



The Plague in Literature and Myth

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The Plague in Literature and Myth

THE PLAGUE IS FOUND EVERYWHERE IN LITERATURE. IT BELONGS TO the epic with Homer, to tragedy with *Oedipus Rex*, to history with Thucydides, to the philosophical poem with Lucretius. The plague can serve as background to the short stories of Boccaccio's *Decameron*; there are fables about the plague, notably La Fontaine's "Les Animaux malades de la peste"; there are novels, such as Manzoni's *I Promessi Sposi* and Camus' *La Peste*. 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—much older, really, since it is present in myth and ritual in the entire world.

The subject appears too vast for a brief exploration. Undoubtedly, but a descriptive enumeration of literary and mythical plagues would be of little interest: there is a strange uniformity to the various treatments of the plague, not only literary and mythical but also scientific and non-scientific, of both past and present. Between the matter-of-fact, even statistical account of Defoe in his *Journal of the Plague Year* and the near hysteria of Artaud in *Le Théâtre et la peste*, the differences, at close range, turn out to be minor.

It would be exaggerated to say that plague descriptions are all alike, but the similarities may well be more intriguing than the individual variations. The curious thing about these similarities is that they ultimately involve the very notion of the similar. The plague is universally presented as a process of undifferentiation, a destruction of specificities.

This destruction is often preceded by a reversal. The plague will turn the honest man into a thief, the virtuous man into a lecher, the prostitute into a saint. Friends murder and enemies embrace. Wealthy men are made poor by the ruin of their business. Riches are showered upon paupers who inherit in a few days the fortunes of many distant relatives. Social hierarchies are first transgressed, then abolished. Political and religious authorities collapse. The plague makes all accumulated knowledge and all categories of judgment invalid. It was traditionally believed that the plague attacks the strong and young in preference to the weak and old, the healthy rather than the chronically ill. Modern authorities do not believe that great epidemics really singled out any particular individuals or categories. The popular belief must have arisen from the fact

that it is more surprising and shocking to see the death of the young and healthy than of the old and the sick. The scientific view, it must be noted, fits the eternal ethos of the plague just as well and better than the popular tradition. The distinctiveness of the plague is that it ultimately destroys all forms of distinctiveness. The plague overcomes all obstacles, disregards all frontiers. All life, finally, is turned into death, which is the supreme undifferentiation. **Most written accounts insist monotonously on this leveling of differences. So does the medieval *danse macabre*, which, of course, is inspired by the plague.**

This process of undifferentiation makes sense, obviously, and poses no special problem in the sociological sphere. The belief that a great plague epidemic can bring about a social collapse is not difficult to accept or irrational in any way; it can be based on positive observation. At the beginning of the modern age, when plague epidemics had not yet disappeared and the spirit of scientific investigation was already awakened, texts can be found that clearly distinguish the medical plague from its social consequences and yet continue to see a similarity. The French surgeon **Ambroise Paré**, for instance, writes:

At the outbreak of the plague, even the highest authorities are likely to flee, so that the administration of justice is rendered impossible and no one can obtain his rights. **General anarchy and confusion then set in and that is the worst evil by which the common wealth can be assailed; for that is the moment when the dissolute bring another and worse plague into the town.** (emphasis mine)

This sequence of events is perfectly positive and rational. The reverse sequence is no less so. A social upheaval can bring about conditions favorable to an outbreak of the plague. Historians still argue whether the Black Death was a cause or a consequence of the social upheavals in the fourteenth century.

Between the plague and social disorder there is a reciprocal affinity, but it does not completely explain the confusion of the two that prevails not only in innumerable myths but in a good number of literary plagues, from ancient times to contemporary culture. **The Greek mythical plague not only kills men but provokes a total interruption of all cultural and natural activities; it causes the sterility of women and cattle and prevents the fields from yielding a crop. In many parts of the world, the words we translate as "plague" can be viewed as a generic label for a variety of ills,** that affect the community as a whole and threaten or seem to threaten the very existence of social life. It may be inferred from various signs that interhuman tensions and disturbances often play the principal role.

In the passage just quoted, Paré separates what primitive thought

unites—the medical and social components of the mythical plague. His language, however, is interesting. The social components are described as *another and worse plague*. **Anarchy is a plague; in a sense, it is even more of a plague than the disease itself.** The former unity is broken, and yet it is remembered and preserved in the stylistic effect of using the same word for two distinct and yet curiously inseparable phenomena. **The medical plague has become a metaphor for the social plague; it belongs to what we call literature.**

Judging from the role of the plague in Western literature up to the present, this metaphor is endowed with an almost incredible vitality, in a world where the plague and epidemics in general have disappeared almost altogether.¹ Such vitality would be unthinkable, of course, if the social “plague” were not always with us, as fear or as reality, in some form or other. This fact is not enough, however, to account for the more obscure and yet persistent aspects of the metaphoric configuration as well as for what appears to be the real need it fulfills with a great many writers. Indeed, an analysis of significant texts reveals definite analogies between the plague, or rather all great epidemics, and the social phenomena, real or imagined, that are assimilated to them. One such text belongs to Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. Raskolnikov has a dream during a grave illness that occurs just before his final change of heart and at the end of the novel. He dreams of a worldwide plague that affects people’s relationships with each other. No specifically medical symptoms are mentioned. It is human interaction that breaks down, and the entire society gradually collapses.

