominant and substantial death would render impossible. (Deleuze 1998, 4)

In her essay, "Zu Pest und AIDS in der englischen Literatur", Christa Jansohn explains that "The pest is […] used as a metaphor for an extreme form of collective calamity, a plague or scourge, and at the same time as a general term for a whole range of terrifying, mostly incurable diseases" (2012, 29-30, *my translation*). As a justification of the metaphorical use of the word *pest*, she is of the opinion that originally the term "plague" covered every dangerous disease and only much later the clinical forms. As a consequence, disease becomes a metaphor, "whereby various areas of the image (especially from the military and political) are repeatedly sought; above all, however, the plague metaphor seems to have prevailed when describing epidemics, even if one was often well aware of the wrong comparison" (Deleuze 1998, 33).

3. The library of the epidemic: from social to literary discourse

The stories of the epidemic insist on the tension between pragmatism and unreason. While the authorities try to act, the powerlessness of men in the face of the scourge arouses movements of panic, a dissolution of social ties and the stigmatization of scapegoats. This tension between reason and madness is present in the contemporary novel which feeds on all past literature. Thus, from Antiquity to the present day, the story of the epidemic paints a picture of a Humanity which is stagnating or regressing. Finding themselves inscribed in a cyclical History which is only the eternal passage from one "plague" (natural or human) to another, civilizations are confronted with their fragility and the vanity of the "sense of History" which underpinned modern thought. Beyond the specific references to the context of the twentieth century, it is therefore Humanity itself that is at stake.

In *The Plague*, Dr. Bernard Rieux comments: "the plague would come to an end, *because it was unthinkable, or, rather, because one thought of it on misleading lines*. If, as was most likely, it died out, all would be well. If not, one would know it anyhow for what it was and what steps should be taken for coping with and finally overcoming it" (Camus 1960, 38, *italics added*). These words raise multiple questions: what to think of an object that resists any imaginary grip? What does this false image of the plague consist of? With this formula, Rieux suggests the impossibility of correctly imagining the epidemic and embracing it in its entirety. In fact, to imagine the plague is above all to imagine an invisible agent. The individual would then oscillate between two attitudes to face the horror: flight and distortion.

The specificity of the plague is brought to light: it is a disease which calls for twists and turns of the imagination so much that it is beyond comprehension. This thought of the unthinkable is made possible by the functioning of the imagination, which conceives, selects, and arranges images from various representations. In fact, the imagination is, to quote Gaston Bachelard, "the faculty that forms images. On the contrary, it deforms what we perceive; it is, above all, the faculty that frees us from immediate images and changes them" (Bachelard 2002, 1). The real world, that of material things and proven events, rubs shoulders with the psychic space of emotions, memories, and fantasies. It is precisely this tension between referentiality (the imagination feeds on recognizable elements) and fictionality (these elements are distorted) that allows the individual to look at the epidemic but also to turn away from its reality.

To what extent does literature take hold of these social discourses that imagine the epidemic? If the epidemic phenomenon favors a hermeneutical approach, what interpretative avenues does the novel favor? There is a vast literary space where centuries and genres converge around the same theme, and a rich library of the epidemic, covering the wide period from Antiquity to the present day, and revealing a common imagination. Total crisis, the epidemic generates a plural, hyperbolic and more or less relevant speech: as soon as everyone feels threatened, everyone feels authorized to comment on the nature, origins, and consequences of the phenomenon. From the doctor to the priest, including the philosopher, and the charlatan, all deem their speech legitimate, as if the consciousness of finitude annihilated hierarchies and conferred on each speaker a supposedly indisputable authority. The story of the epidemic therefore interweaves medical diagnoses, philosophical considerations on man and evil, popular superstitions, religious sermons with apocalyptic overtones, or even political speeches that oscillate between pragmatism and sarcasm: a profusion of words which, once put in relation with a literary imagination.

4. The plague as literature, the literature of the plague

The plague is a theme that has enjoyed great success in both ancient and modern literature; the imagination of poets and writers is struck by the idea of the disease exploding suddenly, from an unknown source, and rapidly spreading, causing death and destruction. It is also an occasion for accurate descriptions of its effects on human bodies – sometimes with scientific interests – as well as for reflections on the origins of evil (divine or natural) and for more or less pessimistic representations on the deterioration of human civilization that it brings with it.

