

The Aesthetics of Destiny in Plague Literature
from Early Modern to Postmodern Times

by

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ABSTRACT

**The Aesthetics of Destiny in Plague Literature
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For centuries—for millennia, at least since the myth of the Plague at Aegina—the subject of plague has been generating an aesthetic that distinctly characterizes its manifold texts, five of which this dissertation considers in depth: *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), Daniel Defoe; *The Betrothed* (1840), Alessandro Manzoni; *Death in Venice* (1912), Thomas Mann; *The Plague* (1947), Albert Camus; and *Angels in America* (1993), Tony Kushner.

While plague texts, no matter how culturally particular and historically specific may be their narrative elements, repeatedly share distinguishable metaphysical themes and mythical motifs, they are more fundamentally wed to each other by their aesthetic response to the overwhelming fact of disease and pestilence. To classify such texts as apocalyptic is already to be approaching them in terms of their aesthetic, as the designation is not only a way of defining plague texts but also, and more importantly to an exploration of their aesthetic, a way of perceiving plague itself. For the descriptive “apocalyptic” also aggrandizes. It invests plague with significance. Angry gods, for example, must be appeased; a savior-scapegoat must die if the people are to be delivered from the pestilence on the land. The bald facts of disease and death become aesthetically, in plague texts, a matter of design and destiny.

As it was in ancient Greece, aesthetics is defined, for purposes of this study, as perception. In the perception of a subject's reality the aesthetic process begins. The reality of plague lies in the fact of it, but to see the fact as diabolical, tragic, cataclysmic, or redemptive is to see—or to perceive—the subject in an aesthetic way. What begins with the perception of pestilential fact ends in its re-presentation as plague text. The text translates the perceived reality into a literary one, for the act of translation is also an act of signification, in which aesthetic constructs like that of destiny, are employed to make sense of what in fact, and terrifyingly, lacks or defies sense. So it is aesthetically that a plague-stricken city's destiny may lie in the hands of God. Or in a migratory bacillus.

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my mother
Jennifer Teresa Reilly

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We have all lost loved ones to AIDS, the plague that has most recently struck America and the world. Among the fallen, I remember always Dean DeBlasis.

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Chapter 1

We are not meant to live thus, Sir. *Flaming swords*, I say my Philip presses into me, swords that are not words; but they are neither flaming swords nor are they words. It is like a contagion, saying one thing always for another (*like a contagion*, I say; barely did I hold myself back from saying, *a plague of rats*, for rats are everywhere about us these days).

—J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*

For centuries—for millennia, at least since the myth of the Plague at Aegina—the subject of plague has been generating an aesthetic that distinctly characterizes its manifold texts (although I shall be focusing primarily on five works spanning the early modern to postmodern periods: *A Journal of the Plague Year* by Daniel Defoe; *The Betrothed*, Alessandro Manzoni; *Death in Venice*, Thomas Mann; *The Plague*, Albert Camus; and *Angels in America*, Tony Kushner). While plague texts, no matter how various and culturally particular may be their elements of character and plot, repeatedly share certain identifiable metaphysical themes and mythical motifs, they are more fundamentally wed to each other by their aesthetic response to the overwhelming fact of depredatory pestilence. To classify such texts as apocalyptic is already to be approaching them in terms of their aesthetic, as the designation is not only a way of defining plague texts but also, and more importantly to an exploration of their aesthetic, a way of perceiving plague itself. For the descriptive “apocalyptic” also aggrandizes. It invests plagues with significance, as do the plague texts themselves: Angry gods, for example, must be appeased; a savior-scapegoat must die if the

people are to be delivered from the pestilence on the land. The bald facts of disease and death become aesthetically a matter of design and destiny.

As it was in ancient Greece, aesthetics is here defined as a process that originates in perception. For it is in the perception of a subject's reality, its whatness, that the aesthetic process of translation begins. The whatness of the plague lies in the fact of it. But to see the fact as terrifying, catastrophic, apocalyptic, or redemptive is immediately to see—or to perceive—the subject in a particular way, and more particularly (and perhaps most palliatively), in an aesthetic way.

The aesthetic eye processes reality. In that process language translates the subject into a text that shows how the subject has been perceived. In the act of perception one is already a step away from the thing itself, and in the act of translation language furthers the distance from the whatness of the subject as it makes of the fact a (plague) text. That text then presents not what the subject plague was or is; rather, it represents how the plague has been intellectually perceived and aesthetically conceived. Language ascribes meaning to fact; the plague text invests the contagion with significance.

To put it another way, the vehicle for the aesthetic response to the perceived fact of plague is language. In that sense, language at once is metaphor and generates metaphor. Common to many plague texts are particular metaphorical *topoi*—telltale signs, angels and demons, omens and wonders, scapegoats, purification rites, destiny—by which an incomprehensible, terrifying event is authored at least into aesthetic sense. Whether that sense is lodged as well in moral philosophy, natural history, astrology, or theology, it is nonetheless, in the end as in its origin, aesthetic. Likewise, whether a *topos* like destiny is being viewed with hope or fear, with realistic resolve or romantic fancy; whether the

language shaping it is poetic or scientific, metaphysical or matter-of-factual—it is being dressed in metaphor. Essentially metaphoric, too, is the aesthetic process that makes of plague’s fact a film, novella, treatise, fable, drama, or fantasia; that process is the vehicle that is at once and constantly both escaping and confronting its tenor, and in the product of that process, in the text, it is continually making its own meaning.

Moreover, the meaning *in* the text is not equivalent to the meaning *of* the text, which accrues meaning *beyond* the text. The plague text as text is not only aesthetically metaphoric in that its language has translated the tenor of plague’s fact into fiction, history, science, metaphysics, or myth. Often, and quite commonly in plague literature, this aesthetically metaphoric text reads also as metaphor, in that the plague as it is represented in the text is also a vehicle by which to expose or explain a plague of another, usually political, social, cultural, or moral sort. Thus the epidemic that besets Oran in Camus’s *The Plague* might be read as the Nazi regime that beleaguered France in the early 1940s; the French, in fact, referred to their Nazi occupiers epithetically (and metaphorically) as “*la peste brune.*” Similarly, in Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, it is not just the homophobic power monger Roy Cohn who is sick and dying of AIDS, it is every right-wing conservative thing he stands for: the be-Reaganited nation itself. As Belize, his African-American gay male nurse, puts it, “You come with me to [Cohn’s] room 1013 over at the hospital, I’ll show you America. Terminal, crazy, and mean.”

*

How a text means, then, enlarges the significance of what a text—and any particular *topos* within the text—means. Destiny, for instance, figures prominently in plague literature, wherein it engenders a lexicon—“chance,” “providence,” “preordination,” “fortune,” “fate,”

“luck,” “contingency,” “random,” “doom”—to produce texts that variously delineate, in the matter of destiny, the metaphysics of plague. Thus, as the language of destiny occasions texts that attribute to plague a religious or philosophical dimension, aesthetics becomes metaphysics, in that the aesthetic expresses itself as metaphysics. And the metaphysical text is thus metaphoric; it at once conceals and reveals not what plague is but how the subject, plague, has been perceived and reconceived in terms of the *topos* destiny. Aesthetically, the *topos* becomes a construct, which may be poetically or scientifically defined.

To the poetic mind, generally, the compass of plague defies comprehensibility; in its devastating enormity it lies beyond human ken. So it is that the poetic response to plague enlists language as often to blame higher powers for the contagion’s ravage as to appeal to them for abatement and surcease. Either way, the poetic mind often finds in destiny, if not deliverance, at least an explanation: However painfully and mysteriously, the plague is somehow fulfilling God’s divine plan. The scientific mind, while it may reject such providential views, nonetheless embraces destiny, although it is empirically (and aesthetically) perceived as being circumstantial or conditional: Plague is an effect with a discernible cause, be it rats’ fleas or HIV. Whether scientifically formulated or poetically ratiocinated, destiny in either case gives more significance to the plague narrative than it does to plague’s fact.

Destiny, then, serves the plague narrative as an aesthetic construct. However destiny may operate in reality, if it operates at all, and however significant it may or may not be as an article of faith or a source of succor in the historical reality of ancient Greece or postmodern America, in the plays of Sophocles and Tony Kushner, destiny, in aesthetic fact, lends sense to the progress of awesome and awful events. Explicitly or in a

literary network of cultural assumption and allusion, some concept of destiny, both as a condition and as an agent, is likely to inform texts that treat plague or apocalyptic occurrences like famine and war (which frequently precede plague).

Destiny as a condition suggests that beyond the circumstances of terrible days lies some divine plan that escapes the eye of man; beyond the perceived chaos of temporal human existence, for instance, lies a celestial and eternal order to which all things tend, what the ancient Greeks called *moira*. By such condition, then, an individual's destiny, be it bountiful in good fortune or tragic in the extreme, serves some other, divine end, which may be fixed in the stars. As an agent, destiny works within the variable, earthly, temporal world of humans to bring them to their destined ends and ultimately to their final one. The Fates spin, and then they snip.

An agent itself, fate also has its agents. They might be named circumstance, chance, and consequence. In Sophocles's *Oedipus Tyrannus*, circumstance places Oedipus, by adoption the prince of Corinth, at a crossroads where by chance he encounters Laius, the king of Thebes, who is traveling to Delphi. A quarrel ensues, the consequences of which leave Laius dead. Pride and willfulness on the part of both the Corinthian prince and the Theban king, the son and the father, result in a tragic end. The cause, however, is only apparent; for it was prophesied years before that a male child born to Laius and Jocasta would kill his father and marry his mother. At the crossroads cause and effect, contingency, become the agents to destiny—again, as Oedipus has once more survived the plot of his parents, who at his birth strove to thwart destiny by infanticide. Continually assuming control of his destiny, Oedipus unwittingly continues to fulfill his destiny. For all his determination not to commit patricide and incest, he has

now committed patricide and will commit incest. He seals his own fate at the same time that he seeks to escape it.

“You are the plague,” the blind seer Tiresias tells Oedipus. The plague that ravishes the land—the plague that Laius had sought to end by his visit to the oracle at Delphi—continues unabated, all the more so because the king’s murder has not yet been avenged. The gods are angry; disorder is declining into chaos. Only when Oedipus succeeds in solving the murder, and thus becomes the victim of his own vengeance, will the plague of civil war and the pestilence itself—founded upon a plague, Thebes suffers affliction upon affliction—begin to be lifted. Tyrannus will become scapegoat, and the land will be purified by his blood. The chain of events might be explained by contingency, but it is destiny that has had its way.

*

Written in the stars, as destiny was long believed to be, for centuries its reading and interpretation lay within the province of astrology, which strove to define correspondences between heavenly activity and earthly events and to identify the influences of the stars, moon, comets, and planets upon human pursuits in every sphere: as above, so below. Man’s concept of his star-directed destiny changed very little from Pythagoras to Alexander Pope, notes E. M. W. Tillyard in *The Elizabethan World Picture*. Not until the seventeenth century, when Bacon’s *New Science*, for one, disposing of the syllogistic givens of scholasticism, embraced empiricism and established a scientific method based upon inductive reasoning, does astrology begin to lose its sway.

In 1722 Daniel Defoe published *A Journal of the Plague Year*. Supposedly an eyewitness account of the 1665 plague in London (Defoe would have been five at the

time) and reportorially detailed to realistic effect, the journal nonetheless links the outbreak of the contagion to the strange appearance of “a blazing star or comet” among other disturbing phenomena that occurred in the heavens months before the plague struck. It signals the approach of “God’s judgments,” and the plague itself represents God’s scourge upon the city. Destiny would appear to be as medieval in its design—and as an aesthetic construct—as it had been when the Black Death ravaged Western Europe in the fourteenth century, except that the fulfillment of any such divine design proves to be, for the author of the journal, a more earthly matter that brings to his empirical account the logic of destiny borne in the science of natural philosophy.

Alessandro Manzoni’s *The Betrothed* (*I Promessi Sposi*) is similarly set in a plague year, that of 1629, in Milan, and while medical practitioners issue dire warnings about the dangers of contagion, the more poetically minded, like the scholar Don Ferrante, see futility in any human attempt to halt or alter the progress of the pestilence. For how can man alter a cause that is astrologically lodged in the heavens, in the “fatal conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter,” in the “influences of the stars”? For Don Ferrante, who may well be familiar with Plato’s cosmology in the *Timaeus* as well as in *The Republic* (Book X, which treats the Myth of Er), destiny is a construct by which one can explain what one cannot know and can attribute to some fixed divine plan all the painful vicissitudes of human existence. However, although the events in *The Betrothed* take place in 1627–30, the novel was written by Manzoni in the 1820s and 30’s, during the turbulent decades preceding the *Risorgimento*. Destiny as it is constructed by Don Ferrante in the time of the novel’s narrative and destiny as it is conceived by Manzoni’s narrator at the time of the novel’s composition, two centuries later, stand at variance, and

the latter (with the advantage of historical hindsight) exposes the shortcomings in the scholastic views of the former. Don Ferrante places man in the hands of destiny; Manzoni's narrator places destiny in the hands of man—or, more precisely, he places the responsibility for one's destiny in the human will, in the morality of one's choices in the face of Milan's plague, social and political as well as actual, and of God's providence.