He dreamt that the whole world was condemned to a terrible new strange plague that had come to Europe from the depths of Asia. . . . Some new sorts of microbes were attacking the bodies of men, but these microbes were endowed with intelligence and will. Men attacked by them became at once mad and furious. But never had men considered themselves so intellectual and so completely in possession of the truth as these sufferers, never had they considered their decisions, their scientific conclusions, their moral convictions so infallible. Whole villages, whole towns and peoples went mad from the infection. All were excited and did not understand one another. Each thought that he alone had the truth and was wretched looking at the others, beat himself on the breast, wept, and wrung his hands. They did not know how to judge and could not agree what to consider evil and what good; they did not know whom to blame, whom to justify. Men killed each other in a sort of senseless spite. They gathered together in armies against one another, but even

¹ Concerning the symbolic significance of disease in modern literature, see the suggestive article of Gian-Paolo Biasin, “From Anatomy to Criticism,” *MLN*, 86 (December, 1971), 873–890.

on the march the armies would begin attacking each other, the ranks would be broken and the soldiers would fall on each other, stabbing and cutting, biting and devouring each other. The alarm bell was ringing all day long in the towns; men rushed together, but why they were summoned and who was summoning them no one knew. The most ordinary trades were abandoned, because every one proposed his own ideas, his own improvements, and they could not agree. The land too was abandoned. Men met in groups, agreed on something, swore to keep together, but at once began on something quite different from what they had proposed. They accused one another, fought and killed each other. There were conflagrations and famine. All men and things were involved in destruction. The plague spread and moved further and further.

The plague is a transparent metaphor for a certain reciprocal violence that spreads, literally, like the plague. The appropriateness of the metaphor comes, obviously, from this contagious character. The idea of contagiousness implies the presence of something harmful, which loses none of its virulence as it is rapidly transmitted from individual to individual. Such, of course, are bacteria in an epidemic; so is violence when it is *imitated*, either positively, whenever bad example makes the usual restraints inoperative, or negatively, when the efforts to stifle violence with violence achieve no more, ultimately, than an increase in the level of violence. Counterviolence turns out to be the same as violence. In cases of massive contamination, the victims are helpless, not necessarily because they remain passive but because whatever they do proves ineffective or makes the situation worse.

In order to appreciate Raskolnikov's dream, we must read it in the context of Dostoevsky's entire work, of that self-defeating mixture of pride and humiliation characteristic of Raskolnikov and other Dostoevskian heroes. The victims of the plague seem to be possessed with the same desire as Raskolnikov. Each falls prey to the same megalomania and sees himself as the one and only superman: "Each thought that he alone had the truth and looked with contempt at the others."

This desire implies a contradiction; it aims at complete autonomy, at a near divine self-sufficiency, and yet it is *imitative*. The divinity this desire is trying to capture never fails, sooner or later, to appear as the divinity of someone else, as the exclusive privilege of a model after whom the hero must pattern not only his behavior but his very desires, insofar as these are directed toward objects. Raskolnikov worships Napoleon. The possessed imitate Stavrogin. The spirit of worship must combine with the spirit of hatred. To reveal the secret of this ambivalence, we need not turn to someone like Freud. There is no secret at all. To imitate the de-

sires of someone else is to turn this someone else into a rival as well as a model. From the convergence of two or more desires on the same object, conflict must necessarily arise.

The mimetic nature of desire can account for the many contradictions in the Dostoevskian hero; this one principle can make his personality truly intelligible. Imitative desire necessarily generates its own living obstacles and comes to view this failure as a sign of the model's omnipotence, as convincing proof, in other words, that this model is the right one, that the door he keeps so tightly shut must be the door to heaven. Mimetic desire cannot keep its illusions alive without falling in love with its own disastrous consequences and focusing more and more on the violence of its rivals. The mimetic attraction of violence is a major topic of Dostoevskian art. Thus, violence becomes reciprocal. In the dream of the plague, the expressions "each other, one another" recur constantly. The great Dostoevskian novels describe mimetic breakdowns of human relations that tend to spread further and further. The dream of the plague is nothing but the quintessential expression of the Dostoevskian crisis; and, as such, it must extend that crisis to the entire world, in truly apocalyptic fashion.

From Dostoevsky, I would like to turn to another writer, Shakespeare, who appears very distant but is really very close in respect to the problem at hand. I want to compare the dream of the plague, a specific passage in *Crime and Punishment*, to a specific passage in a work of Shakespeare, the famous speech of Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida*, a text that rests, in my view, on the same conception of a cultural crisis as the dream of the plague in Dostoevsky.