4.1. The ancients and the plague

More than often, the plague has been understood as a retribution for an individual of collective sin committed. In his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, the historian Thucydides dedicates an important section of the second book of his stories to the outbreak of the plague in Attica, in the summer of the second year of the war (430 BC). The spread of the epidemic is favored by the particular conditions of the moment: all the population from the countryside is massed in the city or along the walls, because Pericles has established that it is not appropriate to fight with Spartan enemies on the plains. The effects are immediately very serious, also because nobody seems able to stop the disease, as "there is no previous record anywhere of a pestilence so severe and so destructive to human life. The physicians were not able to help at its outset since they were treating it in ignorance […]. Nor were other human arts of any avail" (Thucydides 2013, 118).

Everything is impregnated with a strong search for the real, historical, true description of what happened. In this vision, the conception of history that Thucydides himself had is also important: he considered history not only as a means to recall great deeds or events, but above all as a fundamental tool, useful for posterity to understand the future; in fact, he himself declares that he will study the first symptoms and characteristics of this disease, so that, if one day in the future it returns, people will know what it is and can take advantage of previous experiences.

The lack of rules, which becomes disorder and anarchy, reigns, and insinuates itself into daily life: individuals try to satisfy their instincts without any inhibitions, those that were the shared criteria of beauty are replaced by their own momentary drives; selfish pleasure is pursued at the expense of any common purpose. It is undoubtedly a dark and bitter picture, painted with heartfelt tones that influenced both ancient and modern readers.

The description of the plague by Lucretius in his *De rerum natura* is completely different from that of Thucydides, despite the fact that the subject in question, almost 400 years later, is always the same: the plague of Athens. A fundamental thing, which allows us to understand everything, is to distinguish the figures of the two writers: Thucydides was a historian, while Lucretius, was a philosopher-poet. Hence an objective of a completely different kind: if for Thucydides the aim was to create a faithful historical narrative, Lucretius writes to demonstrate that men must not be afraid because, "there is nothing to fear in death, that those who no longer exist cannot become miserable, and that it makes not one speck of difference whether or not they have ever been born once their mortal life has been snatched away by deathless death" (2013, 90). Lucretius was in fact an Epicurean and as such he put human happiness as the highest goal.

From all this came a completely different approach: Lucretius, in fact, made a forced condensation of historical events; his narration was imbued with strong participation, drama, suffering and anguish; the result is a gloomy lexicon, of death and desolation, rich in poetic images and rhetorical devices, tending to make the images more dramatic and full of pathos. Just as Thucydides had done, Lucretius also highlighted the decay of moral values and customs: relatives abandoned the sick for fear of contagion and the dead were buried in mass graves, denying them dignified funerals. Not only the funeral rite had lapsed, but also every other religious practice: a clear sign of the disintegration of the social fabric. The two authors have another point in common: even Lucretius, a faithful epicurean, does not believe that the plague is the cause of divine wrath, but considers it as a force of nature.

4.2. Boccaccio: the plague as the frame of the narrative

Late medieval writings, such as Boccaccio's *Decameron*, shed light on human behavior in epidemic contexts. The fear of contamination brings out the worst in people, amplifies their vices and corruption, aspects that, paradoxically, increase the number of infections and lead to both moral and physical annihilation. Boccaccio gives the plague an important function: that of the historical frame of the narrative, which renders his work more than an ordinary collection of short stories but rather what in Italian is called a *canzoniere*, "a songbook". In fact, he is inspired by the true historical event of 1348, when a huge epidemic of bubonic plague hit Florence for several years: and it is in the description of the event that the greatness of the author shines through. The description begins with the treatment of symptoms, such as buboes, swelling of the skin and blood loss. Thus, it focuses on the reaction of society, on popular cures dictated by superstition due to the inability of doctors. By inserting some details, Boccaccio enables us to understand that the pestilence was understood as a divine punishment, due to the insolent behavior of people. The plague is a way of purification, but to get to the light you have to cross the shadow, and so the plague is the highest form of decay of life in all its aspects, from the material to that of values: we see in fact family members who, fearing contagion, abandon their loved ones to death, money-hungry servants who speculate on dying masters, and other gruesome scenes that make it clear what the price for rebirth is. These are therefore the roles attributed by Boccaccio to the plague: a divine punishment, but above all the price for a necessary rebirth of society and its values, which had been lost over time:

> … what made this pestilence even more severe was that whenever those suffering from it mixed with people who were still unaffected, it would rush upon these with the speed of a fire racing through dry or oily substances that happened to come within its reach. Nor was this the full extent of its evil, for not only did it infect healthy persons who conversed or had any dealings with the sick, making them ill or visiting an equally horrible death upon them, but it also seemed to transfer the sickness to anyone touching the clothes or other objects which had been handled or used by its victims. (Boccaccio 1995, 242-243)

The writer gives an account of the "horrid beginning" on which the book is based and which serves he as a pretext for reaching the "beautiful and delightful plan" of the short stories: an "honest brigade" of ten young people (seven girls and three boys) escapes from city to take refuge in a country villa, where to spend time and keep company, for ten days, each one will tell a story a day. *The Decameron* has a dual purpose: pleasant entertainment and moral story. Boccaccio describes, as an eyewitness, the outbreak of the pandemic in "the noble city of Florence"; as soon as the threat is revealed and "all the wisdom and ingenuity of man" proves "unavailing", the city is cleaned of all its "refuse" and closed: "all sick persons were forbidden entry" (Boccaccio 1995, 241), but all to no avail. *The Decameron* can be read as a polyphonic novel in which a brilliant narrator manages to give narrative form to the maturation of ten young Florentines who react to the upheaval of society caused by the outbreak of the plague of 1348.

Boccaccio has one aspect in common with Thucydides: the animalistic vision of the plague and the consequent social disintegration that occurs. That is, in addition to a physical decay, we are witnessing a decay of morals, customs, common sense and even the law. The ratio so dear to the author is shrouded in darkness. Man is no longer able to remember the ancient values and live civilly; all affection disappears, everything is a struggle for survival. According to Boccaccio, we react to the plague – that is, metaphorically, to the evil of the world – by recovering the values of Western culture and the Christian message, however free from its clerical deformations.

5. The plague in the city

While failing to physically repair the world and the living, literature, especially Anglo-American literature, which takes the epidemic as its subject, provides material for healthy reading. Not that the stories, or the novels, can claim any immunizing property. But the plague described in so many stories, cannot be caught! It is in this capacity that writers rise to the front lines of the

epidemic and venture into contaminated terrain. Formerly in Thebes, yesterday in the Florence of the *Decameron*, closer to us, in Boston or in the London of the seventeenth or twenty-first centuries. Writers may respond differently, on occasion, as Daniel Defoe in his *Journal of the Plague Year*, Edgar Allan Poe in the short story "The King Pest", Mary Shelley in *The Last Man*, or Jack London in *The Scarlet Plague.*

5.1. Daniel Defoe – the bio-power of the metropolis

Set in an overcrowded metropolis, the capital of the Kingdom of England. Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) looks back at the devastation caused by the bubonic plague in London in 1665–1666, here reduced to 12 months: unit of time, action, and place, for a total of 100,000 deaths, very much in excess of official figures reporting 68,590 victims. Cleverly mixing facts and fiction, the narrative, which is not a novel, documents the relentless rise of the scourge and draws up the morbid accounting of corpses, using tables and statistics.

As the observations follow, without any other form of trial, appears a ghostly London, emptied of its richest inhabitants and deserted by the Court which found refuge in Oxford – a city that barricades itself, the sick as well as the able-bodied, because what the *Journal* shows is the implementation of new sanitary techniques initiated by the public authorities – the "bio-power" of the time, to put it with Michel Foucault:

> In concrete terms, starting in the seventeenth century, this power over life evolved in two basic forms; these forms were not antithetical, however; they constituted rather two poles of development linked together by a whole intermediary cluster of relations. […] The disciplines of the body and the regulations of the population constituted the two poles around which the organization of power over life was deployed. (Foucault 1978, 139)

The choice was made there of quarantine and confinement. It is an option contested by the narrator, who sees it, in addition to its reduced efficiency, as an attack on fundamental freedoms, and an obstacle to the essential sociability of the human beings. Moreover, over time, compassion, and concern for the other give way to the fatalism and egoism of "every man for himself".