If destiny as an aesthetic construct of condition in Sophoclean tragedy employs as its agents contingency, chance, and circumstance in bringing the hero to his necessary fate, increasingly in plague literature after the seventeenth century, that construct begins to be internalized by the protagonist, who pursues opportunity as it arises in order to fulfill what he himself conceives to be his destiny. Increasingly, too, the accomplishment of that destiny is linked to the protagonist's will, wherein ambitions, wishes, dreams, pride, and desires supersede providential necessity. If the heroic capabilities of such figures match the human will that drives them, they may indeed fulfill what they deem to be their destiny—unless, or until, their sense of destiny fails them. Certainly it fails Aschenbach in Thomas Mann's novella *Death in Venice* (*Der Tod in Venedig*).

Gustav von Aschenbach has not wanted for success. A celebrated author, he has been honored by the academy and exalted for his knowledge, wisdom, and dignity, although his idealism is in itself passionless. Still, Aschenbach is neither unaware of his shortcomings nor content with his successes. Yet he is not so much plagued by his sense of a destiny that has gone unfulfilled even as it has brought him illustriously to middle age than he is shadowed by a sense of doom. We first encounter him at a cemetery in Munich, where, like an omen, a mysterious stranger appears; he is standing above “two apocalyptic beasts”—presaging pestilence and death—that monumentally guard the steps

of a chapel. And at the end of the tale Aschenbach will die in Venice, of plague, but not before he has pursued what he conceives, or tragically misconceives, as his destiny. It takes the shape of a beautiful androgynous youth named Tadzio. Smitten by the boy, obsessed, Aschenbach refuses to leave the city and thereby forgoes the opportunity to escape the plague, the cholera morbus, which will claim his body as ineluctably as the plague that has long since invaded his psyche. Plague will deliver him, in his delirium, to a stygian abyss—"Aschenbach" might be translated as "ashy brook"—where, lost in Apollonian fantasies of Beauty though he has hopelessly been, he will be feverishly beset by Dionysian desires he has long repressed and can no longer resist. They will lead him again to Tadzio, radiantly imagined, an apotheosis of beauty wrought out of sensual longing (as if the boy's pallor and teeth did not betray in him, too, the presence of disease); and Tadzio, like "the pale and lovely soul-summoner" Hermes at his Stygian station, will lead Aschenbach to the empty sea. The agent of Aschenbach's destiny will prove to be an angel of death.

More comically, but with no less metaphysical significance, an angel appears in the fever dreams of Prior Walter in Tony Kushner's masterly play *Angels in America*; she crashes through the ceiling of Prior's bedroom in fact. For all her bluster and (only apparent) wreckage, however, she too is the product of a plague-ridden man's aesthetic imagination. She is also something of a joke. For even in delirium Prior Walter has a sense of humor as well as a sense of destiny, a destiny that has been played out in the history of the Walter family at least since the eleventh century when the Walters moved from France to England, and from plague to plague, and more plague, down to the eighteenth century when they fled the Old World for the New. If the family lost many a

Walter to pestilence, many another also survived, obviously, to produce more Walters. AIDS in the 1980s would appear to have placed Prior under a death sentence. Prior, though, refuses to die; or rather, he is determined to survive. He chooses not to lose—no scapegoat, he—and he’s quite up to arguing the point with his noisy, winged visitor.

The angel admonishes Prior with two words: “Stop moving!” For centuries the Walters, and scores more like them, have been crossing continents and oceans, carrying with them the disease they were attempting to flee. So stop moving, says the angel: That is the only way to alter destiny and halt the infectious course of plague’s history. No matter that moving—displacement, relocation, migration, expansion—defines America’s manifestly destined history. Prior’s angel, sententious and stentorian, thus delivers her message, but she comes as no messenger from God, who, she informs Prior, has given up on mankind and long abandoned the heavens; so much for divine plans.

A product of his feverish imagination, Prior’s angel appears not without inspiring some awe but ultimately she does not escape her creator Prior’s (or the playwright Kushner’s) mordant wit and satiric eye. Inflated beyond human measure in her Old Testament rhetorical style she is at the same time deflated by the meager substance of her argument. For Prior’s destiny is the province of Prior himself, and one could say the same of the entire cast in Kushner’s play. Not only do the characters clash, so do their constructs of destiny as they draw liberally upon the canon of Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman literature in their attempt to come to grips with plagues real and metaphorical.

The scientifically minded Dr. Rieux in *The Plague (La peste)* by Albert Camus needs no angel to tell him that God has abandoned man and the heavens. The citizen of an absurdist world, Rieux can find no empirical evidence to support any argument that

places human destiny in divine hands. As plague ravages Rieux's community in Oran in an unspecified year in the 1940s, he witnesses firsthand its effects and scientifically speculates upon its cause even as the serum he administers against it proves to be powerless. If the destiny of the community lies in the disease itself, or in the vermin that bear it, then the community is subject randomly, by bad chance and ill circumstance, to its progress for as long as it maintains its progress. Epidemiology meanwhile provides Rieux with a construct by which to explain the nature of the plague and to forecast the destiny of—and his hope for—the community. As scientific as Rieux's construct appears to be, it is equally, and perhaps more truly, aesthetic: a metaphor that artfully orders what are supposedly the known facts of the thing, the plague, in the face of what remains dismayingly unknown.

Father Paneloux, on the other hand, holds more traditional views of destiny. For him, a Jesuit committed to an absolutist universe, plague has been visited upon the community as a punishment by God. In the convention of preachers for five hundred years before him, he delivers plague sermons admonishing the faithful for their sinful ways and urging them toward repentance so that they might appease God, whose displeasure has descended upon them as pestilence, and be redeemed. Although Paneloux's poetic mind can readily conceive, or accept, that the plague, however incomprehensibly tragic it may be as a human event, is part and parcel of some grand, unknowable divine plan, his faith is nonetheless challenged by the mercilessly painful death of an innocent boy. In the end, Paneloux's view of destiny as a construct ensured by the sovereignty of a just God may fail him, yet the scapegoat's fate he apparently chooses may evince as well a faith he cannot forswear. Camus rests Paneloux's case in

ambiguity; not so ambiguously, though, the aesthetic by which the Jesuit father would explain and justify, would rationalize, the fact of the plague ultimately cannot bear the weight of the plague's reality.

*

Plague resists the very constructs that would aesthetically contain and explain it. Again and again plague thrusts its victims and survivors into the maw of fear, panic, horror, guilt, and confusion; and the literature recording it can only attempt to make sense of the fact, poetically or scientifically, or both, unless it presumes to find sense only in the lack of sense. Still, even then, as its narrative collapses incoherently into fragments—with chaos deposing cause while effect becomes random events and destiny imitates anarchy—the aesthetic process continues.

So does the dialogue: not just the dialogue in the text itself, as it appears on the author's stage or page, and not just the dialogue of the author with other authors in the arena of plague literature; but also the dialogue that takes place between the author and the author's audience—an apperceptive audience—on the stage of the text, where they collide or collude in the process of mutual illumination. For the substance and significance in the language of any literary text is continually being reviewed and revised and rewritten by its audience. (Mikhail Bakhtin views all language in literary texts as dialogue, in that "both the composition and, particularly, the style of the utterance depend on those to whom the utterance is addressed" (95).

So it is that Sophocles's *Oedipus Tyrannus* maintains its dramatic power today, however conspicuously the Hellenic concept of destiny as a divine determinant figures into the dynamics of the play. Two millennia, though, have altered the significance of, and

response to, the play's aesthetic. If, for Sophocles, Oedipus's hubris lies in his willful attempt to defy the gods and alter his destiny, and in his willful blindness to such futility, an audience today might view him as a man thwarted by his own destiny, a man whose fate is less fixed in the heavens than it is seated in his psyche. Apperception alters appreciation—continually: While the HBO production of *Angels in America* in 2005 may repeat the same words as did the Broadway production twelve years earlier, it does not speak the same language because its words are not heard in the same way; medical cocktails, for instance, were not routinely, and successfully, used in the treatment of AIDS in 1993, whereas the “golden horde” of AZT, with its mythic promise of a cure in 1985, had by 2005 long since proved to be ineffectual.

In the highly allusive text of his depiction of AIDS in the mid 1980s, Kushner attends not only to the cultural, social, and political issues in postmodern America but also, with intellectual dexterity, to the relationship of his play in its time to plague texts—biblical, historical, epic—of former times. Thus, when the freewheeling political careerist Roy Cohn, dismissing his doctor's AIDS diagnosis, chooses to call his disease, or destiny, liver cancer, he views it as a divine chastisement in a “stygian” world; the allusive adjective casts his argument into the dialogical arena of literary texts at least as ancient as Homeric myth. It also helps him to insulate himself against the doctor's more scientifically informed construct, which attaches Cohn's destiny to a mysterious retrovirus, HIV; reviewing the symptoms, Roy's doctor litanizes: “Like Kaposi sarcoma. These lesions. Or your throat problem. Or the glands.”

The litanization of scientific detail, not uncommon in plague literature, is in its textual effect, and perhaps in its authorial purpose, not unlike the poetic incantation to an objectified

God, be He scourge or comforter. For the translation of plague, whether into scientific or poetic language, insulates what is perceived against what is. No less than invocations to God in plea or prayer do litanies of signs and symptoms, of elixirs and protocols, of names and numbers, enlist language in an aesthetic exercise to distance and to displace, or at least to keep at bay, the perceived horror of plague, which can otherwise only be suffered. No doubt such utterances, whether in terms metaphysical or medical, resonate, too, with the addressees of the texts, with the audiences, whose sentiments in the dialogue with plague texts may range from sympathy to outrage to antagonism in the face of the subject's incomprehensibility as they respond to its aesthetic representations by Kushner or Sophocles, Camus or Mann, Defoe or Manzoni. While Kushner's utterance in *Angels in America* may be more eloquent and Defoe's in *A Journal of the Plague Year* more trenchant, in their impulse the playwright and novelist both are literary kin of a rhymester conjuring up a pied piper who charms rats (and children) out of medieval Hamelin or a street poet canting "Ring around a rosy" to ward off fear in those dark days when the Black Death redefined destiny.

*

The redefinition of destiny in plague texts—more particularly, in the plague texts of Defoe, Manzoni, Mann, Camus, and Kushner—is the focus of the readings in the five chapters that follow. As an aesthetic construct informed variously by moral paradigms and philosophical principles, by scientific intelligence and religious persuasion, destiny lends to these plague texts meaning in the shape of metaphor, the lexicon of destiny presuming to make sense of what in fact, baldly and terrifyingly, lacks or defies sense. For destiny, like the text that it inhabits and illuminates, is more a vital response to the incomprehensible than it is a reflection of a century, period, reality, or age in which it would appear to be fixed. Indeed, it

more often than not proves to be unfixed, for the literary author of destiny, in responding to the enormity of plague, is not only confronting its reality but also aesthetically insulating the world in his text from its reality, and in that process is destiny reconceived and re-presented. The aesthetic shifts; the metaphor is reshaped. Just as a pestiferous virus or bacillus mutates to escape the serum that would obliterate it, so is destiny continually being retooled to meet the challenge of its relentless enemy in the literature of plague.

Chapter 2
A Journal of the Plague Year

How doth the city sit solitary,
that was full of people!
She is become a widow, that
was great among the nations!
—Lamentations 1:1

Written in 1722—just two years after the outbreak of plague in Marseilles—but relating events that occurred six decades earlier, in 1665, when the Great Plague ravaged London, Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* purports to offer an eyewitness account of the infestation’s progress and effects. Defoe himself was only five years old at the time, although, as many students of the novel have pointed out, he may have nonetheless retained some memory of both the plague and the Great Fire of London that occurred a year later and supposedly eradicated the bubonic contagion.¹ The novel’s first-person narrative, however, is rendered as the text not of the author Defoe but of a fictive saddler identified as H. F.—quite probably for Harry Foe, Defoe’s uncle and, like the narrator, a saddler—who recorded in a journal the reality of the plague as he day by day observed and experienced it.

