

Narrating the epidemic

In the Museo del Prado in Madrid, we can find the oil on board called *The Triumph of Death* (Fig. 1), painted by Pieter Brueghel the Elder in 1562. The artist created that masterpiece two hundred and fourteen years after the most terrible epidemic ever known. Without a doubt, the Black Plague was his source of inspiration. The scene reflects horror and dissolution, a clear example of the idea of death at that time. In this view, the world is collapsing without recognizing hierarchies.



Fig. 1

The medieval pandemic that gave rise to Brueghel's painting originated in the distant Cathay, today China. Major natural catastrophes, earthquakes, and floods, triggered the scourge in the 1330s. Merchants travelling the Silk Road reached the Black Sea and from there the ports of the Italian peninsula. The plague began in 1348 and plunged the whole of Europe into severe political, religious and climate turbulences¹. The previous century had primed the Europeans for the catastrophe. While the population expanded, food shortages due to a succession of cruel winters and near-absent summers made people extremely vulnerable. The continent was a fertile ground for disease and the plague killed a quarter of the European population². The Black Plague opens the epilogue of the Middle Ages, transforming all aspects of society, from medicine to art and economics for centuries to come. And created a trauma that lasted for centuries.

We are now undergoing another epidemic of unique proportions in our living history, perhaps not because of its lethality, but for its globalized condition. COVID-19 showed to disseminate at an incredibly swift pace³. The black plague took fourteen years to reach Europe from China. COVID-19 has spread globally in just a few months. Epidemic diseases always take advantage of societal and ecological breaches. This virus arrived at a time when we are connected in ways never seen before, packed cities and healthcare systems are already struggling to contain common diseases. The butterfly flapping its wings in Wuhan (it was actually a bat) has unleashed a brutal global storm. And just like the medieval plague in the 14th century, the SARS COVID-2 2019 coronavirus will leave an enduring mark on societies shocked by its effects.

The plague led to an age of scientific and artistic progress that would be the mark of the Renaissance. The art functioned as a means to record the events occurring in the collective memory trying to make sense of the collective social trauma. Undoubtedly, also the coronavirus causing the present epidemic will produce a social wound that will need to heal.

It is then a matter of thinking about which are the available tools to process a social trauma. The person who has suffered a traumatic situation must narrate his experience, making him listened, and work on that issue to elaborate his suffering. This trauma requires a social narrative to explain the event that decimates a population. These cultural representations are a way for communities to find those narratives.

The epidemic of 1348 occurred in times of darkness. Medicine, very unscientific at that moment, generated ideas mainly based on astronomy, religion, or even pure superstition. And it is then when a founding text for the Italian prose appeared. It was a novel approaching the situation through a narrative that even eluded the idea of the plague being the only possible topic. Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* was written some years after the actual events. The author had probably been near Florence at the time of the epidemic. And not for nothing, it would be in the city of Florence ravaged by the plague where that so-called Renaissance would express itself more deeply. Boccaccio initiated the proemium with the evocative phrase "*Human thing is to have compassion on the afflicted*" and following that phrase, he started with a detailed description of the disease, perhaps of better quality than those produced by the medical councils of the moment⁴. Ten young people flee the epidemic and take refuge in an idyllic village and tell themselves stories to forget the threat of death that is all around. These are the stories of the *Decameron* which try to leave behind the world of sickness through the relief of narratives plenty of love, sensuality and worldly issues.

If we consider that literature fulfilled the task of chronicling these events according to the *fact-text-memory* equation, it is also a relevant question to whom the medieval authors wrote to. While readers didn't abound in a basically illiterate world, silent reading –reading without murmuring the text– appeared during the early Middle Ages, and that was a historical milestone⁵. It made the experience of reading more personal and influenced literary styles. It was, however a very gradual process and many people continued to read in *lauda voce*. There were still large numbers of entertainers, such as wandering minstrels and troubadours who recited and transmitted the texts with their oral narratives. The *Decameron* was one of the first prose texts written in vernacular language that did not deal with religious issues, allowing the stories to expand not only to the enlightened minority able to read but also to less privileged people via itinerant narrators. The Middle Ages Black Plague, for its exterminating power, left a traumatic experience from which it was also necessary to move on collectively.

Narrating an epidemic has become a literary topic. Countless authors produced narratives where an epidemic has a central role. Only as an incomplete enumeration, and not forgetting Daniel De Foe's masterpiece *The Journal of the Plague Year*, only in the twentieth century the topic "epidemic" was addressed by several Nobel Prize winners such as Sigrid Undset, Herman Hesse, Thomas Mann, Albert Camus, Gabriel García Márquez and José Saramago. It will certainly inspire contemporary authors after COVID-19.

What the *Decameron* meant to the literature on epidemics, *The Triumph of Death* did to fine arts. Like most artworks, they served as a way of dealing with trauma, and that representation left a mark on collective memory, a way of thinking the dread and a message for future generations and our future selves.

What will be the ways to narrate the coronavirus epidemic? There will be novels, short stories, poems written about it, and probably a large number of films both documentary and fiction. These cultural creations will alleviate painful wounds while emerging from the horror or, at least, will be the way society will speak about it.

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