But it is the improbable choice made by the signature H.F., initials behind which we have liked to recognize the writer's uncle, Henry Foe, that polarizes attention. Why has he not fled, the only effective remedy against the virulence of the epidemic? Because he is single and could not afford to let his

business go downhill. Because this is undoubtedly the fate of the subject, of the middle-class individual, in a liberal society. Giving discharge to the "public services" he thanks the health workers for their dedication and congratulates those who have remained faithful to the post. He does not forget to castigate the charlatans and other prophets of doom who proliferate in such circumstances. Despite the obvious differences in context and mentalities of the time, there is a certain consistency in the political observations: Defoe admits that the plague has hit the poor of London the hardest. Cynical, he even notes that the extreme lethality in the less favored districts has, after all, preserved "social peace", avoiding gatherings and riots.

In its time, the *Journal* is fully so, in that it made divine Providence the sole agent of tragedy, at the origin of its outbreak as well as of its very miraculous interruption. For the rest, on human behavior in times of major epidemiological crisis, on the quarrels, particularly religious, preceding the outbreak of the plague from Holland and which resume immediately after, the lessons taught by the *Journal* are resolutely ours.

5.2. Edgar Allan Poe and the enterprise of health

Composed at the time when the plague was still raging on the East Coast of the United States, "The King Pest" offers foul word plays (his "Her Serene Highness the Arch Duchess Ana-Pest") and black humor. The Gothic setting of Poe's story is timeless, if we exclude the temporal duration of the story narrated, which lasts approximately six months, and we can find echoes of Horace Walpole's novel, *The Castle of Otranto*. The name of the prince is clearly inspired by a character in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*,[2] the prototype of the scientist-magician who uses his powers to enslave others. A further explicit quote in this story, which refers to the elegance of the prince, takes the drama *Hernan*i, by Victor Hugo as a model.

The idea of death by plague is transfigured, highlighting the fact that humanity is universally contaminated with death and condemned to it. If the ideal of the Enlightenment was progress, the epidemic transgresses even the idea of social regression: contamination becomes the "leveller", the supreme "uniformizer" in society, because it does not respect any premise for discrimination – the old Christian adage reiterated throughout the Middle Ages and in early modern times. The first paragraph of the story offers a concise, symptomatological and striking description of the plague, a disease impressive

[2] It is always worth remembering the seminal importance of *The Tempest*, a work which has influenced not only fantastic literature but also science fiction.

by its speed of spread and the magnitude of its effects. The epidemic inflicted massive losses among the populations over which Prince Prospero had authority, destroying his estates and possessions. The story conveys this message through plastic narrative representations. A nobleman and his wife retire to the comfort of the castle on their private estate, where they live in a luxury that is in total dissonance with the reality beyond the castle walls. They survive undisturbed, until an evening when, at their masked ball, someone infiltrates with a mask replicated so well that it cannot be distinguished from the rest of the participants. The visitor is the Red Death itself, who spares no one that night. No nobleman manages to escape the suffering that the poor go through.

The illusion of believing that the epidemic is outside the walls is shattered. "He had come like a thief in the night" (Poe 1975, 273), is a reference here to the New Testament: "But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night" (2 Peter 3: 10) – Red Death has entered the stronghold overnight to make the prince pay for his arrogance, his prosperity, his insensitivity to the tragedy that has struck his subjects. If the end of the story should not come as a surprise – who still ignores that the plague, let us understand death, is the all-powerful "leveller"? – what fascinates are the fears and fantasies projected, by the force of fiction, onto the plague, the Red Death.

