

THE MIRROR OF MEDUSA

We are a narrative species. We try to piece together our fragmented experience of the world through stories that attempt to lend coherence to the scattered pages that the world throws in our path. Dante speaks of an unbound book dispersed throughout the universe. We try to piece that book together by lending it a beginning, a middle and an end.

Our stories largely concern our pilgrimage through life. Raymond Queneau noted that every story is either the *Odyssey* or the *Iliad* because every life is both a battle and a voyage¹. To make sense of every event, to accept and explain the uncertain nature of our every experience, and the fear that this uncertainty provokes, we conjure up characters and plots, weave arguments and dream up nightmares, dreading the arrival at the last page. Every one of our stories is also the story of the Apocalypse.

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse –Conquest, War, Famine and Death—have been with us since the beginning of human memory. Violence is the rule, peace is the exception. But the Horsemen ride on without rhyme or reason, while we laboriously attempt to find a motive for a disaster, a cause for a famine, flood, or plague, even an explanation for the inevitable and commonplace hour of our death. Neither ill fortune lurking at the door, nor the epidemics that periodically sweep through our world, are seen by us, its sufferers, as normal. We refuse to believe that these plagues are nothing more than recurrent specks in the vast constellation of universal events, with no more or less meaning for the cosmos than the birth or extinction of a mote of dust. We take death personally. For each us, however stoic or resigned we might appear in the face of mortality, death is

an individual matter. To a friend who wants to console a mortally wounded soldier in André Malraux's *La voie royale* by speaking of death in abstract tones, the dying man replies: "There is... no death... There's only... me... me... who's dying."² Dying is an active verb.

For each one of us the threat is personal, even if it affects another. Empathy or love, indifference or egotism, are two sides of the same coin, and this double-faced coin lies at the centre of our being. The variety of things that threaten us is astonishing, from microscopic viruses to nuclear bombs, from fire and droughts to earthquakes and tsunamis, from mysterious illnesses studied by persistent scientists to terrifying nightmares bred in our collective brains. Fear is our dominant emotion. "Fear will sprout everything/ legs/ ambulances/ and the armoured luxury/ of certain cars," wrote the poet Alexandre O'Neill mocking other verses by Carlos Drummond de Andrade. "Fear will have everything/ almost everything/ and each one in his own way/ will all arrive/ almost all of us/ to where the rats are."³ Rats are the traditional harbingers of the plague.

Every fear, each fearful threat requires a narrative, each one a name, each one a strategy of defense. With every new war, every new ecological catastrophe, every new epidemic, we must start the story all over again, seeking a first sentence, and hopefully a last. That's why the universal library consists mainly of tales of suffering and woe.

The word "plague" has become a metaphor for anything noxious and pervasive. Fascists call foreigners a "plague," publishers call writers a "plague," motorists call cyclists a "plague." In the first half of the eighteenth century, in Central Europe, intellectuals and the popular press

began to debate what they called the “vampire plague” attested in countless well-documented reports and chronicles. In 1792, Louis XV became so interested in the subject that he commissioned Marechal Louis-François-Armand de Vignerot du Plessis, third Duke of Richelieu, to investigate. The Duke was a friend of Voltaire and he must have discussed with the famous philosopher the disturbing phenomenon he was ordered to study, in its many cultural, religious and medical implications. In an article on vampires in his *Dictionnaire philosophique*, Voltaire began by pointing out that the sources of information on the subject were not universal. “It was in Poland, Hungary, Silesia, Moravia, Austria, and Lorraine that the dead partook of these extraordinary repasts,” Voltaire wrote. “One did not hear of vampires in London, or even in Paris.” Voltaire was ironically implying that the lesser-civilised regions of Europe had become prone to these beliefs because they were less rationally inclined, unlike the philosophers at the French and English courts. For Voltaire, the question of the “vampire plague” depended on a variety of documents that sprang from one same superstition. While certain ancient cultures (including the Hebrews of the Old Testament) considered the corpses of the uncorrupted dead to be impure and demonic, the Catholics considered them holy and blessed. From this opposition, according to Voltaire, the myth of the vampire was born. In reference to the digging up and desecration of corpses during the so-called “plague,” Voltaire noted that the dug-up remains “resembled those of the ancient martyrs.”⁴ The victims of the plague were deemed to be either cursed or holy: the condition of the “vampire” corpses was the same.