First, it must be observed that *Troilus and Cressida* revolves entirely around a view of mimetic desire analogous if not identical to the one just detected in Dostoevsky. The topic of the play is the decomposition of the Greek army stalled under the walls of Troy. Disorder begins at the top. Achilles imitates Agamemnon, both in the sense that he seriously aspires to his position, he wants to become the supreme ruler of the Greeks, and in the sense that he derisively mimics and parodies the commander-in-chief. Mimetic rivalry spreads from rank to rank and brings about a complete confusion:

So every rank
Exampl'd by the first pace that is sick
Of his superior, grows to an envious fever
Of pale and bloodless emulation.

These lines remind us of Raskolnikov's dream: "They gathered together

in armies against one another, but even on the march the armies would begin attacking each other, the ranks would be broken and the soldiers would fall on each other."

Mimetic desire also dominates the two protagonists. No less than the political and the military, the erotic aspect of the play is an affair of worldly ambition, competitive and imitative in character. We would have to call Cressida "inauthentic" if we did not suspect that the ideal of autonomous desire by which she will be judged is itself a fruit of rampant imitation. The lovers are always open to the corruptive suggestion of spurious models or to the even worse advice of Pandarus. They are really nonheroes, always caught in a game of deception and vanity which is to real passion what the behavior of the army is to genuine military valor.

No individual or psychological approach can do justice to the scope of the phenomenon. That is why the high point of the play is that speech in which Ulysses describes a crisis so pervasive and acute that it goes beyond even the most radical notion of social crisis.

The central concept, Degree, from the Latin *gradus*, means a step, a measured distance, the necessary difference thanks to which two cultural objects, people, or institutions can be said to have a *being* of their own, an individual or categorical identity.

Oh, when degree is shaken,
Which is the ladder to all high designs,
The enterprise is sick! How could communities,
Degrees in schools and brotherhoods in cities,
Peaceful commerce from dividable shores
.
But by degree, stand in authentic place?
Take but degree away, untune that string,
And hark, what discord follows! Each thing meets
In mere oppugnancy. The bounded waters
Should lift their bosoms higher than the shores,
And make a sop of all this solid globe.
Strength should be the lord of imbecility,
And the rude son should strike his father dead.
Force should be right, or rather, right and wrong,
Between whose endless jar justice resides,
Should lose their names, and so should justice too.

The image of the untuned string clearly reveals that the cultural order is to be understood on the model of a melody, not as an aggregate, therefore, a mere collection of heterogeneous objects, but as a "totality" or, if we prefer, a "structure," a system of differences commanded by a single differentiating principle. Degree in the singular seems to define a

purely social transcendence, almost in the sense of Durkheim, with the difference, however, that cultural systems in Shakespeare are always liable to collapse; and it is with such collapse, obviously, not with the systems themselves, that the tragic writer is preoccupied.

If mimetic desire has an object, it is Degree itself; Degree is vulnerable to criminal attempts from inside the structure. The thought appears irrational, but it is not. It does not mean that Degree is something like an object that could be appropriated. It means exactly the opposite. If Degree vanishes, becomes "vizarded" when it becomes an object of rivalry, it is precisely because it is really nothing but the absence of such rivalries in a cultural order that remains functional. The crisis, therefore, is a time of most frantic ambition that becomes more and more self-defeating. As these ambitions are mimetically multiplied, reciprocal violence grows and the differences dissolve; the "degrees" leading to the object and the object itself disintegrate. It is an ambition, therefore, that "by a pace goes backward / With a purpose it hath to climb."

As in Dostoevsky's text, all constancy of purpose disappears, all useful activities are interrupted. The desire in each man to distinguish himself triggers instant imitation, multiplies sterile rivalries, produces conditions that make society unworkable through a growing uniformity. The process is one of undifferentiation that passes for extreme differentiation—false "individualism." Finally, even the most fundamental distinctions become impossible. Shakespeare writes that "Right and wrong . . . lose their names," and this is duplicated almost to the letter in Dostoevsky: "They did not know how to judge and could not agree what to consider evil and what good; they did not know whom to blame, whom to justify."

In both texts the dominant idea, more explicit in Shakespeare, is that regular human activities, however reciprocal their final results, can take place only on a basis of nonreciprocity. Constructive relationships of any type are differentiated. Ulysses certainly betrays a strong hierarchical and authoritarian bias. One should not conclude too hastily that the interest of his speech is thereby diminished. The concepts with which he operates, the very notion of the cultural order as a differential system susceptible of collapse, imply the essential *arbitrariness* of cultural differences.