5.3. The Last Man and the dystopian apocalypse

Four years after the death of her husband, the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, Mary published *The Last Man* (1826), a dystopian novel marked by an eminently fatal globalization. In a not very futuristic 21st century, an epidemic is raging. Its origin is somewhere in the basin of the Nile, at the origins of humanity, its epicenter is in Constantinople, still in the hands of the Ottomans, and which the Greeks besiege in search of their independence, and it is in the West that it will finish its race.

The author imagines a future ravaged by a plague, in which very few people prove immune, and they avoid contact with the rest of the population. The concept of immunization, present in this novel, demonstrates an in-depth knowledge, on the part of the author, of theories regarding the nature of a contamination. *The Last Man* is an allegory of relativity that dominates human identity in a critical context, of life and death. The epidemic is perceived as an intervention, an invasive process on the human mind, as a result of which the human essence is sectioned, and the animal is the only one left. Laws, religion, arts, science, nations, freedom itself, trade, literature, music, theater, industry, transportation, communication, agriculture – all of these gradually disappear, are erased by the force of the epidemic.

Epidemics, it will be noted, always have their origin "elsewhere", preferably in the East. At first, England believes itself to be safe from contamination: its past as an unspoiled citadel pleads for it. English expatriates, followed by hordes of Italians and Spaniards, joined by Americans and Irish, then retreat en masse to this water-bordered land, which has become a Republic. But to this acute "migratory crisis" will be added a generalized infection: London is in turn cleansed of its inhabitants. Striking at random, playing games with doctors, themselves reduced to utter helplessness, the plague is spreading over the entire surface of the globe. Little by little, all of humanity is dying out, with the exception of Lionel Verney, the "last man" in the title, the author's male double.

Long neglected by critics, who preferred Frankenstein and his Promethean ambition, even if it was aborted, the novel now enjoys sustained attention – very largely, it is true, since the AIDS epidemic in the 1990s. In the eyes of specialists in postcolonial studies, the epidemic is the shepherd's response to the shepherdess, the legitimate response brought by the "subordinates" to British imperialism and its undivided domination.

A spell is also cast on the way the daughter of the very rational William Godwin shatters the progressive myth of the invincibility of science. While wanting to be anticipatory, the novel affirms itself contemporary with the discovery of a major paradigm, that of "extinction". Extinction of the dinosaurs, documented and theorized by Georges Cuvier, the author of *Researches on Quadrupeds Fossil Bones* (1812), a work that Mary Shelley knew well. From quadruped to biped, she will have easily taken the plunge, proof if there is one that with each new epidemic, fictitious or real, of a known or unknown nature, it is the future of mankind that is at stake, appearing to each age darker and less assured. A prophetic dimension that Jack London will take on his own, with *The Scarlet Plague* (1912), also set in the twenty-first century, the academic James Smith appearing there as the last survivor of a period of extinction that he undertakes to relate to his grandchildren, who don't care. The strong autobiographical component of Mary Shelley's book finally makes it a keyed novel. The planetary void is first of all a void of men, these "great men" who populated her intellectual universe and her life as a woman: their names were Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley, and they died young, the latter making her a widow forever bereaved.

In *The Last Man*, as in the works of her fellow writers, the reality of an observation, recorded by Defoe, is brought to light, but each will have made it her own:

> A Plague is a formidable Enemy, and is arm'd with Terrors that every Man is not sufficiently fortified to resist, or prepar'd to stand the shock

> against: It is very certain, that a great many of the Clergy, who were in Circumstances to do it, withdrew, and fled for the Safety of their Lives; but 'tis true also, that a great many of them staid, and many of them fell in the Calamity, and in the Discharge of their Duty. (Defoe 2010, 202)

If, in the face of the epidemic that is among us, that we are seized with fear, at the idea of the "terrors" it inspires and the "shock" it inflicts, let us remember that it is given to some great books, belonging to what we have called "the library of the pandemic", to help us feel strong enough, and armed enough, to "oppose" it.