That the novel is written as a journal in the first person by a supposed eyewitness to the plague lends both immediacy and credence to the vivid descriptions of the city in

¹ The narrator takes exception with “quacking philosophers” who “pretend” that in the fire “the seeds of plague were entirely destroyed”; he argues, instead, that “had the seeds of the plague remained in the houses, not to be destroyed but by fire, how has it been that they have not since broken out, seeing [that the great parishes] . . . where the fire never came, and where the plague raged with the greatest violence, remain still in the same condition they were in before?” (238)

the grips of the deadly contagion. The narrative indeed assumes an illusion of realism that is further reinforced by the narrator's use of statistics, documentation, and firsthand testimony, some of it invented but much of it real, as Defoe availed himself of literature generated during the actual period of the plague and fire by such chroniclers as Dr. Nathaniel Hodges (who appears as Dr. Heath in *Journal*), the Puritan minister Thomas Vincent, and the diarists John Evelyn and, more famously, Samuel Pepys. Together, Defoe's narrative devices effect a verisimilitude that the fictional *Journal* shares with actual firsthand accounts.²

Not least among the reasons that Defoe, twice a bankrupt, chose to write a historical fictional account of the 1665 plague in London was his need to make money. More significant to the topic at hand than the novel's commercial possibilities, however, is its relation to Defoe's nonfictional tract *Due Preparations for the Plague, as much for the soul as the body* (also published in 1722),³ by which he may have hoped either to pique public interest in the upcoming *Journal of the Plague Year*, as some critics have suggested, or, as others have posited, to alert and inform Londoners to the necessary precautions in the event that the plague of 1720 should spread to England from Marseilles.⁴ Certainly, during the time that Defoe was writing *Journal*, the English public was in general alarmed by the terrifying stories coming out of France about the epidemic

² Defoe's novelistic depiction of the London plague rhetorically echoes other, literary and historical accounts of plague, as Philip Ziegler observes in *The Black Death*: "The same phrases are used to describe the appearance of the disease, the same exaggerated estimates of mortality appear, the same passions aroused, the same economic and social consequences ensue" (110). "Plague literature," David Roberts points out in his introduction to the Oxford edition of *Journal*, "exhibits striking rhetorical consistency in describing strikingly consistent events" (vii).

³ Scholarly debate continues in regard to the publication and purpose of Defoe's tract, which appeared in March of 1722, about the same time as *Journal*—perhaps just before the novel's publication, perhaps just after.

⁴ The outbreak of bubonic plague in 1720 in Marseilles marked the end of what was commonly known as the Black Death, which had been raging off and on in Europe since 1348. Not until 1865, however, was the bubonic bacillus—*Yersinia pestis*—isolated and named.

in Marseilles, and Defoe's intent in *Due Preparations* as well as, at least in part, in *Journal* may have been to reinforce the stance and instructions of the new Prime Minister Robert Walpole's government in regard to the plague should it break out on English shores. Furthermore, however unsettling a graphically detailed narrative of horrors *Journal* may be, it is also an edifying tale of survival and, implicitly, of triumph; for who would not have been amazed by the monumental strides, both social and architectural, England had made in the fifty-six years between the historical devastation of London first by plague, then by fire,⁵ and the publication of Defoe's *Journal* fictively recounting and recalling the "Great Visitation"?⁶

Without question, the Great Visitation of 1665, coupled with the Great Fire in 1666, cataclysmically rent the social fabric of seventeenth-century London, which had already suffered stress in a series of radically disruptive political events: The Civil Wars between the Royalists and Parliamentarians, which led to the regicide of Charles I in 1649, had delivered England to the Puritan strictures of the Interregnum under the leadership of Oliver Cromwell, who assumed the title of Lord Protector in 1653, and then, in 1660, with the return of the Stuart dynasty to the throne in the person of Charles II, to the excesses of the Restoration. Twenty-two years after the plague and fire, England would witness the Glorious Revolution of 1688, which would bring to the throne from

⁵ While the Great Fire of London may have effectively ended the plague, it also reduced two-thirds of the city to charred and ashen ruin. Although Christopher Wren's plans for rebuilding London were never adopted, upon his appointment by Charles II as the King's Surveyor of Works in 1669 Wren was instrumental in the enormous undertaking of the city's architectural reconstruction in general and was more particularly involved with the rebuilding of fifty-one churches, most notably St. Paul's Cathedral. His designs in large part defined the city's new skyline, which visually attested to its phoenix-like triumph in the wake of catastrophe.

⁶ The original title page of *A Journal of the Plague Year* bore the following subtitle and author line: "*Being Observations or Memorials, of the most Remarkable Occurrences, as well Publick as Private, which happened in London during the last Great Visitation in 1665. Written by a Citizen who continued all the while in London. Never made publick before.*"

Holland William III of Orange and his Protestant wife Mary II, daughter of England's then-reigning (Roman Catholic) monarch, James II. While *Journal's* narrator, H. F., a tradesman and a Dissenter, and thus both a likely critic and a victim of the English parliament's intolerant Anglo-Catholic policies during the reign of Charles II (although the king himself favored indulgence of both Papists and Dissenters),⁷ might view the monarchy with disfavor—as might his equally freethinking nephew, Defoe, who authored *Journal* during the reign of the Hanoverian George I—he does not in his plague narrative explicitly draw metaphoric parallels between the ills of the monarchy and the disease in the city.⁸ Neither—and not surprisingly, given the political disposition of the Nonconformist narrator—does H. F. make a point of the fact that many seventeenth-century Londoners viewed the plague as a divine retribution visited upon the city for the Parliamentarians' execution of Charles I, the regicide having disrupted the natural order of things by violating the divine right of kings, a doctrine that had been firmly established in England by the Tudors (and controversially challenged in 1649 by John Milton in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*). Nor does H. F. attach any political significance or national blame to the fact that the plague came to England by way of Holland, despite the long contention over trade routes that prompted the Anglo-Dutch Wars in the seventeenth century; of course, by the time *Journal* was being written by Defoe in the eighteenth

⁷ A proponent of religious tolerance, Charles II nonetheless acquiesced to the strictures of the Clarendon Code passed by Parliament, which included the 1662 Act of Uniformity. As Dissenters, Defoe's family refused to subscribe to this mandate of conformity to the Church's Articles, and "Defoe's earliest years thus included an intimate acquaintance with religious intolerance and persecution," writes Cynthia Wall in her introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of *Journal*. So it was, interestingly, that like all non-Anglicans, "Defoe was prohibited from attending the usual schools and universities of England, and instead of the traditional classical education in Latin and Greek was taught such 'modern' subjects as astronomy and geography" (xxi-ii).

⁸ In Manzoni's *The Betrothed*, by contrast, the plague of Milan in the 1630s is as much political as it is bubonic, and in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* social, political, and cultural viruses, no less than HIV, abound in Reagan's America. Camus's *The Plague* also invites allegorical interpretation, whereby the pestilence, for instance, might be read in part as the German Occupation of France.

century, the fourteen-year reign (1688–1702) of William of Orange and Mary, which Defoe had supported and which he would be loath to criticize, would have assumed its place in the history of the English monarchy.⁹

Instead, in regard to Holland, the narrator matter-of-factly notes, in the opening sentence of his journal: “It was about the beginning of September, 1664, that I, among the rest of my neighbours, heard in ordinary discourse that the plague was returned again in Holland” (3). The sentence sets the tone for the narrative, which for the most part proceeds dispassionately, in its own “ordinary discourse,” as it amasses statistical data and eyewitnesses’ details in regard to the months of signs and rumors before the outbreak of the plague, then the early, isolated cases of plague (one in December, another in February) followed by a period of apparent dormancy (until late April), then slowly the escalation of contagion into the terrible, violent dog days of summer. So, for instance, with sobriety and restraint, with no striving for drama beyond that which lies in the unadorned facts as H. F. has been able to glean them, the journal marks the date and location of the first, largely unremarked death by the dread distemper: “the first person that died of the plague was on December 20, or thereabouts, 1664, and in or about Long Acre,” the infection having been borne in “a parcel of silks imported from Holland, and first opened in that house” (200).¹⁰ In six months the weekly bills of mortality will be

⁹ In June 1685 Defoe, then twenty-five, actively backed the Monmouth Rebellion, an attempt by Protestants to replace the recently crowned James II, a Roman Catholic, with the Protestant, if illegitimate son of Charles II, the Duke of Monmouth. Within weeks the rebellion was quashed, decisively in a battle at Sedgwick, and Monmouth was beheaded for treason on July 15. Defoe states, in his own words, that he was “in arms under the Duke of Monmouth,” although no account survives as to the extent of his participation; nor is there any record of his prosecution in the aftermath. As John J. Richetti notes, further, Defoe may have sought refuge along with other English sympathizers in exile in Holland; a general pardon was issued in March 1686 (3).

¹⁰ In similarly unremarkable circumstances will the 1630 plague in Milan, as it is chronicled in Manzoni’s *The Betrothed*, originate with an Italian foot soldier who had been in the service of Spain. Likewise, in Mann’s *Death in Venice*, an Asiatic strain of cholera is brought to Mediterranean ports by Syrian traders.

listing plague deaths by the hundreds, in eight by the tens of thousands, and with those numbers, meticulously recorded in his journal, often without comment, H. F. compounds the horrors of the private miseries and doleful public events he depicts, their effect all the more chilling for being composed in a soberly descriptive, reportorial mode.

Still, the narrator's plain prose may on occasion quiver with apocalyptic resonance, as it distinctly does when he recalls "several odd accidents" (21) that occurred some months before the outbreak of the plague in London and presaged the city's destiny:

In the first place, a blazing star or comet appeared for several months before the plague, as there did the year after another, a little before the fire. The old women and the phlegmatic hypochondriac part of the other sex whom I could almost call old women too, remarked (especially afterwards, though not till both their judgments were over) that those two comets passed directly over the city, and that so very near the houses that it was plain they imported something peculiar to the city alone: that the comet before the pestilence was a faint, dull, languid colour and its motion very heavy, solemn, and slow; but that the comet before the fire was bright and sparkling, or as others said, flaming, and its motion swift and furious and that accordingly one foretold a heavy judgment, slow but severe, terrible but frightful, as was the plague; but the other foretold a stroke, sudden, swift, and fiery as the conflagration. (21)

Skeptical though the narrator may be of astronomical signs and astrological predictions, which "serve to show how far people were really overcome with delusions" (26)—as were astrologers themselves, who "added stories of the conjunctions of planets in a malignant manner," and ministers, too, whose "sermons rather sank than lifted up the hearts of their hearers" (27)—he himself had witnessed both the comet that preceded, and perhaps prefigured, the plague and the one that, a year later, appeared before, and may have foretold, the fire. At the same time that H. F. may be inclined to dismiss interpretations of astral phenomena as heavenly portents as being more poetical than

scientific, more the products of fancy than of reason, he cannot fully disregard the pull of their possibility. In color—“faint, dull, languid” in the case of the first comet;¹¹ “bright and sparkling” in that of the second—and in motion, that of the first being “very heavy, solemn, and slow” and of the second being “bright and sparkling,” H. F. can conceive, or concede, that “they imported something peculiar to the city alone”: one portending pestilence, “slow but severe, terrible but frightful”; the other, the conflagration, “sudden, swift, and fiery.” After all, for twenty-two centuries, at least since the flourishing of the Pythagoreans in ancient Greece, philosophers and mathematicians and astronomers had been affixing human destiny to the stars and drawing correspondences between heavenly activity and earthly events. Indeed, as E. M. W. Tillyard observes in *The Elizabethan World Picture*, the attachment of human destiny to divine ordinance vis-à-vis the doctrine of correspondence remains essentially unchanged from the Pythagoreans to Alexander Pope (67). In the intellectual climate of the eighteenth century the scientific impulse to explain natural phenomena no more thwarted a poetic response to them than did religious beliefs contravene empirical data.

Between 1615 and 1621 Johannes Kepler published his theories in regard to the new, Copernican-based astronomy, what he called “celestial physics” (an endeavor that, for him, illuminated rather than abnegated God’s divine intelligence in the creation and design of the universe); and in 1687 Sir Isaac Newton, building on Kepler’s laws of planetary motion, published his law of universal gravitation in *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica*. By 1664, the year in which H. F. begins his tale, all of René

¹¹ H.F.’s description of the first comet is not unlike that of Samuel Pepys in Volume V of his *Diaries*, although Pepys appears to be more disappointed than awed by the sight of it in the December sky: “This evening, I being informed, did look and saw the Comett, which is now, whether worn away or not I know not, but appears not with a tail; but only is larger and duller then any other star, and is come to rise betimes and to make an arch, and is gone quite to a new place in heaven then it was before . . .” (355-6).

Descartes's voluminous *Le Monde*, which endorsed and incorporated key Copernican principles in its cosmology—as had Galileo's controversial (heretical, by ruling of the Inquisition) *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems* in 1632—had been published. At the time of the plague, then, and in the months before it when a comet blazed in the sky above London, and certainly by 1722 when Defoe's *Journal* “made publick” its “most Remarkable Occurrences,” the revolution in thought that produced the new astronomy, be it “celestial physics” (Kepler) or “corpuscularian cosmology” (Descartes), had brought natural philosophy to the fore of intellectual discussion and debate among philosophers and theologians, and at the court: In 1675 Charles II commissioned the Royal Greenwich Observatory and appointed an Astronomer Royal. Yet Newton himself was quite able to invest the stars with poetical properties, and the inscription on his monument in Westminster Abbey attests to his religious principles and Christian morality: “he vindicated by his philosophy the majesty of God mighty and good, and expressed the simplicity of the Gospel in his manners.”¹² Among the thinkers and theorists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, then, the embrace of physics and natural philosophy was not concomitant to a divorce from religion. “Both . . . and” more commonly characterized intellectual attitudes than “either . . . or”; and albeit philosophic or scientific¹³ perspectives might temper or color religious postures, the impulse to reconcile the two was often less apparent than a willingness to explore the

¹² “. . . *Dei O. M. Majestatem Philosophiâ asseruit, / Evangelij Simpliciter Moribus expressit . . .*” On the monument, the inscription appears in Latin.