This preoccupation with the dead resulting from a plague –whether victims of vampires, the bubonic pest, the Spanish flu or COVID—leads us to place them in some predetermined role within the flow of our constructed

narratives. Sometimes the dead appear at the beginning of the story, when the discovery of a corpse elicits the suspicion of an epidemic that later asserts itself, as in Camus's *La peste* or in Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*. Sometimes the dead provide the framework for the narrative, as in Boccaccio's *Decameron* or in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*. Or else it constitutes the story's secret core, as in Manzoni's *I promessi sposi*. Sometimes the dead are the conclusion of the narrative as in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" or Flaubert's "La légende de Saint Julien l'hospitalier." In every case, plague stories are held together by the presence of holy or unholy dead. The dead are of the essence.

In early narratives, the catastrophic Horsemen often arrive as emissaries of the Divine Will, as a punishment of God for our no doubt very real sins, leaving behind them oceans of corpses for our better instruction. A rabbinical text from the sixteenth century makes this cause explicit:

"Nowadays we flee the city due to disturbance of the air, may God protect us, without realizing that it was sent providentially from God [...] Rather, it seems that the fact that we wander, roam, and experience displacement subdues our uncircumcised hearts and our stiff necks, such that the displacement and wandering becomes atonement for all of our sins. One should not be so bold as to stand before his King when He is angry with him; hide yourself for a while, until the tempest has passed. You also find in the Torah: 'None of you shall go out of the opening of his house until the morning.' Once power has been given to the destroyer, he does not distinguish between the righteous and the wicked. [...] Therefore, distancing is good, and exile, wandering, and displacement atone and halt [God's] anger.⁵"

However, in most cases, atonement is not enough, as the medieval flagellants and the evangelical *mea culpa* of today have shown. Beating breasts and ash-strewn scalps don't suffice. Even if the stern justice of the Lord is supposed to be behind our suffering, we are not meek like our father Job. There is an illumination in the sixteenth-century French manuscript *Chants Royaux du Puy de Rouen* that depicts Christ as an apothecary, dispensing the drugs of eternal life to Adam and Eve. We deem ourselves worthy of those drugs, and complain when they are not forthcoming. We whine, we recriminate, we cry out that we don't deserve the ills that befall us, in spite of whatever evils we might have knowingly or unknowingly committed. All this must be someone else's fault. And here is where the useful scapegoat appears. The Jews massacred in Lisbon in 1506, the witches burnt in Salem in 1692, the albinos killed in Tanzania in the first years of this millennium, the Chinese held liable for COVID, all testify to the need we feel to blame someone else in our desperate quest for an explanation.

René Girard first proposed the theory of the scapegoat in 1972. According to Girard, desire is a contagious thing. In the infant, desire develops by learning to copy adult behaviour, linking acquisition of identity, knowledge and material wealth to the desire to have something others possess. The process increases geometrically, eventually reaching a stage of destructive conflict between the individual and the social group. Unable to assume responsibility or engage in self-reflection, in order to diffuse the violent tension created, society now seeks to destroy whomever it sees as a common enemy, blaming it for the conflict and deciding that it must be eliminated. As soon as the scapegoat is chosen, and is either

sacrificed or made to leave, the group feels that its shared desire is satisfied. And the scapegoat, supposedly at the origin of the crisis, acquires now the status of a miraculous being who has the power to bring peace⁶.

