

✦ You Can Run But You Can't Hide – Plagues and AIDS in “The Masque of the Red Death” and “The Times as It Knows Us”

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“I thought that when we fought I was to blame  
But now I know you play a different game  
I've watched you dance with danger, still wanting more  
Add another number to the score.

(All day, all day) Watch them all fall down  
(All day, all day) Domino dancing  
(All day, all day) Watch them all fall down  
(All day, all day) Domino dancing.”

Pet Shop Boys, “Domino Dancing”, Introspective (1988).

Catastrophes and disasters have been part of human history since immemorial times. Terrible floods, fires, among other manifestations, have always scared people, specially since these very manifestations were commonly associated to divine intervention, no matter the deity being worshipped. However, things became worse when diseases and plagues were seen as the means through which Gods plan to make themselves known.

Since the seven plagues that Moses predicted that would attack Egypt, going through the Black Death of medieval times and the more recent ebola outbreaks, plagues and diseases have been recurrent in the history of humanity, and they have been regarded in many different ways: as a manmade weapon, an accidental disaster, divine punishment for the sins of whole humanity – or of a determined group. Even more drastically, they are often regarded as the coming of the apocalypse. According to what Elana Gomel, from the university of Tel-Aviv, argues in her article “The Plague of Utopias: Pestilence and the Apocalyptic Body” (2000), the problem with pestilences is that no one knows how they start and when or how they are going to end, bringing a lot of anxiety:

“The plot of pestilence is driven toward narrative exhaustion. Unlike a nuclear apocalypse, which has a definite beginning (the zero hour, the fateful push of the button) and definite end (all of the arsenals have run dry), a contagious disease may theoretically continue indefinitely. (...) The only intrinsic closure of a pandemic is total extinction, which leaves no opening for a hopeful sequel.”[1]

Thus, diseases and plagues have the power of being much more disastrous for their unpredictability as well as for the images which are commonly associated to them, images created by societal fear and beliefs.

Still, regardless of the interpretations associated to such events, one relevant point is the fascination mankind has with this subject of pestilence, which is expressed mainly in terms of literature. Although these instances are mainly discussed in (supposedly) medical and journalistic documents – not to forget diaries and other testimonial pieces of work – they are also very much present in fictionalized accounts such as Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), Camus' *The Plague* (1948), or Garcia Marquez *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985). Gomel also debates in her article the use of the discourse of the

plague has been employed in literature as means to create a new utopia. This means allowing to remain alive in the race only the “purer and better” specimens, a notion that either follows the Nazi idea of “cleaning the human race” or the mere hope that those who manage to survive all the suffering and pain will be able to create a better world so that prosperity and peace will reign once more. A form of cleansing through suffering. These two main views may sound at the same time both so different and so similar: plagues and diseases become sorts of probations through which humanity must go in order to become better. Nevertheless this process may be viewed either in a scientific way, meaning the Darwinian concept of the survival of the fittest; or in a more religious and moralistic way, claiming that only those who are worthy will be left in peace.

Dealing with diseases is not an easy task both in the sphere of everyday life, when one must deal with the stigmas and dangers of contagious illnesses, and in the realm of words. One runs the risk of sounding too bitter in relation to the suffering of others or to become what Elaine Showalter mentions in her work *The Female Malady* (1985) as “romanticizing the disease”. Even though her work is more related to the matter of insanity, in particular the female manifestations, she argues against the tendency of those outside the problem – the supposedly ‘sane’ people – to create certain forms of interpretation to a problem: somehow forcing the insane to be viewed as a martyr sadly misunderstood by the cruel world, but who becomes stronger to point out the curses of this same world. In reality, the sane ones do not acknowledge that insanity is a serious matter, a cry for help from somebody who cannot tolerate a certain situation anymore and resorts to this alternate way of living as a way out, escaping from reality.

This concept may somehow be applied to patients who have suffered from various plagues and epidemics such as tuberculosis or AIDS: on the one hand, they either become the symbolic villains who represent the bad deeds of the world and who must go through the ordeal of the disease as a sort of punishment or atonement. On the other hand, they become the poor repented victims, who turn into an example of moral strength and at the end die in a noble way, becoming some kind of saint, regardless of the fact whether their own lives were that saintly in the eyes of society or not. As a way to illustrate the second aspect one may consider Dumas Fils and his *La Dame aux Camélias* (1852): a redeemed courtesan dies virtuously of tuberculosis.