¹³ As the Oxford English Dictionary points out regarding “science”: “In the 17th and 18th c. the notion now usually expressed by *science* [a branch of study concerned with a connected body of demonstrated truths or with observed facts systematically classified and more or less colligated by being brought under general laws] was commonly expressed as *philosophy*.” Not until 1834 does the word “scientist” enter the language.

possibilities that lay both in the physical universe and in metaphysical realms, or simply to ignore the empirical facts of the former while pursuing the poetic reality of the latter.¹⁴

In his description of the comet H. F. is attentive to the empirical data—its color, its motion—but he cannot ignore the poetry, although he assigns it to “old women and the phlegmatic hypochondriac part of the other sex” who remarked how closely to the houses the comet passed and thus “imported something peculiar to the city alone.” So it is that the comet becomes an omen, foretelling a judgment “heavy” like its motion and not just “slow and solemn” but rather in the more foreboding terms of “slow but severe, terrible but frightful”; and H. F. adds, “as was the plague.” Of course, the pestilential destiny that the ominous comet apparently so correctly foretells comes with some benefit of the narrator’s hindsight; he is recalling the comet after the plague has arrived. He is also aesthetically investing the fact of the comet with the fiction of its portent. (So is Defoe as the author; contemporaneous sources such as Hodges, Gadbury, and Pepys state that the first comet appeared only in the month of December 1664, not “for several months” as Defoe’s narrator H. F., presumably accurately in the context of the novel, records.) Reportage H. F.’s journal may be, yet it nonetheless makes of the comet languishing in the London sky for months before the plague a harbinger of horror; it makes of the comet’s appearance and course not just a natural phenomenon (which it scientifically explicably is) but also an extraordinary celestial event, a wayward star signaling woes to

¹⁴ Tillyard cites, for example, the Elizabethan poet John Davies’s poem “The Orchestra,” which asserts that “Only the earth doth stand for ever still” and then, in a parenthesis, alludes to the Copernicans: “(Although some wits enrich with learning’s skill / Say heav’n stands firm and that the earth doth fleet / And swiftly turneth underneath their feet).” While Davies “must have known that this [Copernican] science had by then broken the fiction of the eternal and immutable heavens,” Tillyard notes, “he trusts in his age and the beliefs he has inherited and like most of his contemporaries refuses to allow a mere inconsistency to interfere with the things he really has at heart” (106).

come.¹⁵ The dis-ease in the heavens prefigures the correspondent disease on earth. The phenomenon is real; the interpretation is aesthetic—it casts the scientific reality of the phenomenon in apocalyptic light. That H. F. can imagine that human destiny lies in the stars, however, neither alters nor denies for him the fact that daily death comes blackly in a plague.

H. F. admits to being “apt to look upon them [the two comets] as the forerunners and warnings of God’s judgments” (21); still, for H. F., correspondence is not equivalent to cause. An omen in the heavens may be interpreted as the prefiguration of an upheaval on earth, but a blazing star or comet or unusual planetary activity does not itself infest the city with pestilence. Yet, H. F. notes, many are the alarms sounded by astrologers who read signs as influence: “The astrologers added stories of the conjunctions of planets in a malignant manner and with a mischievous influence . . . intimating that those conjunctions foretold drought, famine, and pestilence” (26). As Watson Nicholson demonstrates in his study of Defoe’s sources for *Journal*, much of the historical detail is drawn from Dr. Nathaniel Hodges’s *Loimologia*, a factual account of the epidemic that was originally published in Latin in 1665 but appeared in English translation in 1720. Hodges remarks how “wild rumors and predictions terrified the common sort,” whose “apprehensions were further augmented” by the “terrifying predictions of astrologers” when “the comet and the conjunctions of Saturn and Jupiter, and Saturn and Mars,”

¹⁵ Not only generally does H. F.’s attribution of portent to the natural phenomenon support Tillyard’s assertion in regard to the viability of Pythagorean cosmology from the fifth century BCE to the Age of Pope, but also specifically: Aristotle, for one, assigned comets (which he named, the Greek *kometes* meaning “hairy tail”) to the sublunary realm of a geocentric universe, but the astronomy did not preclude his viewing the comet as a herald of earthly catastrophe like famine, flood, or plague. (See Aristotle’s *Meteorology*, Book I.561.20.) Indeed, the motion of the comet’s body in the sky, its bright forelight followed by a vaporous tail, might suggest the passage of a messenger.

appeared in the night skies (72).¹⁶ In consideration of the actual influence that astrologers deemed comets and conjunctions, by some divine ordinance, malignantly exerted upon London's destiny in the last months of 1664, H. F. finds more cause for their appearance in science than in superstition. Astrologers prognosticate; astronomers calculate, and H. F. acknowledges, not entirely without irony, "that natural causes are assigned by astronomers for such things, and that their motions and even their revolutions are calculated, or pretended to be calculated" (22). Inclined, then, as H. F. may be to see comets and conjunctions as omens—as "forerunners or foretellers" of human destiny—in light of the astronomy he cannot do so "perfectly"; and by the same light, unable rationally to attribute to them evil influence or malign cause, he can see them as "procurers" of destiny barely at all: "they cannot be so perfectly called the forerunners or foretellers, much less procurers, of such events as pestilence, war, fire, and the like" (22).

As much as astronomy may temper astrology in H. F.'s construct of destiny, in the narrative that he relates the terror that grips the populace in plague-ridden London is shaped by the astrologers' readings of the city's destiny in celestial signs. As Barbara Tuchman observes in her lucid historical narrative of bubonic plague, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* (one of the calamities being the Black Death of 1348), in the Middle Ages "the influence of the planets could explain everything otherwise unaccounted for. Astronomy was the noblest science, and astrology, after God, the greatest determinant of affairs" (55). Three centuries would not effectively alter the position of the "noblest science" in relation to its awesome cousin. In 1665, the year of the plague, the English astrologer and almanac-writer John Gadbury would perorate in

¹⁶ In Manzoni's *The Betrothed*, the distinguished scholar Don Ferrante, in defiance of all natural philosophy, also lodges the cause of the 1630 plague in Milan in the conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter.

De Cometis: “The Blazing Star, / Threat’ning the world with Famine, Plague, and War: / To Princes, Death! To Kingdoms, many Crosses; / To all Estates, inevitable Losses! / To Herdsmen, Rot; to Plowmen, hapless Seasons; / To Sailors, Storms; To Cities, Civil Treasons”! (54) Classifying the comet by its color—“*Leaden, Envious, Pale, Ashen*” (9)—Gadbury would declare it “*Saturnine*,” thereby denoting “there shall happen in the world many pernicious evils as *Famine, Plague . . . and absolute Destruction* of all things that grow upon the earth useful for *man* and beast” (23). More bewildered than convinced by the apocalyptic extreme of astrologers like Gadbury—“their predictions ran upon a most dreadful plague, which should lay the whole city, and even the kingdom, waste, and should destroy all the nations, both man and beast” (26)—H. F. nonetheless acknowledges, and laments, the hold of so doomful a construct of destiny upon the imagination of the panic-stricken Londoners. In their terror they have been “overcome with delusions” (26), which have been reinforced by ministers whose sermons compound the predictions of absolute destruction with the possibility of eternal damnation.

In the face of a plague that threatened with extermination the very existence of mankind on earth at the same time that it evidenced no apparent earthly cause, ministers no less than astrologers and philosophers and doctors turned to the heavens for an explanation, and they found it not in planets and comets but in the divine determinant beyond the stars: in God; more particularly, the wrathful God of the Old Testament. And to H. F.’s dismay, it is an explanation they preach to parishioners who are “out of their wits already” (26). “Planets might satisfy the learned doctors, but God was closer to the average man. A scourge so sweeping and unsparing without any visible cause could only be seen as Divine punishment upon mankind for its sins,” says Tuchman (103), in regard

to the stern biblical message that informed constructs of the plague in 1348 and that, however medieval in its tenor, would continue to typify plague narratives into the more enlightened seventeenth century, and beyond. Certainly it is evident in the responses to London's plague in 1665, in the pulpit and on the streets. H. F. grants that the ministers' intent in their plague sermons may have been to "strengthen[] the resolution of the people" in order to "quicken[] them to repentance" for the sins that have so roused the ire of God. He does point out, however, the preachers' discourses cause their parishioners only more "injury" (26). Filled with apocalyptic terrors, "prophesying nothing but evil tidings," the sermons "sent them [the parishioners] away in tears . . . with the apprehensions of being utterly destroyed" rather than "guiding them, at least not enough, to cry to heaven to mercy" (27). While H. F. himself views the plague as a divine scourge—he declares the two comets to be "warnings of God's judgments," and when the second one appears, he cannot "but say God had not yet sufficiently scourged the city" (22)—but he also places Divinity in the light of the Gospel, by which judgment is tempered with mercy and wrath with love: "so I must confess I thought the ministers should have done also, imitating our blessed Lord and Master in this, that His whole Gospel is full of declarations from heaven of God's mercy, and His readiness to receive penitents and forgive them" (26-7). Pulpit threats of hellfire and brimstone for the unrepentant, then, H. F. would mollify with the New Testament message, with what "is called the Gospel of Peace and the Gospel of Grace" (27).

The madness—or "injury," "delusion," "apprehensions," or "unhappy temper"—effected by apocalyptic constructs of destiny that laid a city in the path of a plague and not only subjected it to the malign influence of ill-conjoined planets and blazing stars but

also threatened its sinful citizenry with death and damnation by a wrathful God is evident everywhere in London's streets. Less by the plague itself than by the dire prognostications of astrologers and pronouncements of ministers—by the almanacs of William Lilly and John Gadbury, by religious books like *Come out of her, my People, lest you be Partaker of her Plagues* and *Fair Warning* and *Britain's Remembrancer*—has the populace become “more addicted to prophecies and astrological conjurations, dreams, and old wives' tales than ever they were before or since” (22). Afflicted by an “unhappy temper” (22), one man, like the biblical “Jonah to Nineveh, cried in the streets, ‘Yet forty days, and London shall be destroyed,’” while another ran near naked, crying “Oh, the great and dreadful God!” reports H. F. and compares him to “a man that [Flavius] Josephus mentions, who cried, ‘Woe to Jerusalem!’ a little before the destruction of that city” (23).¹⁷ (The naked man is identified later in the text as the real-life Solomon Eagle, a Quaker madman, or seer, who prophesied doom and called for repentance as he walked the streets of London, sometimes with a pot of flaming coals on his head.) Although H. F. does not draw the parallels explicitly, the figures of Jonah in Nineveh, which was spared

¹⁷ The cry of woe appears, too, in the biblical book of the prophet Jeremiah: “Woe unto thee, Jerusalem! wilt thou not be made clean?” (Jeremiah 13:27). Significantly, too, the Book of Lamentations, attributed to Jeremiah (his authorship is questionable), addresses the destruction of Jerusalem (in 586 BCE, by the army of the Babylonians, though they are not specified in the threnodies) because she “hath grievously sinned” and “become an unclean thing” (1:8) in the eyes of a displeased God. The “man that Josephus mentions” appears in his *War of the Jews* (Book VI, Chapter 5) under the name of “Jesus, the son of Ananus, a plebeian and a husbandman, who, four years before the war began, and at a time when the city was in a very great peace and prosperity, came to that feast [Pentecost] whereon it is the our custom for everyone to make tabernacles to God in the temple (301) and began on a sudden to cry aloud, ‘A voice from the east, a voice from the west, a voice from the four winds, a voice against Jerusalem and the holy house, a voice against the bridegrooms and the brides, and a voice against the whole people!’ This was his cry as he went about by day and by night, in all the lanes of the city. . . . Hereupon our rulers, supposing, as the case proved to be, that this was a sort of divine fury in the man, brought him to the Roman procurator, (304) where he was whipped till his bones were laid bare; yet did he not make any supplication to himself, not shed any tears, but turning his voice to the most lamentable tone possible, at every stroke of the whip his answer was ‘Woe to Jerusalem!’ (306) . . . Now during all the time that passed before the war began this man did not go near any of the citizens, nor was seen by them while he said so; but every day he uttered these lamentable words, as if it were his premeditated vow, ‘Woe, woe to Jerusalem!’ (307) . . .” (742-3). The numbers parenthesized in the quoted material refer to the pages in the original Greek text.

destruction by God's mercy, and the doomsayer in Jerusalem, which fell to the Romans in AD 70, are implicitly analogous to the street prophets in London, as are the Assyrians and Hebrews to the Londoners. As was the fate of ancient cities in the hands of the Old Testament God, so, too, is the destiny of London in the punitive grip of a wrathful God. Furthermore, for nearly a year before Jerusalem fell a comet was visible in the night sky, and a meteor in the shape of a sword also hovered over the city just before its fall. Flavius Josephus in his history of the First Jewish-Roman War alludes both to a "meteor resembling a sword," which, he reports, "hung over Jerusalem during one whole year" and to "the comet that hung over Jerusalem one whole year together in the figure of a sword," as Watson Nicholson points out (166).¹⁸

It would seem that "a flaming sword" appeared in the London sky as well, but not metaphorically. Its hilt "in a hand coming out of a cloud" and its "point hanging directly over the city," it is neither comet nor meteor. It is, for H. F., the product of naught but "air and vapour" and imagination "turned wayward and possessed" (23). It is madness, and mass hysteria: "'Yes, I see it all plainly,' says one: 'there's the sword as plain as can be.' Another saw the angel. One saw his very face, and cried out what a glorious creature he was! One saw one thing, and one another" (24). And what it signifies for these "poor people . . . terrified by the force of their own imagination"—as H. F. characterizes them—is "a time of God's anger, and dreadful judgments were approaching" (24).¹⁹ As

¹⁸ By most accounts, a comet appeared ominously over Jerusalem for close to a year before the city was taken by the Romans, while the sword-like meteor appeared closer to the time of the city's fall. Both celestial phenomena assume the same shape for the same duration in Flavius Josephus's account in *War of the Jews*, which reads: "Thus there was a star resembling a sword, which stood over the city, and a comet that continued a whole year" (742).