5.4. Jack London's post-apocalyptic views

A novel written a hundred years ago by the great American writer of Irish origins Jack London, *The Scarlet Plague* (1912) takes up the post-apocalyptic vein and speaks precisely of the sudden outbreak of a pandemic around the world. The plague is a disease capable of killing in a few hours all of those who have contracted it, and it begins to spread in 2013, in a world dominated by the Board of Industrial Magnates – made up of the seven richest and most important families of the planet – which closely resembles today's capitalist and technocratic society and that of the United States in the early twentieth century.

In London's tale, in a short time, most human beings are annihilated by this unknown disease for which there is no cure. Bacteriologists who seek the cure die one after the other and, like our doctors and nurses today who work in contact with the coronavirus in hospitals, they are defined as "heroes" by the protagonist. The survivors must deal not only with a wild nature but also with the primal instincts of a humanity now adrift.

The protagonist, James Howard Smith, is an old Berkeley professor who in 2073 – 60 years after the outbreak of the virus and now very old – begins to tell his grandchildren of how they lived before the end of the world.

That old man is the only keeper of memory and culture, who has kept the books to keep the memory alive. Mortified by the idea of being the last man who has a language and cannot use it, and a man who has no destiny, he tells his young grandchildren (to whom his grandfather's language and literary quotations appear raving and prolix since they can't even read) of a world that, although civilized, has been able to exploit the weakest. He tells them of the chaos that took over with the spread of the epidemic and of the brutality to which men gave vent instead of helping each other. He warns of the dangers of not remembering the past because, in a world in which all cultural expressions have been lost and everything is left to the oral narrative, the risk of repeating past mistakes is great:

> The gunpowder will come. Nothing can stop it – the same old story over and over. Man will increase, and men will fight. The gunpowder will enable men to kill millions of men, and in this way only, by fire and blood, will a new civilization, in some remote day, be evolved. And of what profit will it be? Just as the old civilization passed, so will the new. (London 2015, 78)

But to the poetic quotations, to the Latin phrases, to the literary references, to his "rambling soliloquies" (London 2015, 31), the boys respond distracted and disinterested: the catastrophe makes complex words obsolete, impoverishes the vocabulary and young people express themselves in a sort of guttural jargon, without any grammatical complexity, that is, in a language in the state of nature, that is barely communicative. "Anything you can't see, ain't, that's what" (London 2015, 77), the boys conclude hastily. And the old man warns them above all of the new "medicine-men", who in 2073 do not represent doctors who take care of the health of the sick, but – as in African tribal societies – are none other than the ancient sorcerers, who take possession of the minds of people, thanks to the deceptions and fears they use to subjugate the masses; but it will be enough not to listen to their rumors and superstitions about their magical powers – the old man argues – for people no longer to suffer from the medicine-men's abuses, since they will not have weak minds on which the medicine-men can feast. But it will be one of the grandchildren, around the fire, who reveals to the old man, at the end, that his dream is to become just like them: a doctor, dazzled by their charm and their power, and by the dominion of man over man.

In London's novel there are echoes of some of his philosophical ideas in which the writer strongly believed, socialism and Darwinism, with a reference also to the traditional Indo-European tripartite society of Dumezil – albeit in a materialistic key – and to the myth of the eternal return of Nietzsche.

In the first place, socialism emerges from the fact that in the world of that time there is genuine "social justice": before the outbreak of the plague in 2013, the world was dominated by an oligarchy of tycoons and industrialists, and ordinary citizens were treated as real slaves; the elite and important people like the protagonist himself could decide to kill them by stopping feeding them. But even after the apocalypse, the problem remains: it is the proof that Mrs. Vesta – the wife of one of the seven tycoons, also a survivor of the plague – will be made a sexual slave and not only, by her ex-driver subject, with an evident reference to Hegel's thought regarding the reversal of social roles in the slave-master dialectic.

6. Conclusions: factuality vs. fictionality in accounts of the epidemic

Selected from the vast "library of the epidemic," the titles discussed above represent only a fraction of what is representative of the literary tradition of the epidemic but significant relevance. The current context significantly invigorates readers' interest in profile writing, which may help us understand that, despite the exceptional nature of the current global epidemic, humanity has gained secular, even millennial, experience in this regard.