When the difference goes, the relationship becomes violent and sterile as it becomes more symmetrical, as everything becomes more perfectly identical on both sides: "*Each thing meets in mere oppugnancy.*" It is a relationship of *doubles* that emerges from the crisis. We would misunderstand this relationship if we interpreted it as a *coincidentia oppositorum*, in the tradition of philosophical idealism, or as a mere subjective reflection or hallucination, in the vein of psychological "narcissism," an

approach adopted by Rank, for instance, in his essay on Don Juan and the *double*.

With Shakespeare, as earlier with the playwrights of classical antiquity, the relationship of *doubles* is perfectly real and concrete; it is the fundamental relationship of the tragic and comic antagonists. It is present among the four *doubles* of *A Comedy of Errors*, where it is almost identical to the relationship defined in *Troilus and Cressida* and dramatized in all of Shakespeare's plays. The fact that the *doubles* constantly run into each other in a desperate effort to part ways can be viewed either in a tragic or in a comic light. This is as true of Dostoevsky as it is of Shakespeare. The relationship of conflictual symmetry and reciprocal fascination portrayed in the novels is fundamentally identical to what is attempted very early in the short story entitled *The Double*.

Thus, the speech of Ulysses closely parallels Raskolnikov's dream of the plague. In both these texts the authors find a way to conceptualize and generalize the same type of relationship that, in the rest of the work and in his other works, is developed in dramatic or novelistic form. The convergence of these two writers is particularly striking in view of their obvious differences of language, period, style, genre, etc. In order to be complete, the parallel should also include, on Shakespeare's side, the metaphor of the plague; and, of course, does. In the passage quoted above, the idea of disease occurs repeatedly. Even though it does not play as prominent a role as in Raskolnikov's dream, the plague proper is not absent; it figures among the various and more or less natural disasters that accompany the crisis, as in a kind of mythical orchestration:

What raging of the sea, shaking of the earth,
 What plagues and what portents, what mutiny
 Divert and crack, rend and deracinate
 The unity and married calm of states
 Quite from their fixture!

Looking back upon the preceding remarks, we must note that we are no longer dealing with a single theme, with the isolated plague, but with a thematic cluster that includes, besides the plague or, more generally, the theme of epidemic contamination, the dissolving of differences and the mimetic *doubles*. All these elements are present both in the text of Shakespeare and in the text of Dostoevsky. I shall give more examples later, and they will show that this same thematic cluster almost never fails to gather around the plague in a great many texts that may appear to have very little in common. Some of the elements may be more emphasized than others; they may appear only in an embryonic form, but it is very rare when even one of them is completely missing.

First, however, we must complete our thematic cluster. Another element, which has not yet been mentioned, may be the most important of all, the *sacrificial* element. This sacrificial element may be limited to the assertion that all the death and suffering from the plague is not in vain, that the ordeal is necessary to purify and rejuvenate the society. Here is, for example, the conclusion of Raskolnikov's dream: "Only a few men could be saved in the whole world. They were a pure chosen people, destined to found a new race and a new life, to renew and purify the earth." Something very similar is present in Artaud's *Le Théâtre et la peste*: "The theater like the plague is a crisis which is resolved by death or cure. And the plague is a superior disease because it is a total crisis after which nothing remains except death or an extreme purification." Death itself appears as the purifying agent, the death of all plague victims or a few, sometimes of a single chosen victim who seems to assume the plague in its entirety and whose death or expulsion cures the society, in the rituals of much of the world. Sacrifices and the so-called scapegoat rituals are prescribed when a community is stricken by "the plague" or other scourges. Our thematic cluster is even more common in myth and ritual than in literature. In *Exodus*, for instance, we find the "ten plagues" of Egypt together with the incident of Moses stricken with leprosy and cured by Yahweh himself. The "ten plagues" are a worsening social breakdown, which also appears in the form of a destructive rivalry between Moses and the magicians of Egypt. Finally we have a strong sacrificial theme in the death of the firstborn and the establishment of the passover ritual.

The sacrificial element is sometimes an invisible dimension, something like an atmosphere that pervades every theme but cannot be pinpointed as a theme; its status must be ascertained. An analysis not of the entire Oedipus myth, but of the mythical elements that appear in Sophocles' tragedy, *Oedipus the King*, may help shed some light upon that problem.

In the opening scenes of the tragedy, the city of Thebes is in the throes of a plague epidemic; and the solution of the crisis becomes a test of power and prestige for the protagonists, Oedipus, Creon, and Tiresias. Each of these would-be doctors tries to place the blame on another, and they all turn into each other's *doubles*. Here, too, the tragic process is one with a worsening "crisis of Degree," one with the plague itself, in other words. The tragic conflict and the plague are in the same metaphoric relationship as in Dostoevsky or Shakespeare, except, of course, that this metaphoric character is less explicit, as if the task of uncovering the element of violence hidden behind the mythical plague were initiated by Sophocles but less advanced than in the work of the two other writers.