¹⁹ With the apparitional image of the angel wielding a fiery sword the narrator may also be alluding to a biblical counterpart, for an angel similarly appears over a plague-infested Jerusalem and threatens to destroy the city in 957 BCE during the reign of King David, who has, at the provocation of Satan, according to the account in I Chronicles 21, offended God by "number[ing] Israel." David repents, God

H. F. daily surveys his native, plague-afflicted city, he records the terrifying shapes destiny takes for the people at large; for they imagine not only avenging angels in the clouds but all manner of horrors: “hearses and coffins”; “heaps of dead bodies lying unburied” (23).²⁰ In the reading of portentous signs in the clouds over London H. F.’s account again echoes Flavius Josephus’s on the siege of Jerusalem, wherein the beleaguered Jews fancy that armored soldiers and charging chariots take shape in clouds flecked by the Judean sunset.²¹ Although H. F. refrains from reading London’s destiny in the clouds, he does not repudiate claims that the visitation of the plague stems from divine vengeance—“I looked upon this dismal time to be a particular season of Divine vengeance,” he writes in another context (68)—and he shapes the tenor not as an avenging angel but as God, “as it were, His sword drawn in His hand on purpose to take vengeance . . . on the whole nation” (69). As for all the airy apparitions that “the poor, terrified people” contend they see, H. F. considers them to be but morbid, self-created fantasies: “So hypochondriac fancies represent / Ships, armies, battles in the firmament; / Till steady eyes the exhalations solve, / And all to its first matter, cloud, resolve” (23).²²

relents, the plague is lifted and Jerusalem is spared. In 2 Samuel 24, the pestilence likewise comes as a punishment on David for conducting a census, by which, with no assist from Satan, he has belied his trust in God. Josephus includes the story of King David’s census and the plague upon Jerusalem in Book VI, Chapter 13, of his history *Antiquities of the Jews* (206).

²⁰ In his attempt to verify the historical accuracy of the details in Defoe’s *Journal*, Watson Nicholson finds: “In a newsletter from Hamburg, December 24, 1664 (published in *Newes*, January 5, 1665), we read that ‘The great comet lately seen here, appears no longer with us; but here is now another, much less then the former, rising South-East, and setting North-West. They write from Vienna by the last [mail], of a great Comet seen there also, shewing itself first from the East and pointing to Hungary. There has been likewise seen in the ayre the appearance of a Coffin, which causes great anxiety of thought among the people’ (67).

²¹ “Besides these, a few days after that feast, on the twenty-first day of the month Artemisius [Jyar], (297) a certain prodigious and incredible phenomenon appeared; I suppose the account of it would seem to be a fable, were it not related by those who saw it, (298) and were not the events that followed it of so considerable a nature as to deserve such signals; for, before sunset, chariots and troops of soldiers in their armor were seen (299) running about among the clouds, and surrounding of cities” (*War of the Jews*, 742).

²² This verse is quoted by H. F. in the text of *Journal*, but research has not turned up its source. It is not unlikely that Defoe composed it himself; he was fond of writing doggerel—he closes his journal with verse clearly his own.

Repeatedly throughout his journal H. F. refers to plague-infested London's populace as "the poor people." The mass of Londoners, threatened not only by a destiny ill constructed from the prognostications of astrologers and admonitions of ministers that feed their own worst imaginings but also by the reality of pestilence, are of course poor in the sense of being pitiable; and certainly H. F. is not without sympathy for their plight. More fundamentally, they are also poor by social class and economic status, i.e., they are also *the* poor. And the plague of 1665 is essentially a poor people's plague, as were those of 1603, 1625, and 1636: "Plague was no stranger to London" in the seventeenth century, as George Bell notes in *The Great Plague: The chronicles of St. Bride's No. 2*, and as the "full horror [of the fourth visitation] developed," it came to be known as "the Poore's Plague" (2).

By August, when the pestilence had spread from the parishes outside the walls of the city into the city itself, "so great a multitude" had fled to the country that H. F., as he says, "began to think there would be really none but magistrates and servants left" (17). That great multitude included the royal Court, which Charles II "removed early, viz., in the month of June" (17), first to Hampton Court, then to Oxford; the Parliament; the Inns of Court; and along with virtually all the lawyers, the merchants and doctors and divines. So it was that the city's vast population, which in the wake of the Restoration had grown by "above a hundred thousand people more than it had ever held before" (20),²³ had again been greatly diminished, on the one hand, by the exodus of the professional and merchant

²³ On this point, too, the narrator draws a parallel to the fall of ancient Jerusalem, in that the Jews had gathered there in "incredible number" to celebrate Passover when the Romans laid siege: Analogically, "the plague entered London when an incredible increase of people had happened occasionally, by the particular circumstances above named" (20). Regarding those circumstances: "The wars being over, the armies disbanded, and the royal family and monarchy being restored, [great numbers of people] had flocked to London to settle in business, or to depend upon and attend the Court for rewards, preferments, and the like." And beyond that influx of a hundred thousand people, add "all the ruined families of the royal party [who] flocked hither" (20).

classes as well as the peerage and Parliament and, on the other, by the numbers of the dead, most of them from among the poor. Striking a sardonic note, H. F. observes vis-à-vis the absented Court that “it pleased God to preserve them”; yet, no matter that the distemper did not “so much as touch them,” they showed neither “any great token of thankfulness” nor “anything of reformation,” albeit that “their crying vices”—the excesses of pride and luxury—might have contributed in no small part to “that terrible judgment upon the whole nation” (17). H. F.’s measured irony yields to the voice of the Dissenter as he attributes some responsibility for the plague’s visitation to royalist excess and folly, the failure of moral (Presbyterian) restraint in the circle of the profligate Court having elicited to a significant—and deadly—degree God’s judgment on the entire nation. Only it is the poor people who are dying.

The Court may have been frolicking in Oxford, but in London, mostly among the poor, in the week of July 4–11, “1268 [died] of all distempers, whereof it might be supposed 900 died of the plague” (16). The next week’s bill of mortality counted 1761. By the second week of August, however, “Cripplegate parish alone buried 886 [850 dead of plague], and Clerkenwell 155 [145 dead of plague]” (16-7). Statistics may in themselves be neutral, or even banal, but the want of passion in the narrator’s prosaic, unadorned presentation of them is more apparent than real. The horror lies both in their cumulative effect, as throughout the text the narrator frequently incorporates litany-like listings from the bills of mortality—deaths by plague ultimately totaling more than 100,000—and, more immediately here, in the statistics’ context. Juxtaposed to the flight of the moneyed and titled along with their retinues from the city to the comfortable insularity of plague-free havens at far remove from London, the plague’s toll on the

parishes of the poor—from St. Giles, St. Andrew, Holborn, Westminster; to Southwark and Lambeth; to Shoreditch, Stepney, Whitechapel, Bishopsgate—chills. It also grows, with September being “the most dreadful of its kind . . . that London ever saw” (176). The bills for the five weeks from August 22 to September 26 show a total of 38,195 plague fatalities:²⁴ “a prodigious number of itself,” as H. F. notes, then adds that he believes “this account was deficient” and “there died above ten thousand a week for all those weeks”; for in the city’s “inexpressible” confusion the bodies in the dead-carts often went uncounted, frequently because the drivers themselves died either in transit to or at the site of the burial pits (176-7). Accurate or not, the numbers convey the stark reality of the plague; they establish the matter of the black death’s overwhelming fact, especially among the mass of people abandoned to the pestilential city.

The plague’s fiction lies in “the madness and the folly of the people” (176), whose minds, terrified beyond reason by the outbreak of the plague, afforded ready ground for the apocalyptic dispatches of astrologers and misguided ministers: “all the predictors, astrologers, fortune-tellers, and what they called cunning-men, conjurers, and the like; calculators of nativities and dreamers of dreams” (176). Whereas, in H. F.’s Nonconformist Presbyterian view, the excesses of the royal Court now in its retreat at Oxford bear part of the responsibility for God’s exercise of painful justice upon the nation, in the progress of the plague the tribe of false visionaries appears to have been more directly subject to “the remarkable hand of Divine justice”: for they have all “gone

²⁴ From August the 22 nd	to the 29 th	7496
" August the 29 th	" 5 th September	8252
" September the 5 th	" 12 th "	7690
" September the 12 th	" 19 th "	8297
" September the 19 th	" 26 th "	6460

and vanished; not one of them was to be found” and not one of them “ever appeared after the calamity was over” (176). If they have indeed died “in the heat of the calamity, having ventured to stay upon the prospect of getting great estates” (176), having risked contagion in London for personal gain, in their greed they have, by God, and by H. F.’s reasoning, received their just deserts. Patently, they were “not able to foretell their own fate or to calculate their own nativities” (176). In their charlatanry they might well have exempted themselves from their own false, elaborate constructs of destiny in fanciful regard to plague as apocalypse, but they could not escape the destiny that lay in the fact of plague as a deadly distemper and, in the narrator’s plain Presbyterian faith, as an instrument in the hand of a just but not unmerciful God.

The madness among the poor, however, does not disappear along with the street prophets whose dire predictions before the plague’s outbreak and in its early stages bred so much of the lunacy and mass hysteria. As the plague rages to its height in the dog days of August and the first three weeks of September—a period during which “above 3000 people died in one night,” an occurrence that astrologers credit to the “influence of the dog-star” (Sirius, in the constellation Canis Major) and its “malignant effect” (171)²⁵—the madness among the uninfected is allied with folly while among the infected it cedes to the delirium of disease. In the progress of the plague narrative, with genuine sympathy as well as, increasingly, with genuine alarm, H. F. details numerous cases in which the afflicted deliver themselves to bizarre destinies: how one man, who in his delirium had been tied to his bed, could “find[] no other way to deliver himself” from the disease than to set the bed and himself on fire with a bedside candle; how another of the afflicted in

²⁵ The superstition linking the dog days to disease survives the centuries since. In *The Rings of Saturn*, W. G. Sebald “wonder[s] now, however, whether there might be something in the old superstition that certain ailments of the spirit and of the body are particularly likely to beset us under the sign of the Dog Star” (3).

his “insufferable torment . . . danced and sung naked in the streets, not knowing one ecstasy from another” (174). With cases like these H. F. would exemplify the “complicated distress” that typified “the misery of these times” (174). Equally alarming to H. F. is the “universal desolation” (169) to which the unafflicted have submitted. With the infection promising no surcease and with all remedies proving to be ineffectual in abating it, the people have begun simply to surrender to their fears and to fate. No more do they make coffins for the dead; no more do they shut up the houses that hosted the contagion. Nor do they strive to protect themselves from infection; they ignore the ordinances of the magistrates, they disregard preventive measures. They deem “all regulations and methods [to be] in vain” (168). They have divorced reason from destiny, and in their madness and folly have married fancy to fate.