In addition to what has been discussed in this paper so far it is of extreme relevance to consider Marcelo Bessa’s *Histórias Positivas* (1997). In the first chapter to his work Bessa deals with the already mentioned notions of diseases as punishments for those who do not lead a ‘virtuous’ life and how society tries to appropriate the discourse of the illness to create metaphors that will maintain the order according to those who are in power and the necessity to eliminate this kind of attitude: “(...) ver a doença não como uma metáfora, mas apenas como uma doença.”[2] The disease, in particular AIDS, would be better analyzed and discussed once it escaped from the unscientific presuppositions, something that is taken for granted in present reality, but which does not correspond to the actual truth:

“Ter conhecimento prévio de que as doenças são, de certa maneira, construídas, e de que o discurso biomédico não é sinônimo de neutralidade científica, ao utilizar pressupostos que fogem à validade acadêmica, é de extrema importância quando se propõe um estudo que conjuga literatura e AIDS.”[3]

Societal response may vary from culture to culture once there is an outbreak of an epidemic: solidarity, indifference, fear. Nevertheless, the basic instinct that will grip people’s heart is fear and a necessity to go away from the ones who have already been accused to fend for themselves. Such behavior is more clearly seen when considering Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death” (1842). A short story that deals with human selfishness towards the suffering of others, when Prince Prospero abandons his sick subjects and seek for protective isolation in the walls of an abbey.

A similar approach can be seen in relation to Allen Barnett’s story “The Times as It Knows Us” (1990). In this story, which takes place in the 1980’s, there is a group of people showing different “levels” of AIDS – ranging from those who are uninfected to those who are approaching the bitter end – who spend some time having fun in a summer house together. The illusion of a family within this gay community is shattered at the moment one of the persons in a more critical condition needs assistance, and solidarity

becomes as scarce as the time they have.

While in Poe's story the sane seek for refuge, trying to get away from the infected ones, in Barnett's story the infected are the ones who seclude themselves. Regardless of this, there is the isolation of the sick body, its abjectness becomes more evident since they are excluded from the social context. In "The Masque of the Red Death" the courtesans convey a kind of behavior that Gomel mentions in her article as the search for an easy cure: the solution coming from the abandonment of those who are infected, or of the groups that supposedly hold bigger responsibility for the epidemic, the so-called risk groups. Those who are inside the castellated abbey feel free from any responsibility towards the external world, they just have to wait until the epidemic is over: "The external world could take care of itself. (...) All these [pleasures] were within. Without was the 'Red Death.'" [4] A solution similar to associating AIDS to being merely a "gay cancer": only the immoral and promiscuous should worry about carrying the burden of the disease and not the ones who do not seem to be associated to it, at least initially.

In his article "AIDS and Stigma" (1999), Gregory Herek mentions the two most important stigmas associated to the disease: first the instrumental fear of AIDS as a lethal disease that can kill, and second the symbolic connections between AIDS and certain groups, causing many persons with AIDS to simply avoid seeking the truth if their condition or to keep this diagnosis a secret for fear that prejudice and isolation will become a part of their lives. A similar attitude is expressed by Jurandir Costa in his book *A Inocência e o Vício* (1992), he presents men that, for fear of losing their current status, refused to openly accept the fact that they had AIDS or to reveal it: "Para esses indivíduos o risco de contração da AIDS representava a 'revelação de uma identidade homossexual' que durante toda vida tentaram ocultar dos outros." [5]

Both in Poe's story as well as in Barnett's the characters look for a sort of respite from the crisis that is always lurking around them. There is the already mentioned party in "Masque" and in "The Times as It Knows Us" – even if they admit that they are not there for "the Dance of the Red Masque" [6] – there is a moment when the men enjoy themselves putting on their drag clothes from Miguel's (a friend who died in consequence of AIDS the summer before) "hope chest", however there is not much that can be done so that despair and sadness take control of the way how things stand.