In the light of our analyses, the tragic conflict of *Oedipus the King*

amounts to nothing more and nothing less than a search for a scapegoat, triggered by the oracle, which says, "a murderer is in your midst; get rid of him and you will be rid of the plague." How could a single individual, even the worst offender, be responsible for whatever social catastrophe may be at stake in the "plague"? Within the confines of the myth, however, not only is the significance of the strange medicine unquestioned, but its efficacy is actually verified. We must assume that the prescription works, that the discovery of the "culprit" cures the plague. The reciprocal witch hunt brings the crisis to a climax; then, the focusing of the guilt on Oedipus and his expulsion constitute a genuine resolution. The whole process is comparable to a "cathartic" purge.

A fascinating possibility arises. Even though the reasons adduced are quite mythical, the reality of the cure may be a fact. Behind the entire myth there could be a real crisis, concluded by the collective expulsion or death of a victim. In this case the oracle would be truthful in part. What is true is not that there is, as a "real culprit," a man who bears alone the entire responsibility for the plague. Such a man cannot exist, of course. The oracle is really talking about a victim who is "right," in the sense that against and around that victim everyone can unite. Oedipus may well be the right scapegoat in the sense that the accusation against him really "sticks" and restores the unity of the community. This restoration is tantamount to a "cure" if, as Sophocles himself appears to suggest, the plague is the same crisis as in Shakespeare or Dostoevsky, a crisis of mimetic violence. The polarization of all fascination and hatred on a single victim leaves none for the other *doubles* and must automatically bring about their reconciliation.

How can the required unanimity be achieved if no one among the potential victims is likely to be either much more or much less guilty than anyone else? How can the mythical "guilt" become solidly fixed on a more or less random victim? The mimetic *doubles* are concretely alike; there is no difference between them. This means that at any time even the smallest incident, the most insignificant clue, can trigger a mimetic transfer against any *double* whatsoever. The positive effect of such a transfer, the end of the crisis, must necessarily be interpreted as a confirmation of the "oracle," as absolute proof that the "real culprit" has been identified. A faultless relationship of cause and effect appears to have been established.

The process just described implies that the random victim must be perceived as a "real culprit," missing before and now identified and punished. This random victim, in other words, will never be perceived as random; the "cure" would not be operative if its beneficiaries realized the randomness of the victim's selection.

All this goes without saying, and yet it needs very much to be said because the unperceived consequences of these facts may be decisive for the myth as a whole. We just said that the entire responsibility for the crisis is collectively transferred upon the scapegoat. This transfer will not appear as such, of course. Instead of the truth, we will have the "crimes" of Oedipus, the "parricide and the incest" that are supposed to "contaminate" the entire city. These two crimes obviously signify the dissolving of even the most elemental cultural differences, those between father, mother, and child. The parricide and the incest represent the quintessence of the whole crisis, its most logical crystallization in the context of a scapegoating project, that is, of an attempt to make that crisis look like the responsibility of a single individual. Even today, these and similar accusations come to the fore when a pogrom is in the making, when a lynching mob goes on a rampage. The ideas of parricide, incest, and also infanticide always crop up when cultural cohesion is threatened, when a society is in danger of disintegration. The nature of the crimes attributed to Oedipus should be enough to make us suspect that we are dealing with some kind of lynching process. And this suspicion has been present for many years; it has prompted many investigations. Unfortunately, scholars keep looking for a possible link that could be historically documented between the Oedipus myth and some particular scapegoat-type ritual. The results have been disappointing. The question of relating myth to ritual or ritual to myth is a circle that can be broken here by asking a more decisive question about the possible origin of both in a spontaneous lynching process that must necessarily remain invisible because of its very efficacy.

If the collective transfer is really effective, the victim will never appear as an explicit scapegoat, as an innocent destroyed by the blind passion of the crowd. This victim will pass for a real criminal, for the one guilty exception in a community now emptied of its violence. Oedipus is a scapegoat in the fullest sense *because he is never designated as such*. For the genuine recollection of the crisis, which allows for no differentiation whatever between all the *doubles*, the two differentiated themes of the myth are substituted. The original elements are all there, but rearranged and transfigured in such a way as to destroy the reciprocity of the crisis and polarize all its violence on the wretched scapegoat, leaving everybody else a passive victim of that vague and undefined scourge called "the plague." A lynching viewed from the perspective of the lynchers will never become explicit as such. In order to apprehend the truth, we must carry out a radical critique that will see the mythical themes as systematic distortion of the former crisis.

The spontaneous scapegoat process now appears as the generative

process of myth, the true *raison d'être* of its themes and notably of the plague, which must be viewed, I believe, as a mask for the crisis leading to the scapegoat process, not only in the Oedipus myth but in countless other myths of the entire world.