Terrorized daily, either as witnesses or victims, by the effects of plague, for which any earthly or natural cause is indeterminate, much of the city’s populace has concluded that the air itself is “corrupted and infected” (189). Death thus being in the air one breathes, no measure—whether one wanders abroad or remains at home, whether one visits the sick or shuns the infected—can save one from it. For if in a breath one is “struck from Heaven” with the distemper by the very “hand of God,” it is plainly accomplished by God’s will and “there is no withstanding it” (190). While the narrator himself has demonstrated repeatedly his respect for the proposition that divine justice has been operative throughout the progress of the plague, such arguments that link the infection of any one individual by the pestilence directly to the hand of God, in acts as much of divine whim as of divine will (so it would seem), tax H. F.’s credulity at the same time that he recognizes how the city’s prevailing miseries—the “universal

desolation” and “complicated distress”—may have produced them. Still, to H. F.’s mind, the stance is reckless; for to observe no caution against the plague, on the grounds that heedfulness of consequences is immaterial to God’s will, which will in whatever case be done, is to invite the very dangers such a stance defies. H. F. identifies the attitude as “a kind of Turkish predestinarianism” (190), which alludes to the observations of H. F.’s elder, seafaring brother in regard to “the predestining notions” embraced by “the Turks and Mahometans in Asia.” Firm in their belief that “every man’s end [is] predetermined and unalterably beforehand decreed,” without concern for consequences, blithe to dangers, they walked among the plague-infected and visited quarters rife with contagion, and “died at the rate often of fifteen thousand a week.” On the other hand, “the European or Christian merchants” practiced caution; they “kept themselves retired and reserved” and “generally escaped the contagion” (13). As for the Londoners whose fears and fancies led them, like the Turks, to a fatalistic disregard of caution and consequence—“they went boldly about, even into infected houses and infected company; visited sick people; and, in short, lay in the beds with their wives or relations when they were infected”—unsurprisingly to H. F., they came to an end like that of the Mahometans: “what was the consequence, but the same that is the consequence in Turkey . . . namely, that they were infected too, and died by hundreds and thousands” (190). Needless so, H. F. would opine on the basis of his own empirical evidence to the effect that in every instance the distemper is contracted “in the ordinary way of infection from somebody, or the clothes, or touch, or stench of somebody that was infected before” (191). For H. F.—Presbyterian though he may be, and therefore not disinclined toward predestination in principle—in the matter of infection, discernible physical cause more evidently explains

its transmission than does a metaphysical construct ascribing it to destiny by divine, predetermined decree.

Ironically, the exemplum of the predestinarian Turks by which H. F. points up the fallacy in the fatalist folly of his fellow citizens at the height of the plague is the very example that months before, in the early stages of contagion, his brother used to argue against H. F.'s resolve to stay in London so as to be able to attend to the business of his household, shop, and warehouses filled with the stock of his saddler's trade. On that occasion, advising H. F. that "the best preparation for the plague was to run away from it," the elder brother reduced his counsel to "three words" from the Gospels: "Master, save thyself" (11).²⁶ Echoing his brother, and half acknowledging his own folly in choosing not to flee the city, H. F. avouches in the dreadful ninth month of the visitation that "though Providence seemed to direct my conduct to be otherwise, yet it is my opinion, and I must leave it as a prescription, viz., that the best physic against the plague is to run away from it" (195). However earnestly H. F. may account to Providence his earlier decision to remain in London, and thus to place his personal destiny in "the will of Heaven" (12),²⁷ his argument in that regard is less than compelling. At that time, to

²⁶ While H. F. attributes the "three words" to the Gospels, the exhortation "Master, save thyself" does not appear anywhere in them. In the account of Christ's crucifixion in Matthew 27:38-40, the "two thieves crucified with him . . . reviled him . . . saying, Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest *it* in three days, save thyself." The taunt appears also in Mark 5:29-30, although it is "railed on" Christ, the King of the Jews, by passersby rather than the two thieves. "The chosen of God" is similarly "derided" by the rulers and the people, as well as by the soldiers, who offer him vinegar, "saying, If thou be the King of the Jews, save thyself," and by one of the thieves, "saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us" in Luke 23:35-9. In none of these instances does the speaker address, or think of, Christ as his "Master." However, the seventeenth-century Nonconformist preacher John Bunyan (1628-1688), with whose religious treatises the Nonconformist Defoe may well have been familiar, puts the plea "Master, save thyself" into the mouths of Christ's "weak disciples" upon their Master's decision to go to "on his fatal journey up to Jerusalem," a decision related, as Bunyan points out, in Mark 10:32-34 and Luke 9:51 (*Works of John Bunyan*, Volume 1, Part C, 622).

²⁷ To leave one's destiny to heavenly will, especially when finding oneself at the end of a narrative tether, is not an uncommon impulse for the protagonists in other of Defoe's novels, notably in *Moll Flanders* and *Robinson Crusoe*.

determine what was “his unquestioned duty,” he relied, he says, on “disappointments,” two in particular, that might also be read as “intimations from Heaven” (12). For one, when he sought to gain access to a horse in order to depart the city as his brother had urged, he could find none for either purchase or hire; for another, having decided, for want of a horse, to travel by foot in the company of a servant, he found his plan thwarted when the servant he had chosen, frightened by the rapid spread of the distemper, fled. While the upshots of H. F.’s initial attempt to leave “disappoint” him in his intent, they are not preclusive—he has other servants, and a horse might be hired once he has traveled a day or two out of the city, as his brother points out to him. Yet H. F. chooses to view these chance, temporary, resolvable impediments as signs, or “intimations,” of God’s divine purpose for him, and so concludes that to fulfill truly his personal destiny, he “should stay” in London in the faith that God is “able to preserve me in the midst of all the danger and death that would surround me.” To “act[] contrary to these intimations,” H. F. reasons, would be “kind of like flying from God” (12).²⁸

The narrator’s brother, “though a very religious man himself” (13), discounts the significance that H. F. attaches to his disappointments as intimations of the operation of divine will upon his personal destiny. Indeed, he “laugh[s]” at H. F.’s reasoning, likens it to that of “other foolhardy people” (e.g., Turks and Mahometans), deems it “ridiculous,” and counters with the argument that if H. F. were in fact incapable of departing the city—if he were “any way disabled by distempers or diseases”—he might then read in his circumstances the working of God’s will and “acquiesce in the direction of Him, who,

²⁸ No Jonah he, H. F. stays when others of the merchant class flee the city and the street prophets disappear from its plaguey precincts. The first time Jonah was called upon by God to “[a]rise, go to Nineveh, that great city and cry against it[s] . . . wickedness,” he chose instead to fly “from the presence of the Lord”—and ended up in the belly of a fish (Jonah 1).

having been [his] Maker, had an undisputed right of sovereignty in disposing of [him]” (13). In light of his brother’s argument, H. F. again prepares to leave the city, but his resolve wavers. Not easily can he ignore intimations he believes to be from Heaven: However reasonably his brother might argue against them, they contain for H. F. “a direction to stay,” which itself “contained a promise of being preserved if [he] obeyed” (14). No doubt, as W. Austin Flanders has noted, “economic motive” figures importantly into H. F.’s quandary (166), especially in the dispute between H. F., who would risk his life to safeguard his business interests (H. F. fits comfortably in London’s emergent bourgeoisie), and his brother, who would have him save his life at the risk of his commerce. In itself, his trade with its servants, shop, and warehouses does not entirely provide sufficient sway to H. F.’s apparent disposition to remain in London, but by conjoining economic motive with religious injunction he might satisfy both his Presbyterian conscience and his bourgeois temperament. Whereas H. F.’s “spiritual crisis is central to the book,” as Everett Zimmerman contends in *Defoe and the Novel* (108)—and increasingly in his journal H. F.’s responses to the plague illuminate the shifting contours of his personal crisis of faith, even as his unsettled, evolving faith shapes and colors those same often antinomic responses—at least at the onset of the visitation, the spiritual crisis is in large part yoked to economic motive.²⁹ The ambivalence in the prosperous saddler’s reluctance to retreat, as Flanders notes, stems from the near certainty that while he will “escape the disease,” he will as surely “suffer economically by abandoning his business holdings” (165). So it is, posits Flanders, that “divination provides H. F. with a convenient justification for his choice [to stay]” (166).

²⁹ As significant as economic motive is in H. F.’s quandary at the onset of the plague, the narrator, notes Zimmerman, says little of his business interests once his decision to remain in London is made (166).

For divination, H. F. relies upon the common Puritan practice of *sortes Biblicae*, wherein one might be guided not by what might appear to be mere chance but rather by the word of God.³⁰ “[M]ore and more encouraged to stay than ever” (14), and sorely wanting a decisive sign from on high that he should remain in the city, H. F. leafs randomly through the pages of the Bible as he contemplates a quandary that at this point lies less in the pull between philosophic reason and religious faith than that between common sense (leave) and plain desire (stay). With a cry to God for guidance—“Lord, direct me!” (14)—he stops turning over the pages and discovers, when his eye falls upon the second verse of Psalm 91, which alternative shall determine the course of his destiny.³¹ First declaring the Lord to be “my refuge and my fortress” and “in him will I trust” (v. 2), the psalmist (“I”) then promises his hearer (“thee”), that God “shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler, and from”—more pointedly for H. F., albeit that the psalmist may be speaking figuratively of plague as the contagion not of buboes but of sin—“the noisome pestilence” (v. 3). The protection afforded by God from the metaphorical “snare of the fowler,” i.e., the lure of evil, as well as from its noxiously attendant sin, is elaborated in the image of God’s “feathers,” which “shall cover thee . . . and under his wings shalt thou trust”; the feathery camouflage of the eagle’s wing then being succeeded by the more patently protective armor of “shield and buckler,” the

³⁰ Jason Goodwin notes in the 2001 Penguin edition of *Journal* that Puritans commonly employed *sortes* for divine guidance: Letting the Bible fall to the ground, they would take as a sign from heaven the first verses the eye beheld on whatever page the Bible had opened to (240).

³¹ H.F. “cast[] [his] eye on the second verse” of Psalm 91, then “read on to the seventh verse exclusive, and after that included the tenth” (14). Verses 2-10 read, in the King James Version: “I will say of the LORD, *He is* my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust. / Surely he shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler, *and* from the noisome pestilence. / He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth *shall be thy* shield and buckler. / Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; *nor* for the arrow that *flieth* by day; / *Nor* for the pestilence *that* walketh in darkness; *nor* for the destruction *that* wasteth at noonday. / A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; *but* it shall not come nigh thee. / Only with thine eyes shalt thou behold and see the reward of the wicked. / Because thou has made the LORD, *which is* my refuge, *even* the Most High, thy habitation; / There shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling.”

psalmist's metaphor for God's truth: "His truth shall be thy shield and buckler" (v. 4). Thus safeguarded, because "thou hast made the Lord . . . thy habitation" (v. 9), any among those who, like the psalmist, trust in the Lord "shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day; / Nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness; nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday" (v. 5-6). The arrow, metonymically referent to the fowler as well as to the warring forces of evil that visit mortals by day, fails before the shield of the godly, so that while a "thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand," no harm shall "come nigh thee" (v. 7). Spared death, secure in the embrace of the Lord, the godly shall instead "behold and see the reward of the wicked" (v. 8) at the same time that "no evil [shall] befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling" (v. 10). However figurative the apocalyptic tremors of war and, more particularly, of plague may be in the psalm, the allusions to the latter—from the promise of delivery from "the noisome pestilence" to the assurance of safety from "the terror by night" and "the pestilence that walketh in darkness," to the final, and for H. F. most pertinent, clause of the passage, the pronouncement that even while the plague may fell thousands, it shall not "come nigh thy dwelling"—provide H. F. with a clear sign from Heaven that he need not flee from London. Thus: "I resolved that I would stay in the town, and casting myself entirely upon the goodness and protection of the Almighty, would not seek any other shelter whatever" (15). He might as aptly have said, as does the first verse of Psalm 91, which H. F. does not quote in his journal but may perhaps be unconsciously echoing, that having made the Lord most high his true habitation, he would anywhere "abide under the shadow of the Almighty."³²

³² "He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty" (Psalm 91:1).

However secure H. F. may assert himself to be in his resolve, which he has lodged—sincerely, to all appearances—less, it seems, in his economic concerns as a tradesman than in his faith that his destiny lies in the protective hand of God, he does more than once in the face of a plague that is in fact claiming victims by the thousands regret his decision: “I have already said that I repented several times that I had ventured to stay in town, and had not gone away with my brother and his family” (174). While that decision may have been proved by the city’s unremittingly calamitous circumstances to be as “foolhardy” as his brother had implied it might, any foolhardy behavior on H. F.’s part bears little comparison to the willful indifference to the danger of contagion manifested by the predestinarian Turks and Mahometans or to the hysteria and fatalist folly of half-mad Londoners on the city’s plague-infested streets. Throughout his discourse in the journal, even when recording details of the pestilence at its horrific extremes, H. F.’s prose evidences unfailingly the measure of reason and the voice of sanity, and those same qualities, reason and sanity, typify his behavior. Prudent by nature as well as a man of means enough to allow him some degree of self-sufficiency, H. F. demonstrates in his day-to-day existence not reckless disregard (no matter that he may also dwell in the shelter of the Almighty) but caution and discretion. Observation having convinced him that the distemper is transmitted by physical contact with the person of an infected party, he strives to avoid the perceived cause of the undesired effect. Under the advice of his friend, the physician Dr. Heath, he confines his household, and he lays in a store of foodstuffs, except for flesh-meat, which might jeopardize their lives. He admits no visitors into his house; on the streets he is careful not to come too much in proximity with other people. He is wary of touch. When he is appointed by the alderman of his

municipal ward to be an examiner of the houses of the sick—a post that causes H. F. great distress, as it exposes him daily to the distemper and the danger of infection—he is able, by virtue of his financial means, to get himself “discharged of the dangerous office,” although he does it by hiring a surrogate, “whom I had obtained for a little money to accept of it; and so, instead of serving the two months which was directed, I was not above three weeks in it; and a great while too, considering it was the month of August, at which time the distemper began to rage with great violence at our end of the town” (167). For W. Austin Flanders, this particular transaction by H. F. points up “the ambiguity of his attitude as a bourgeois” in that by “using his position of economic privilege” to avoid his own contamination, he “thereby has exposed another to it” (165). H. F. himself, who considers the matter no further, does not apparently see any irony in the arrangement; that he doesn’t may attest to bourgeois presumption on his part or to a gainful opportunity on the part of the surrogate, or both. There is no indication in the text of the journal, however, that the narrator, who is more candid than not in regard to his own shortcomings, views the negotiation as a moral error.