Europe suffered from the onslaught of the plague known as the Black Death several times throughout the centuries. In France, the epidemic of 1628 to 1631 claimed the lives of close to a million people. In 1678, a few decades after the end, Jean de La Fontaine published his second volumes of collected fables in which he included one, written years earlier, entitled “The Animals Sick With the Plague.”⁷

The Lion King calls on all the animals and declares that, since the plague is obviously a punishment for their sins, the guiltiest among them should be sought out and sacrificed as penance. “Let each search his conscience,” says the King. And he himself begins by confessing that he has preyed on sheep, and also on occasion on a shepherd. Hearing this, the fox speaks up and defends the monarch, saying that the Lion had only done this to prove his natural superiority and that the loss of sheep (even of the shepherd who could not look after his flock) was not a crime. The bear, the tiger, the wolf concur. Then the ass speaks up and confesses that, on passing the curate’s garden and driven by gnawing hunger, he was tempted to chew on the herbs and the grass. Hearing this, the wolf pronounces the verdict: the ass must die. “The battered rascalion who had made the world ill deserves to be hung as an example. Eat another’s grass! What could be more horrible! Death, only death is suitable for the criminal.”

The ass is the scapegoat. The Lion King and the other beasts of prey in his royal court (La Fontaine ironizes) cannot be accused whatever their

deeds: the powerful are above the law. The scapegoat needs to be someone disempowered: an ass, a Jew, a woman, an immigrant. The narrative of the plague creates its privileged actors and its sacrificial victims. No plague story is objective.

If our strategy to make sense of experience is to tell a story, and if the story has as its protagonist a scapegoat, there remains an unanswered question. Once the story of the plague has been told and suffering and death have consciously become our normal way of life, what then? How does the storytelling help us practically to confront the catastrophe? Boccaccio, in his introduction to the stories the group of Florentine citizens fleeing the pestilential city will tell one another, notes that “we shall pass away this sultry part of the day, not in gaming,—wherein the mind of one of the players must of necessity be troubled, without any great pleasure of the other or of those who look on,—but in telling stories, which, one telling, may afford diversion to all the company who hearken. “ And he adds: “without this reminiscence of our past miseries, it might not be shown what was the occasion of the coming about of the things that will hereafter be read.⁸” But how can stories of evil times help us live through “things” to come?

Perhaps the answer lies in another ancient story.

Medusa was one of three hideous sisters, the only one who was mortal. She had the dreadful ability to turn any living creature into stone with her gaze, and she was slain by Perseus who used his shield as a mirror to avoid facing her directly. From Medusa’s blood was bred the winged

horse Pegasus that allowed Perseus to fly off and rescue the chained Andromeda.

Perhaps the stories that we construct to tell of our catastrophes become in the telling the shield that allows us to confront it and, though it does not divest it of its destructive power, it helps us put the hideous threat into words. In that way, we can read in the story, if not an explanation, then at least a comprehensible mirror that becomes, sometimes, a kind of consolation. Because Medusa's head retained its power after being severed, throughout the centuries it was depicted on walls, doors and ornaments as a protective charm to ward off evil. The stories we tell have often this magical power.

Alberto Manguel

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Raymond Queneau, Préface à Gustave Flaubert, *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (Paris: Les éditions du point du jour, 1947)

² André Malraux, *La voie royale* (Paris: Grasset, 1930)

³ Alexandre O'Neill "O poema pouco original do medo" in *Abandono Vigiado* (Lisboa: Guimarães Editores, 1960)

"o medo vai ter tudo/ pernas/ ambulâncias/ e o luxo blindado/ de alguns automóveis (...) o medo vai ter tudo/ quase tudo/ e cada um por seu caminho/ havemos todos de chegar/ quase todos/ a ratos."