Oedipus, it will be said, is a religious hero as well as a villain. This is true, and it is no objection—far from it—to the genesis just outlined. The difference between the founding process of myth and the scapegoat processes we may know of and understand is that the first, being the more powerful, literally goes full circle from unanimous hatred to unanimous worship. The juxtaposition of the one and the other is intelligible. If the polarization of the crisis upon a single victim really effects a cure, this victim's guilt is confirmed, but his role as a savior is no less evident. That is why Oedipus and behind him the more remote but parallel figure of the god Apollo appear both as bringers of the plague and as benefactors. This is true of all primitive gods and other sacred figures associated with the mythical "plague." They are both the accursed divinities that curse with the plague and the blessed ones that heal. This duality, it must be noted, is present in all primitive forms of the "sacred."

I have already suggested that the present hypothesis bears also on ritual, that a sacrificial action or immolation is generally found, frequently interpreted as the reenactment of a divine murder supposed to be the decisive event in the foundation of the culture. In the preparatory stages of a ritual immolation, symmetrically arranged antagonists hold warlike dances or real and simulated battles. Familial and social hierarchies are reversed or suppressed. These and many other features may be interpreted as traces of some "crisis of degree" climaxed by its habitual resolution, the collective transfer on a single victim. We may suppose that ritual tries to reenact this entire process in order to recapture the unifying effect mentioned earlier. There are sound reasons to believe that this purpose is generally achieved. Being still unable to perceive the threat that internal violence constitutes for primitive society, we cannot recognize in ritual a relatively effective protection against that threat.

If the preceding and obviously too brief remarks are not unfounded,² the conjunction between the plague and sacrificial ritual, first in primitive religion and later in literature, becomes fully intelligible. Primitive societies constantly resort to ritual against anything they call the plague. That may comprise very diverse threats ranging from the crisis of mimetic violence and less acute forms of internal tensions and aggressions to purely exterior threats that have nothing to do with reciprocal vio-

² For a more complete exposition of the collective transfer and single victim process as mythical genesis, see my *La Violence et le sacré* (Paris, 1972).

lence, including, of course, real pathological epidemics, even the plague in the modern scientific sense.

Ritual tries to reproduce a process that has proved effective against one kind of "plague," the most terrible kind, the epidemic of reciprocal violence that never becomes explicit as such. It is my opinion that the scapegoat process, through religious myths, notably the myths of the plague, plays a major role in disguising and minimizing the danger its own potential for internal violence constitutes for a primitive community. This minimization must be viewed in turn as an integral part of the protection that myth and ritual provide against this same violence.

Certain lines of Sophocles and Euripides make it hard to believe that these writers did not have an intuition of collective mechanisms behind the myths they adapted, an intuition that is still incomplete, perhaps, but far superior to ours. These mechanisms are still well attested historically. In the Middle Ages, for instance, social catastrophes, notably the great plague epidemics, usually triggered persecutions against the Jews. Even though they have become less productive in terms of mythical lore, these mechanisms, quite obviously, are far from extinct.

We are now in a position to understand why the mythical plague is never present alone. It is part of a thematic cluster that includes various forms of undifferentiation and transgression, the mimetic *doubles*, and a sacrificial theme that may take the form of a scapegoat process. Earlier, I said that the plague, as a literary theme, is still alive today, in a world less and less threatened by real bacterial epidemics. This fact looks less surprising now, as we come to realize that the properly medical aspects of the plague never were essential; in themselves, they always played a minor role, serving mostly as a disguise for an even more terrible threat that no science has ever been able to conquer. The threat is still very much with us, and it would be a mistake to consider the presence of the plague in our literature as a matter of formal routine, as an example of a tradition that persists even though its object has vanished.

Not only the plague but the entire thematic cluster is alive, and its relevance to our current psychosociological predicament becomes evident as soon as specific examples are produced. The continued vitality of all our themes must correspond to a continued need to disguise as well as to suggest—the one and the other in varying degrees—a certain pervasive violence in our relationships.

I will give three examples, each so different from the other two and from the texts already mentioned, at least in terms of traditional literary values, that direct literary influence cannot account for the presence of the pattern. The first is Artaud's already mentioned *Le Théâtre et la peste*.

Much of this text is devoted to a strange account of the medical and social effects not of a specific outbreak but of the plague in general. In a long pseudoclinical disquisition, Artaud rejects all attempts at making the transmission of the disease a scientifically determined phenomenon; he interprets the physiological process as a dissolution of organs, which may be a kind of melting away, a liquefaction of the body or on the contrary a desiccation and a pulverization. This loss of organic differentiation is medically mythical but esthetically powerful because it patterns the pathological symptoms on the breakdown of culture, producing an overwhelming impression of disintegration. This apocalyptic vision is quite close to Dostoevsky's dream of the plague, but this time, in keeping with the destructive ethos of contemporary art, it is a cause for fierce jubilation.

At first glance it seems that, in spite of its intensity, the process of undifferentiation does not culminate in the *doubles*. The *doubles* are there, though—less explicit, to be sure, than in Dostoevsky and Shakespeare but unmistakable nevertheless—notably in those passages that hint at a purely spiritual contamination, analogous to the mimetic *hubris* of our first two examples.