Indeed, attendant to H. F.’s intimation of a personal destiny wrought by covenant between him and the psalmist’s protective God is his recognition of a moral vocation; for he would be worthy of the Almighty upon whose goodness he has cast himself. In his exercise of caution H. F. does not isolate himself totally from the terrifying human drama unfolding everywhere around him: “dismal scenes . . . of persons falling dead in the streets, terrible shrieks and screechings of women, who, in their agonies, would throw open their chamber windows and cry out in a dismal, surprising manner” (80). His “unsatisfied curiosity” draws him into the plague’s arena, where the

horrors of a populace being reduced either by the disease itself or else by the fear of it to “idiotism and foolish distractions,” to “despair and lunacy” and “melancholic madness” (81), awaken in him a profound sympathy for the afflicted: “It often pierced my very soul to hear the groans and cries of those who were thus³³ tormented” (82). That he tempers his curiosity with prudence enables him to limit the chances of his own infection, just as by reining his abundant sympathy with rationality H. F., sane and responsible, evades the many shapes of the panic-stricken city’s madness. As Flanders notes, “the sympathetic, curious narrator” does not, like so many of the Londoners, “irresponsibly lapse into irrationality,” but rather he “acquire[s] for himself moral awareness . . . He wants to know the situation, to interpret it, to learn from it; he wants to be able to communicate useful advice and thereby to improve the state of national life” (166). The journal in the process of its composition by H. F. unfailingly reflects its narrator’s moral sensibility in his immediate responses to the ravages of the plague on the city as they are occurring, or as they have recently occurred: It tracks the course of the contagion through the city’s parishes; it garners statistics in regard to the infected and the dead; it compiles lists detailing the effects of the plague on trades and occupations; it includes verbatim municipal orders and ordinances; it outlines preventive measures; it discusses the efficacy, or not, of confinement and quarantine and medicines; it details innumerable cases of the distemper, most of them calamitous; it sermonizes on the wages of sin and the will of God. It chronicles chaos. As the product of its composition, though, the

³³ The adverbial “thus” here refers specifically to the double torment of violent pain and surgical devices: “The pain of the swelling was in particular very violent, and to some intolerable; the physicians and surgeons may be said to have tortured many poor creatures even to death. The swellings in some grew hard, and they applied violent drawing-plaisters or poultices to break them, and if these did not do they cut and scarified them in a terrible manner. In some those swellings . . . were so hard that no instrument could cut them, and then they burnt them with caustics, so that many died raving mad with the torment, and some in the very operation” (81).

journal also shows how H. F.'s curiosity and sympathy both evidence and abet an essentially moral impulse to soberly witness and truthfully record the progress of the London plague of 1665, thereby not merely to chronicle it, as was his intent, but also, as it happens, to historicize the city's experience of the visitation as a natural phenomenon and as a divine act. While H. F. brings a moral sensibility to the process of his composition, it is the product of the composition wherein can be discerned a coherent moral vision.

That moral vision, once it has been perceived, illuminates the journal anew, as it casts the reading, and significance, of H. F.'s narrative in a revisory light. So it is that the text of the plague narrative, which, in the process of its composition, ultimately evinces a perceptible moral vision, is to a degree refigured by the vision it produced. Likewise, the narrator's in-the-end distinctive construct of destiny, which is informed by the moral vision, evolves in the process of the journal's composition; and the narrative of days, the months of days, each day augmenting the toll of the plague on the city's body and spirit like all the days before, defines in its course the construct of destiny that the narrator's journal of a plague year is in turn, by the close of the novel, defined by.

Frequently in the pages of the journal the narrator contemns the apocalyptic extremes ascribed to destiny as it has been variously imagined among the tribe of false visionaries, be they astrologers or physicians or clergymen, whose prophecy and casuistry have fueled the panic of a citizenry daily threatened by plague and have reduced sound reason to abject irresponsibility: For, while assigning responsibility for the visitation upon the sins of a people who have offended the wrathful God of the Old Testament, they have at the same time remitted the people of any moral responsibility in

stemming the contagion, since, by the divine ordination of the planets or, more directly, by God's own vengeful hand, shall the people—indeed, the nation—no matter what recourse they may seek in prayer or precaution, be as willfully as willy-nilly struck down by death. Still, as scornful of the “cunning-men” and “conjurers” as H. F. may be, or as incredulous of the madmen and ministers and Mahometans, he himself does not discount entirely the proposition that portents may lie in planetary conjunctions, neither does his rationality disallow the validity of divination in his practice of *sortes*. Nor does H. F. abnegate without exception the possibility that God may single out and strike down a particular, if morally reprehensible individual with the deadly distemper. Aggrieved by the behavior of “a dreadful set of fellows” who, at the toll of the dead-cart's bell, jeer at the mourners' cries for God's mercy—and especially at “one poor unhappy gentleman” (64) whom they “taunted . . . with want of courage to leap into the great pit and go to heaven” to join his plague-dead wife and children (65)—the narrator reproves the louts, only to be answered with their “hellish, abominable raillery”: “blasphem[ing] God and talking atheistically, making a jest of my calling the plague the hand of God, mocking and even laughing at the word judgment” (66). A few days after, the one who had led the taunts against the bereft gentleman “was struck from Heaven with the plague, and died in a most deplorable manner,” soon to be followed by his fellows into the great pit of Aldgate (67). H. F. does not doubt that for their “abominable wickedness” they have been “made dreadful examples of God's justice” (68), their deaths effected directly by a godly stroke from heaven for their blasphemous, atheistic behavior. He also considers that in another time the Lord may have borne such exploits with mercy, but not deep in the days of plague, which have given sway to God's anger; and he recalls a verse from Jeremiah

(5:9): “Shall I not visit for these things? saith the Lord: and shall not My soul be revenged of such a nation as this!” (69) Neither can H. F. himself extend to men so wicked, as abominable as they are impenitent, any benefit of the heavenly mercy he extols in “the Gospel of Peace and the Gospel of Grace” (27) of the New Testament.

More significant, perhaps, in the narrative of the encounter between H. F. and the profane louts—the resolution of which might in any case be attributed to wishful thinking—is the language in which it is related, specifically in the allusions to “the hand of God,” “the word judgment,” and a blow “struck from Heaven.” Phrases that appear repeatedly throughout the journal, they reflect one fundamental principle upon which H. F. consistently agrees with the street prophets, zealous ministers, ineffectual physicians, and incautious predestinarians: that the plague is a visitation and a judgment by God in his vengeance upon a morally diminished nation; “a stroke from Heaven upon a city, or country, or nation . . . a messenger of His vengeance” (190), as he iterates latterly in the journal, in a reflection on the origins of the plague. Further, as the plague originates in the sins of man, H. F. reasons in line with the religious he is frequently wont to criticize, so will deliverance from it begin in man’s repentance; and again H. F. cites the prophet Jeremiah (18:7-8), in which the Lord says: “At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up and to pull down, and to destroy it; / If that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I do unto them” (190). God’s visitation of the plague being prompted by the moral ills and spiritual failings prevalent among the populace at large, only in the people’s—or kingdom’s or nation’s—repentance of the evil among them will God himself repent and find reason to deliver them from the pestilence. It would appear, then, that H. F. is

placing the destiny of London's citizenry in its very self, both in its initial blindness to its own evil, which incurs heavenly wrath and pestilential vengeance, and in its eventual awakening, repentance of its sins, and redemption in the eyes of God, by which the plague is lifted. However, neither H. F. nor the populace nor the ministers, physicians, and natural philosophers have measure of the degree of human frailty that would invite divine punishment, any more than they have gauge of the repentance necessary to mollify it. The critical point at which the human moral contingencies gave rise to the divinely ordained plague, as well as, a year later, abated it, thus lies beyond human ken. However morally responsible the citizens of London may be held for the willfully committed sinful deeds that effected the plague, by the limits of their human intelligence, collectively or individually, they cannot have known when, in aggregate, the sins of an entire citizenry, or evil of a nation, would bring down upon them an angry God's pestilence. Not *by* choice, not by the free and conscious exercise of human will, have the people of London suffered the effects of the visitation, but rather *because of* their choices, cumulative and incalculable in number, have they unwittingly brought the plague upon themselves, or, more precisely, have they offended God and borne the plaguey consequences of his judgment. Their destiny, then, as it emerges in H. F.'s journal of a plague year, resides not in the control of human will but in the will and hand of God, whose merciful deliverance of the city from the visitation proves to be, for the narrator, even more divinely mysterious than the just cause.

Without reference to any human moral contingency being operative in the city's deliverance from plague—while the narrator yet again refers to the origin of the disease in God's "judgment upon us," he assigns no role to "repentance by us" in effecting the

abatement—H. F. states in the final pages of his journal that it can be accountable only to God, to “the secret hand of Him that had at first sent this disease as a judgment upon us” (241); and, more emphatically, “Nothing but the immediate finger of God, nothing but omnipotent power, could have done it” (239). With the city of London in a condition “truly calamitous,” the contagion in a three-week period leaving “not less than 30,000 people dead and near 100,000 fallen sick,” mystifyingly, to H. F., “just then it pleased God, as it were, by His immediate hand to disarm the enemy; the poison was taken out of the sting” (240-1). The disease having resisted all medicines, and surgeries offering no cure, the sudden abatement—“the very first week’s bill decreased 1843” (239)—attests to no less than a divine reversal in the course of human destiny (though what appears to have been redetermined by God, perhaps “repenting of the evil [He has] done to them,” may have been divinely predetermined all along). God’s praise is now sung in the streets of London, no matter how strenuously philosophers search for empirical data, for “reasons in nature,” to explain the unanticipated attenuation of the plague: “The disease was enervated, its malignity spent” (241).³⁴ Even the physicians, who with few exceptions (like Dr. Heath), in the narrator’s view, dealt ineptly with the realities of the contagion, have had to allow that the surprising reversal was “all supernatural” and “extraordinary” and “that no account could be given of it,” however reluctant they may

³⁴ H. F.’s observations regarding the abatement of the plague are notably echoed in those of Dr. Rieux in Camus’s *La peste*, although Rieux does not account the attenuation of the plague in Oran to the miracle of a divine intervention but rather to the inexplicability of the plague bacillus itself, which “never dies or disappears for good” but rather retreats into dormancy and “bides its time” until one day, equally inexplicably, it rises up again. Similarly, too, when the plague has largely diminished itself in Oran, with “cries of joy rising from the town” bourgeois normalcy is restored (272). And the bacillus is soon forgot. In H. F.’s London, though, it is the work of God—both in the visitation and deliverance from it—that is forgot as the city returns to “all manner of wickedness” (243). H. F. draws an analogy between his fellow citizens and the children of Israel, who, “after being delivered from the host of Pharaoh, when they passed the Red Sea, and looked back, and saw the Egyptians overwhelmed in the water, viz., that they sang His [God’s] praise, but they soon forgot His works” (242).

be otherwise to acknowledge the enormity of “the debt they owe to their Maker” (241). Whereas in earlier journal entries the reality of statistical facts is grimly juxtaposed to the apocalyptic fictions unavailingly embraced by a populace not singing in the streets but rather maundering in terror and fear, here the observable and statistical evidence, the matter of facts, serves instead to support a matter of faith. Maintaining the voice of reason, dismissing what he considers unwarranted charges of Nonconformist religious “enthusiasm” from the “atheistic pan of mankind” (241), H. F. plainly places the city’s destiny, and his own, in the mainstay of that faith, in God, whose “supernatural” and “extraordinary” power alone can be accountable for casting out the distemper and restoring the city to its health.

Not least among God’s wonders in the course of the plague, for H. F., is that of his own survival. In the dismal period immediately preceding the abatement, when the distemper was afflicting or felling its victims in “prodigious number,” virtually every household in the narrator’s neighborhood had been infected, one exception being his own, although, in the face of the “astonishing” mortality bills and the undiminishing distress, even the equanimous H. F. “must confess [him]self to have been very much dejected” (240). Still, the promise H. F. read in Psalm 91:10—“There shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling”—has apparently held true: His house stands uninfected; he is alive, and well. More than once in the course of his composition H. F. comments on the remarkability of his survival in the disastrous midst of the contamination, and in fact he closes the journal with a bit of doggerel, “a coarse but sincere stanza,” expressing his amaze: “A dreadful plague in London was / In the year sixty-five, / Which swept an hundred thousand souls / Away; yet I alive!” (243). His

survival is indeed a fact so “miraculous” that he can credit it only to God. Addressing arguments that afford to God’s providential hand the origin and course of the plague, H. F. adds this personal note of thanks to his protector: “I esteem my own deliverance to be one next to miraculous, and do record it with thankfulness” (191).