Thucydides was very objective in the description of the cause of the plague: unlike many of his contemporaries and subsequent writers, he did not understand the plague as divine punishment, entering the theological field, but strictly adhered to the historical context, and created a purely historical picture in all its manifestations. With the modern Albert Camus, the situation changes completely. We find a detailed description of the advent of the plague, its scourge, its suffering, and its effects, but this plague is nothing more than an allegory of evil, oppression, and war. This kind of plague will be there forever, ready to upset every city and every mind, without man being able to make sense of the evil actions of his species. In between, the authors selected have done their bit. Boccaccio has one aspect in common with Thucydides and Lucretius: the animalistic vision of the plague and the consequent social disintegration. In addition to physical decay, we witness a decay of morals, customs, common sense, and even the law. Defoe's narrative is built on multiple levels: the desire for a journalistic and complete report is enriched with expressionist descriptions, capable of recounting the conditions of extreme difficulty in which the population found themselves. The evil evoked by Defoe has the character of a faceless tragedy.

Poe takes up the idea of the plague as a symbol of devastation and the struggle between life and death, an idea still very much present in the nineteenth-century collective imagination after the many devastating events of previous centuries and, therefore, capable of profoundly affecting the reader. *Mary Shelley's novel* is a subversive text that stages the end of civilization based on those assumptions: the idea of family, state, and religion. It is a Gothic narrative that does not limit itself to expressing the ghosts of the repressed and the fear accompanying them; it gives body to these ghosts by transforming them into realistic yet metaphorical figures capable of acting on reality with tangible and often catastrophic consequences. Jack London's novel is one of the first post-apocalyptic novels set in a futuristic 2073, a genre that will find great diffusion in the second half of the twentieth century and still today. The psychological implications of a pandemic. It foreshadows a probable scenario for humanity because, when the holders of knowledge, both practical and theoretical, fail or diminish, great wealth is lost.

Deleuze writes that "health as literature, as writing, consists in inventing a people who are missing", and therefore, "the ultimate aim of literature is to set free, in the delirium, this creation of a health or this invention of a people, that is, a possibility of life" (Deleuze 1997, 4). This is what the writers discussed above have managed to achieve – the possibility of life.

WORKS CITED

Bachelard, Gaston. 2002. *Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement.* Translated from French by Edith R. Farrell and C. Frederick Farrell. Dallas: The Dallas Institute Publications.

Boccaccio, Giovanni. 1995. *The Decameron*. Translated with an introduction and notes by G. H. McWilliam. London: Penguin Books.

Camus, Albert. 1960. *The Plague*. New York: Albert Knopf.

——. 1970. *Lyrical and Critical Essays*. Edited by Philip Thody. Translated by Ellen Conroy Kennedy. New York: Vintage.

Defoe, Daniel. 2010. *A Journal of the Plague Year.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Deleuze, Gilles. 1997. *Essays Critical and Clinical*. Translated by Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco. Minneapolis: Minneapolis University Press.

Eagleton, Terry. 1986. "The Critic as Clown". In *Against the Grain: Essays: 1975-1985*. London: Verso.

Foucault, Michel. 1978. *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: The Will to Knowledge*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books.

Girard, René. "The Plague in Literature and Myth". *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* Vol. 15, No. 5, 1974, pp. 833-850.

Jansohn, Christa. 2012. "Zu Pest und AIDS in der englischen Literatur". *Abhandlungen der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaftlichen Klasse*, Jahrgang, No. 1. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag.

London, Jack. 2015. *The Scarlet Plague*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc.

Lucretius. 2001. *The Nature of Things*. Translated, with Introduction and Notes, by Martin Ferguson Smith. Indianopolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.

Mitchell, Peta. 2012. *Contagious Metaphor*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Poe, Edgar Allan. 1975. "King Pest". In *The Complete Tales and Stories of Edgar Allan Poe*, New York: Vintage, pp. 720-729.

Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft. *The Last Man*. Peterborough, Ontario, 1996.

Sontag, Susan. 1989. *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

The New Testament. King James Bible Online. https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/2-Peter-Chapter-3/#10

Thucydides. 2013. *The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians*. Edited and translated by Jeremy Mynott. New York; Cambridge University Press.