⁴ Voltaire, «Vampires», in *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire* (Gotha, Chez Charles-Guillaume Ettinger, 1784) vol. 43, 386-392

Rabbi Yehiel (Michel) Moravchik, *Minhah Hadashah* (Krakow: Isaac Prostitz, 1577), 59b. ^[SEP]Quoted in "Jewish Traditions on Fleeing Afflicted Cities in Early Modern Ashkenaz" by Moshe Dovid Chechik and Tamara Morsel-Eisenberg (Leiden: Journal of Law, Religion and State, 2020) 173

⁶ René Girard, *La violence et le sacré* (Paris: Grasset, 1972)

⁷ Jean de La Fontaine, "Les animaux malades de la peste" in *Les Fables de La Fontaine*, Livre VII (Paris: Barbin et Thierry, 1668-1694) III partie, 9-14

Un mal qui répand la terreur,

Mal que le Ciel en sa fureur
Inventa pour punir les crimes de la terre,
La Peste (puis qu'il faut l'appeller par son nom)
Capable d'enrichir en un jour l'Acheron,
Faisoit aux animaux la guerre.
Ils ne mouroient pas tous, mais tous estoient frappez.
On n'en voyoit point d'occupez
À chercher le sôûtien d'une mourante vie ;
Nul mets n'excitoit leur envie.
Ni Loups ni Renards n'épioient
La douce & l'innocente proye.
Les Tourterelles se fuyoient :
Plus d'amour, partant plus de joye.
Le Lion tint conseil, & dit ; Mes chers amis,
Je crois que le Ciel a permis
Pour nos pechez cette infortune ;
Que le plus coupable de nous
Se sacrifie aux traits du celeste courroux,
Peut-estre il obtiendra la guerison commune.
L'histoire nous apprend qu'en de tels accidens
On fait de pareils dévoûmens :
Ne nous flatons donc point, voyons sans indulgence
L'état de nostre conscience.
Pour moy, fatisfaisant mes appetits gloutons
J'ay devoré force moutons ;
Que m'avoient-ils fait ? nulle offense :
Même il m'est arrivé quelquefois de manger
Le Berger.
Je me dévoûray donc, s'il le faut ; mais je pense
Qu'il est bon que chacun l'accuse ainsi que moy :
Car on doit souhaiter selon toute justice
Que le plus coupable perisse.
Sire, dit le Renard, vous estes trop bon Roy ;
Vos scrupules font voir trop de delicatesse ;
Et bien, manger moutons, canaille, sottte espece,
Est-ce un peché ? Non non : Vous leur fistes Seigneur
En les croquant beaucoup d'honneur.
Et quant au Berger l'on peut dire
Qu'il estoit digne de tous maux,
Estant de ces gens-là qui sur les animaux
Se font un chimerique empire.
Ainsi dit le Renard, & flateurs d'applaudir.
On n'osa trop approfondir.
Du Tigre, ni de l'Ours, ni des autres puissances,
Les moins pardonnables offenses.
Tous les gens querelleurs, jusqu'aux simples mastins,
Au dire de chacun estoient de petits faincts.

L' Afne vint à son tour & dit : J'ay souvenance
Qu'en un pré de Moines passant,
La faim, l'occasion, l'herbe tendre, & je pense
Quelque diable aussi me pouffant,
Je tondis de ce pré la largeur de ma langue.
Je n'en avois nul droit, puis qu'il faut parler net.
A ces mots on cria haro sur le baudet.
Un Loup quelque peu clerc prouva par sa harangue
Qu'il falloit dévouër ce maudit animal,
Ce pelé, ce galeux, d'où venoit tout leur mal.
Sa peccadille fut jugée un cas pendable.
Manger l'herbe d'autrui ! quel crime abominable !
Rien que la mort n'estoit capable
D'expiër son forfait : on le luy fit bien voir.
Selon que vous ferez puiffant ou miserable,
Les jugemens de Cour vous rendront blanc ou noir.

“Ma se in questo il mio parer si seguisse, non giucando, nel quale l'animo dell'una delle parti convien chi si turbi senza troppo piacere dell'altra o di chi sta a vedere, ma novelando (il che può porgere, dicendo uno, a tutta la compagnia che ascolta diletto) questa calda parte del giorno trapasseremo.” “[...] qual fosse la cagione per che le cose che appresso si leggeranno avvenissero, non si poteva senza questa ramemorazion dimostrare, quasi da necessità constretto a scriverle mi conduco.

Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, edizione a cura di Vittore Branca (Torino: Utet, 1956)
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