These characters reflect the case of the soldier who is granted a license during the war so that he can come home for a while, but the battlefield cannot be entirely dismissed from his mind. This metaphor is presented by Alain Dreuilhe in his work *Corpo a Corpo: AIDS, Diário de uma Guerra* (1989), a book in which he relates his own experiences and anxieties as a PWA [7] in the beginning of the epidemics. The continuance of life in spite of the disease may sound unreal to him sometimes, trying to be brave, contrary to the fears evoked by the disease, seems absurd, yet it is the only way to remain living: "Desde o momento em que também fui enviando para o front, percebo a banalidade da coragem cotidiana exigida pela situação, esta falta de qualquer outra opção com exceção da loucura e do suicídio." [8]

However the normalcy of everyday life is not as smooth as it seems to be. In both stories there are constant reminders that the time on earth is very limited. In the party given by Prince Prospero the characters try to forget the dying masses outside the abbey's walls with all the fun they are having inside. Notwithstanding, there is a gigantic clock of ebony that, every time it strikes the hour, shuts the party. This helps create a somber atmosphere, reminding the guests of their frailty spoiling all the merriment:

"(...) there came from the brazen lungs of the clock a sound which was clear and loud and deep and exceedingly musical, (...), the musicians of the orchestra were constrained to pause, momentarily, in their performance to harken to the sound; and thus the waltzers perforce ceased their evolutions; and there was brief disconcert of the whole gay company; (...) the giddiest grew pale, and the more aged and sedate passed their hands over their brows as if in confused reverie or meditation." [9]

At the end of this same story this very clock will be stopped forever, since there will be no one to arrange it. Time is running out until it is no more and only decay remains: "and the life of the ebony clock went

out with the last of the gay.”[10]

In Barnett’s tale there is Horst, a character that everyday, at 4 in the morning, prepares a medicine cocktail of orange juice along with an Israeli drug called AL721. This compound must be taken at that specific hour due to fact that it is the only time when Horst’s stomach is free of fat, thus able to better assimilate the medicine. Initially Horst would try to reduce the noise by placing blankets on the blender he uses to prepare the drink. Later on he simply discards this measure, after all there is nothing he can do about it, all of them are in the same situation: “(...) he [Horst] would muffle the blender in a blanket, but he stopped, figuring that if he woke us, we would just go back to sleep.”[11] The elixir shifts into Horst’s hope to keep the disease at bay.

These passages from these two works may be associated to what Herek discusses in his article as the elements that mainly contribute in the creation of the already presented stigmas around AIDS. In his view there are basically four elements: the bearer’s responsibility for getting the disease, the situations that favor propagation of the virus (such as homosexual acts and drug abuse), the appearance to others of an upsetting fact that disrupts social interaction.

Notwithstanding, the most relevant element in Herek’s discussion for the present discussion is the unalterability of the disease and the deterioration of the infected ones.[12] Since the first epidemics that have been registered in human history until AIDS, these incurable illnesses become a sort of death sentence for those who are diagnosed with them. This way, the patients turn into personifications of death and mortality, things that human beings may know that one day they will have to face, but which do not need to be constantly brought to memory. The friends in Barnett’s story do not seem to be very keen of taking sick Enzo to the hospital. Many questions may come out of this: is it merely unwillingness to do so? Lack of consideration towards a fellow? The answer may be hard to find, still remains the possibility that nobody wants to remember that they can find themselves in the same position one day.

The plague also turns into a kind of spectacle, both for the ones living it as for those who are witnesses to the epidemics. In Margaret Atwood’s most recent novel, *Oryx and Crake* (2003), the progress of the plague that infected all of the citizens of the world is described by the only human survivor left, Jimmy or Snowman. He mentions how people would go to TV cameras and show themselves as an attraction to the audience, with their bodies being consumed by the terrible virus. Even before that Jimmy mentions that there were those who liked to have their executions or suicides broadcasted on the internet, showing off their comedowns. This macabre exhibition may sound too unrealistic or exaggerated to the reader, however it should not be forgotten humanity’s attraction to what is revolting, just remember the audience to public executions in medieval times. In addition to this, this kind of manifestation can be relevant as it can bring forth another aspect of the disease: the appeal, the emotional blackmail of the infected ones in order to gain favors. They convert their disease into a kind of charm that can be used if people or events do not go as they might have wanted.