Other victims, without bubos, delirium, pain, or rash, examine themselves proudly in the mirror, in splendid health as they think and then fall dead with their shaving mugs in their hand, full of scorn for other victims.

The proud self-examination is *hubristic* pride, reaching out for supreme mastery, even over the plague, immediately defeated, massively contradicted by the instant arrival of the disease. Still apparently intact, the victim dies, "full of scorn for the other victims." An unquenchable thirst to distinguish himself turns the apparently healthy man into a *double* of all other victims, his partners in violence and death. The mirror, everywhere, is an attribute of the *doubles*.

The sacrificial theme is there too: first, as earlier indicated, in the rejuvenation that the plague and its modern counterpart, the theater, are supposed to bring to a decadent world, but also in more subtle touches that may be limited, at least in one case, to one single word. At one point the author imagines some kind of surgical dissection performed on the victims not with just any knife but with a knife that, for no immediately apparent reason, is described as being made of *obsidian*. Anthropological literature knows of knives made of this material and used on human flesh, the Aztec sacrificial knives. In the context of our analyses, it is not excessive to suppose, perhaps, that the *couteau d'obsidienne*, in conjunction with the victims of the plague, was prompted by a reminiscence of human sacrifice.

The second example is the film work of Ingmar Bergman in which the plague, the dissolving of differences, the mimetic *doubles*, and the sacrificial scapegoat are recurrent themes. If one particular film should be mentioned in connection with the *doubles*, it is certainly *Persona*. Two characters only are constantly present, a nurse and her patient, a totally silent actress. The entire work is dedicated to the mimetic relationship of these two, never a communion, really, but the same violent dissolving of differences as elsewhere. Another film, *Shame*, makes the conjunction of the mimetic *doubles* and of a plaguelike contamination quite manifest. A senseless civil war is being fought between two perfectly undistinguishable parties. This absurd struggle of rival *doubles* gradually spreads into a general infection, a literal ocean of putrefaction. Here, as in many contemporary works, the old mythical plague literally merges with such positive threats as radioactive fall-out and industrial pollution, both of which "function," of course, exactly like the plague and constitute disturbingly appropriate "metaphors" of individual and social relations in a state of extreme degradation.

One may single out *The Seventh Seal* as one film of Bergman in which the interplay of all the elements in our thematic cluster is quite spectacular. The mimetic *doubles* are there, and Death is one of them. So is a real medieval plague with its cortège of Flagellants. In the midst of all this comes the brief suggestion of a mob scene, a collective transfer against a very random and at the same time quite significant *scapegoat*, an actor, a mime, the very personification of *mimesis*.

The third example is both literary and cinematic. It is the famous short story by Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice*, which was recently made into a film by Lucchino Visconti. My own comments are based on the short story, which remains, I believe, the more striking of the two in the present context.³

An older and famous writer, Aschenbach, goes to Venice for a rest. As he arrives, he notices another elderly man who clings desperately to a group of younger people. His modish attire and the rouge on his cheeks turn this pathetic figure into a monstrous mask of pseudo-youthfulness. Later, the protagonist will permit a hairdresser to paint his face and dye his hair, which makes of him the exact replica, the perfect *double*, of the grotesque vision encountered at the beginning.

In the meantime, at the hotel and on the beach, the artist has come under the spell of a Polish adolescent. The differences of age, language, and culture, as well as its homosexual character, make this silent attach-

³ A paper on "The Plague in *Death in Venice*," by Ruth Ellen Perlman, a student at SUNY/Buffalo (Spring, 1972), first made me aware of the short story's relevance to the present investigation.

ment more than a mere transgression; it is really a destruction and a dissolution of the old man's entire life.

The sense of decay is heightened by the plague and the rumors of plague that are abroad in the city. The sacrificial theme is present, of course, first in the hero's dream of a primitive bacchanal during which animals are slaughtered and, no less decisively, in his sudden death the next morning, which seems a retribution for his surrender to the forces of cultural disintegration. The writer has become the very embodiment of the plague. He literally sides with the epidemic when he chooses not to inform the Polish family of its presence in Venice, thus increasing their exposure to danger. He delights in the plague, and the plague will literally die with him since, as he dies, everybody is leaving Venice and the drama is resolved.

In our three contemporary examples the plague and associated themes are all present; our entire cluster is strikingly intact. It even has more thematic consistency than in Sophocles, Shakespeare, or Dostoevsky. The plague is a less transparent metaphor in Thomas Mann and Artaud than in *Crime and Punishment*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and even *Oedipus the King*. This very opacity confers to the plague a great evocative and esthetic power. The *doubles*, too, appear in a light of romantic mystery, in contrast with the unadorned severity of the tragic rapport.