Alain Dreuilhe in his book mention how he himself made use of such device to try to achieve something he wanted:

“Como uma criança mimada, deixo entender que logo deixarei de viver – e portanto amar –, de forma tal que os adultos, que para nós são as pessoas saudáveis, cheios de culpa por estar pisando em terra firme enquanto vêem que me enterro na areia movediça, cedem a mim.”[13]

A similar strategy is used by Perry in “The Times as It Knows Us”. Even though he does not have the virus and is quite healthy and happy with his new boyfriend, he uses the image of the poor suffering widower to his benefit. His intentions might seem noble at first, with the fund raising for charity organizations and everything else. Even so, he had already given hints of his exhibitionist character in the beginning of the short story when he gave an interview that affected the lives of the people in the house, creating an image for the group in the media that does not correspond to the reality: “Joe says, ‘I don’t like the way she [the journalist] implies that death has become so mundane to us, we don’t feel anymore: Paul died today. Oh, that’s too bad, what’s for dinner?’”[14]

Nevertheless, Dreuilhe alerts later in the same text to the dangers of making use of such emotional tactic. At the end, it may become something tiresome and sympathy may not be easy to find again:

“Essa guerra de nervos é ainda mais dolorosa para aqueles que me estimam. Acho que a situação não deve eternizar-se; mesmo a compassiva irmã do inseto de A Metamorfose acaba por cansar-se. Frequentemente caio na armadilha da minha própria chantagem.”[15]

In spite of all the social and psychological aspects of diseases discussed so far, it is also relevant to consider the literary aspect of the plague discourse in terms of the narrator. Elana Gomel mentions in her article that the narrator of the plague may receive different characteristics in the progress of the narratives. First, he becomes a creature living in the boundary between life and death and nullifies himself in the process. His testimony is more relevant than what he is. In Poe’s tale there is the omniscient narrator who does nothing more than describe in considerable detail the events pertinent to the development of the story. Second, he must be granted immunity for some time so that the tale can be told, and he has a tendency to identify with the suffering body of people so that the expression of agony may become more intense. Clark, in Barnett’s work, takes part in the progress of the action, he becomes a delegate for that community and his “collective voice represents the duration of pestilence, its refusal of final closure.”[16]

As it has already been discussed in this paper, Gomel mentions the anxiety generated by the plague since it has no specific beginning, neither a specific end. In the plague discourse – as well as in life in general – there is only one certainty: that one day death, no matter what form it may assume, will have “illimitable dominion over all”[17] So the only alternative left for humanity is to use very well the time that is left, no matter how short it may seem to be. However, it is no excuse for human beings to turn into a modern-day version of Prince Prospero, totally selfish and uncaring in relation to the suffering of others.

A valid comment is presented by Richard Berkowitz and Michael Callen in their fragment taken from their work *How to Have Sex in an Epidemic* (1983), they claim that there are many problems when living with/without AIDS in a world that fears contagion. No one knows who is ‘safe’ anymore, and there is also the debate whether infected patients have the right to resume their lives in all aspects in spite of the disease. They present their view in regard to protection and prevention that turns out to be much more effective once love becomes part of the equation: concern towards the other as a means to avoid problems such as the mistreatment of the sick people. In addition to that there is the danger of the “domino effect”: one passing the disease to the other either unwillingly, due to unawareness of being an infected carrier, or on purpose as a means of revenge against society and the unfairness of the world.

Berkowitz and Callen comment in their article that: “If you love the person you are fucking with – even for one night – you will not want to make them sick. Maybe affection is our best protection.”[18] Clark in Barnett’s story volunteers to take Enzo to the hospital, Noah questions him on why he feels he has to take care on the sick man when no one else wants to. Clark’s answer is in a tone that repeats the plea towards love and compassion: “Because I am beginning to see what it will be like to be sick with this thing and not have anyone bring me milk or medication because it isn’t convenient or amusing any longer.”[19] Only by acknowledging the curses brought by the stigmatization of the disease and how it affects the infected victims can society bring their insights to light in a more productive way in order to care for the others until a final cure can be found. For this is what not only Jesus Christ but also most religions in the world say and many fail to understand: that we simply love one another.

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- [1] GOMEL, 2000.
- [2] BESSA, 1997: 23.
- [3] BESSA, 1997: 26.
- [4] POE, 1946: 202.
- [5] COSTA, 1992: 160.
- [6] BARNETT, 1994: 349.
- [7] Person with AIDS
- [8] DREUILHE, 1989: 45-46.
- [9] POE, 1946: 203.
- [10] POE, 1946: 207.
- [11] BARNETT, 1994: 350
- [12] HEREK, 1999.
- [13] DREUILHE, 1989: 47.

[14] BARNETT, 1994: 349.

[15] DREUILHE, 1989: 47.

[16] GOMEL, 2000.

[17] POE, 1946: 207.

[18] BERKOWITZ, & CALLEN, 1997: 574.

[19] BARNETT, 1994: 387.