Such opacity, it must be noted, belongs to myth—distinguished, of course, from its tragic adaptations—as well as to modern literature. If we limited ourselves to these chronological or cultural extremes, which is what recent investigators tend to do, the conjunction between the plague, the *doubles*, and the sacrificial scapegoat would remain unintelligible. Many specialists, of course (for instance, the psychoanalysts), have all sorts of answers ready for us. Unfortunately, these ever-ready answers shed no real light on the texts. As for the literary critics, they usually reject not only these superficial answers—which is good—but also the question itself—which cannot be good. In a misguided effort to protect the integrity of literature against all possible enemies, they refuse the open and equal dialogue between literature and anthropology they themselves should promote. We should not cut off literature from the vital concerns of our age. We should not divorce esthetic enjoyment from the power of intelligence, even from scientific investigation. We cannot simply “enjoy” the plague and be quiet—like old Aschenbach, I suppose, awaiting in pure esthetic bliss whatever fate may lie in store for us.

I find Shakespeare more bracing than Aschenbach. One reason is that he does not despair of the truth. If we had not turned to him earlier, we could not have made sense out of our thematic cluster. The brightest light available is still there. Shakespeare does not use the plague as verbal vio-

lence against an indifferent world. He is not interested in words as shields or weapons in the dubious battle of individual *ressentiment*. What concerns him most is the myth and the truth of his own language.

In our contemporary examples, the thematic elements of our cluster are juxtaposed a little like colors on the flat surface of a modern painting. It takes Shakespeare to realize that these themes are not really on a par, that they are not really even themes, and that it is a misnomer to call them so. The plague is less than theme, structure, or symbol, since it symbolizes desymbolization itself. The *doubles*, on the contrary, are more than a theme; they are the unperceived reciprocity of violence among men. They are essential to the understanding of sacrifice as a mitigation, a displacement, a substitution, and a metaphor of this same violence. The closer the writer gets to the fundamentals of that process, the more the plague and other metaphors become transparent. Sacrificial values disintegrate, disclosing their origin in the unifying and reconciling effect of a spontaneous scapegoat. If the scapegoat process described above is the resolution of the crisis and the source of mythical meaning, it must also be the end of tragedy and the restoration of Degree. Shakespeare does not simply repeat; he reveals the entire process.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, for instance, it takes Shakespeare no more than six words to suggest our entire pattern of metaphoric and real interaction. The famous cry of the dying Mercutio, *A plague on both your houses*, is not an idle wish. It is already fulfilled in the endlessly destructive rivalry of these same two houses, Montagues and Capulets, who turn each other into perfect *doubles*, thereby bringing the plague upon themselves. At the end of the play, the Prince equates the death of the two lovers with the plague of their families: *See what a scourge is laid upon your hate*. The two statements are really the same. Both are uttered *in extremis*, as a revelation of the truth: the first by a dying victim; the second as the last judgment of the sovereign authority, always a sacrificial figure in Shakespeare, and a potential scapegoat.

The death of the lovers is the entire plague, in the sense that it represents the climax of the scourge, the plague finally made visible and, as a consequence, exorcised by its very excess; the plague is both the disease and the cure. A sacrificial death brings about the end of the crisis and the reconciliation of the *doubles*. Talking to Capulet, Montague aptly calls the victims *Poor sacrifices of our enmity*.

Thus, a scapegoat mechanism is clearly defined as the solution to the tragic crisis, the catharsis inside the play that parallels the catharsis produced by that play, the catharsis twice announced and proposed to the spectators at the very opening, in an enigmatic little prologue that contains literally no other idea: *Romeo and Juliet*, we are told,

Do with their death bury their parents' strife.
 The fearful passage of their death-marked love,
 And the continuance of their parents' rage,
 Which, but their children's end, naught could remove,
 Is now the two hours' traffic of our stage.

The word *catharsis* originally refers to the purifying effect of a particular sacrifice. Shakespeare needs no etymology to see through Aristotelian estheticism and to reveal in the most concrete and the most *dramatic* fashion that all drama is a mimetic reenactment of a scapegoat process. In his tragedies, Shakespeare reproduces the cathartic mechanism of all tragedy; but he underlines it so forcefully that he lays it bare, so to speak, forcing us to ask questions that run counter to the cathartic effect, questions that would tear the entire dramatic structure asunder if they were seriously asked.

In his comedies, Shakespeare openly derides the sacrificial pattern. In the Pyramus and Thisbe episode of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the play that comes immediately after *Romeo and Juliet*, he parodies the cathartic system of this first play. He comes closer to a full revelation of the sacrificial values hidden behind the plague and other mythical or tragic metaphors than our contemporaries, including those like Artaud, whose frontal attacks against sacrificial values ultimately regress into the crudest forms of sacrifice. Contrary to what we believe, we may not be in a position to criticize Shakespeare. He may be the one who criticizes us. Rather than trying to judge him from above, from a necessarily superior "modern" viewpoint, we should try to recover some major intuitions of his that obviously escape us. We must have lost them somehow and somewhere, unless, of course, they have yet to be grasped.

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