Throughout the journal H. F. often finds it apt to declare his abiding faith in, as well as his gratitude to, a sometimes wrathful, necessarily just, but essentially and ultimately merciful God, whose providential hand, in the narrator’s case, proves also to be protective. In and through God H. F. realizes his personal destiny, which is to survive the plague year sixty-five. While H. F. may be equally concerned with his eternal destiny, in the journal, which frequently occasions sincere, usually spontaneous protestations of faith, the salvation of his immortal soul—not a minor issue among the predestinarian Nonconformists, who would have faith that any of God’s elect now numbered among the dead would have been duly delivered to their heavenly destiny—is overshadowed by the more practical, earthly business of survival as a mortal being. Further, ascribe though he does his survival of the plague to divine providence, it may owe as much to his own precaution: to the preventive, empirically perceived measures that H. F., by the demands of conscience and reason, assiduously takes to protect himself against contagion. For the plague, however extraordinary and supernatural the visitation may be in its origin (and likewise the deliverance from it), is also a natural phenomenon. So it must also be considered, H. F. posits, as “a distemper arising from natural causes” and “propagated by natural means” (191).

In regard to the visitation by the Black Death in fourteenth-century Europe, Barbara Tuchman notes that “the apparent absence of earthly cause gave the plague a

supernatural and sinister quality,” which gave rise to wild speculation, but ultimately, in attributing cause, “beyond demons and superstition the final hand was God’s,” and the disease—so horrid in its effects that it was deemed not “natural” to mankind—was pronounced to be “a chastisement from Heaven” (104).³⁵ The three centuries between the Black Death and the plague of 1665 in London—and closer to four between it and 1722, when Defoe published *Journal*—did not significantly alter the conceit that links the origin of the visitation to mankind’s sins, God’s wrath, divine judgment, and pestilential punishment; however, the narrator of *Journal*, and his author, signal an important shift in the seventeenth century’s intellectual attitude toward plague as a divinely ordained phenomenon, as is apparent in H. F.’s references to the distemper’s “natural causes” and its propagation by “natural means.” Unlike his fourteenth-century counterparts, H. F. deems the contagion quite natural to mankind, for in its contraction and transmission it manifests demonstrably human causes with predictably human effects. On this critical point of contagion by contact H. F. would agree with the natural philosophers, for it is supported by his own massive anecdotal evidence, as he says—“I have so many examples fresh in my memory to convince me of it, that I think none can resist their evidence” (191)—and as he shows exhaustively, in affecting and sometimes grisly detail, throughout the journal’s text. Recalling mid-July, for example, by when physicians’ evidence and his own observations have convinced him that contraction of the distemper is contingent upon proximity to the sick, H. F. records how the disease is borne by what “the physicians call effluvia, by the breath, or by the sweat, or by the stench of the sores”

³⁵ Tuchman cites a papal “Bull of September 1348, speaking of the ‘pestilence with which God is afflicting the Christian people.’ To the Emperor John Cantacuzene it was manifest that a malady of such horrors, stench, and agonies, and especially one bringing the dismal despair that settled upon its victims before they died, was not a plague ‘natural’ to mankind but ‘a chastisement from Heaven.’ To *Piers Plowman* ‘these pestilences were for pure sin’” (104).

from the sick to the sound, “immediately penetrating the vital parts of the said sound person, putting their blood into an immediate ferment, and agitating their spirits,” so that the epidemic spreads in geometric proportion as “those newly infected persons” in turn and “in the same manner”—i.e., naturally—communicate the disease to others (74-5). H. F. logs, too, the effects of the distemper—“horrible” and “dismal,” to be sure, but nonetheless natural, as the disease fulfills its own destiny—which are now everywhere evident when he walks the city streets: “The swellings, which were generally in the neck and groin, when they grew hard and would not break, grew so painful that it was equal to the most exquisite torture; and some not able to bear the torment threw themselves out at windows or shot themselves,” while others, he notes as much with sympathy as apprehension, “vented their pain by incessant roarings, and such loud and lamentable cries . . . that would pierce the very heart to think of, especially when it was to be considered that the same dreadful scourge might be expected every moment to seize upon ourselves” (76).

As vigorous as H. F.’s argument is in regard to the naturalness of plague, its distemper being discernibly the cause and means of the contagion, he is also emphatic in his declaration that the plague is no less a divine instrument of God’s judgment “for its being under the conduct of human causes and effects” (191). The natural thus does not preclude the divine, nor the divine the natural, in defining the journal’s immanent construct of destiny, for H. F. draws upon both natural philosophy and theology in his attempt to comprehend the cause and course of “the last Great Visitation in 1665.” While he states unequivocally, and often, in the text that plague is an instrument of God, he has only “contempt” for the “manifest ignorance and enthusiasm” of those who more literally

put the instrument in God's hand and evangelically hold that the contagion was "an immediate stroke from Heaven, without the agency of means, having commission to strike this and that particular person and none other" (75). It is "the agency of means" that introduces natural cause into H. F.'s paradigm of a visitation that originates in the wrath and will of God. By H. F.'s cosmological reasoning, God in his "Divine Power has formed the whole scheme of nature and maintains nature in its course," but rather than dictate by extraordinary means the ordinary actions of humans within that course, He allows "His own actings with men, whether of mercy or judgment, to go on in the ordinary course of natural causes" while "excepting and reserving to Himself nevertheless a power to act in a supernatural way when He sees occasion" (191). Such occasion may produce a divine judgment upon a morally transgressive nation, and subsequently, by divine decree, a visitation upon the wicked, but while the heavenly decree is supernatural in its origin, the plague itself follows the ordinary laws of cause and effect to which humans are subject in the natural daily course of their temporal, earthly existence. Plague, then, is the earthly agent of a divinely ordained destiny. Indeed, so efficient an agent of execution is plague that by natural means its contagion obviates any need of heavenly measures: "Now 'tis evident that in the case of an infection there is no apparent extraordinary occasion for supernatural operation"; for "among these causes and effects," infection in itself—"imperceptible and unavoidable"—is proving to be "more than sufficient to execute the fierceness of Divine vengeance, without putting it upon supernaturals and miracle" (191). What God ordains nature effects, with effluvia. The contagion operates so efficaciously, however, that London's deliverance from the plague, as H. F. avers in the final pages of his journal, indeed rests upon a divine miracle.

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A Journal of the Plague Year did not bring Daniel Defoe commercial success upon its release in 1722, perhaps because the title page attributed authorship only to an unnamed “Citizen who continued all the while in London”; nor would the book be reprinted until after Defoe’s death. On the other hand, had London been threatened with the onslaught of another plague—like the one that struck Marseilles in 1720—the novel might have seen a more illustrious literary and publishing history. As Defoe’s narrator notes, on making some cautionary observations, his journal “may be of use hereafter to those into whose hands [it] may come, if they should ever see the like dreadful visitation” (73). In such a case it might also by aesthetic means and moral vision have altered the course of the city’s destiny.

Chapter 3
The Betrothed

“Ah! . . . If the plague did things like this always and everywhere, it would be a real shame to speak ill of it. One might say that one was needed every generation; if you could only make conditions about having it—and recover oneself, to be sure.” —Don Abbondio, *The Betrothed*

The 1827 publication in Italy of Alessandro Manzoni’s *The Betrothed* (*I Promessi Sposi*) proved to be truly a literary sensation, its two thousand copies—in three volumes—selling out in two months. Illustrated, set to music, scripted for puppet shows, adopted by schools, it won all manner of popular success, in no small part because it “create[d] a literary patria in the absence of political unity,” as Italianist Federica Brunori Deigan suggests: “Before becoming citizens of the same nation many Italians, from north to south, were able to enjoy a book whose subject—drawn from national history—and lexicon—echoing the spoken language—they could understand and appreciate” (19). An historical novel, its seventeenth-century substance and its Italian speech shared by the populace of a politically long-divided country, Manzoni’s opus inspired in its readers a new sense of national identity and destiny. It marked a literary achievement that was hailed by the writer-patriot Silvio Pellico as a “beautiful deed”: a work that can “educate

the mind and refine the mores.”³⁶ Then, too, it offered a rousing tale of romance and adventure.

First published in 1827, *The Betrothed*, which owes much to the romantic fiction of Sir Walter Scott, underwent numerous revisions, wherein its author grappled with the problem of writing historical fiction without compromising history’s truth, before its final publication in 1840. Whereas Defoe’s narrator, H. F., presents his fiction as eyewitness history, Manzoni’s unnamed narrator, contemporaneous to the author and sometimes referred to in the text as “the author,”³⁷ declares his novel to comprise both a romance—an adventure that sweeps its central characters, Lorenzo and Lucia, into the tide of historical events in seventeenth-century northern Italy—and a chronicle documenting both the power struggles that rent Spanish-controlled Lombardy during the War of Mantuan Succession and the ravages of the plague that befell its capital city, Milan, in 1629–30 (the same plague that would attack H. F.’s London in 1664–65). The novel also purports to be a translation. The narrator explains that having been frustrated by the vernacular in which “the anonymous chronicler” penned the original account—an account that is in fact as much Manzoni’s invention as is the purported plague-year journal of Defoe—he has chosen simply to retell its story for his nineteenth-century

³⁶ From a letter written during Pellico’s imprisonment for participation in the 1821 Piedmontese revolt against the Austrian authorities in Lombardy to his fellow revolutionary, also jailed, Count Federico Confalonieri; quoted by Federica B. Brunori Deigan in her introduction to *Alessandro Manzoni’s The Count of Carmagnola and Adelchis* (20).

³⁷ Manzoni’s novel opens with the “Author’s Introduction,” the author in this instance clearly referring to the narrator. In the text of the introduction, however, “our author [*nostro autore*]” refers not to the narrator or to the author Manzoni, but to the anonymous author of the fictive seventeenth-century chronicle on which the unnamed narrator’s tale is supposedly based. The terms “narrator” and “chronicler” are used here and throughout the chapter to distinguish between the author of the fictive chronicle and the author of the tale in its supposed nineteenth-century translation, and to distinguish them as well from the author of the novel itself, i.e., Manzoni.

readers in nineteenth-century Italian.³⁸ In the narrator's composition of the translation, however, the tale is not only retold but also rewritten, as the narrator brings to bear upon the anonymously authored seventeenth-century chronicle his own nineteenth-century perspective. He liberally paraphrases the original text, he editorializes, he shapes the narrative.³⁹ No less than he translates the tale of Lucia and Lorenzo, he recreates it for his time.

And what a tale he has to tell! A story of high adventure with heroic deeds and incredible sacrifices as virtue does battle with avarice and corruption, with betrayal and hypocrisy, with cowardice and vicious brutality, with insurrection and disease: War, Famine, Pestilence, Death; Lombardy hosts all Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Pestilence, in fact, arrives late in the novel. The outbreak of bubonic plague in Milan occupies the final quarter of the narrative, but social plague—political disorder, economic dysfunction, societal decay, religious depravity—has afflicted Lombardy from the outset. Long before the plague strikes Milan, the virus of power has infected the city at every level, borne as it has been by the patriarchs of the community: by ruthless princes, greedy merchants, and a venal judiciary; by malicious church rulers, false priests, and parasitic monks, particularly the Capuchins (although they will perform with selfless heroism in the face of the actual plague). The *bravi*, a band of noblemen and their thuggish retainers,

³⁸ Archibald Colquhoun notes in *Manzoni and His Times*, “To bridge the gap between reality and invention he [Manzoni] used the device of an ‘Anonymous Chronicler,’ in whose ‘scratched and faded manuscript’ he pretended he had found his story. The device of course was in no way original, and an English critic of *I Promessi Sposi* in the *Monthly Review* in 1827 even found the ‘Anonymous Chronicler’ a hackneyed idea, too reminiscent of Walpole and Sterne” (167).

³⁹ On more than one occasion the narrator alludes to shortcomings in the style and substance of the chronicle he is translating. Lorenzo, the narrator notes at one point, “was wont to describe his story in detail and at almost too great length (and everything points to the anonymous chronicler [*il nostro anonimo*] having heard it from him more than once) . . .” (578) Evident are the narrator's frustration and impatience with the original text.

are meanwhile terrorizing the countryside.⁴⁰ Against this backdrop the young lovers Lorenzo and Lucia strive to fulfill their personal destiny—and to satisfy Destiny.

Manzoni's novel, like the romantic fiction which serves as his model, highlights exalted virtue and excessive vice as it pits the innocents Lorenzo and Lucia against sinister forces that would thwart their destiny—a destiny that would wed the luminous Lucia's purity to her betrothed Lorenzo's manly virtues. It is the obstruction to their proposed marriage that sets the novel's bustling plot into motion, when its arch-villain, Don Rodrigo, whose predaceous eye has settled upon Lucia, threatens the priest Don Abbondio with death if he persists in presiding over Lucia's marriage to Lorenzo. The cowardly Don Abbondio capitulates.⁴¹ The lovers flee—Lorenzo to Milan, Lucia to the convent at Monza—but with Don Rodrigo in pursuit of the maiden to whom he would lay carnal claim. Rodrigo will ally himself, at least for a time, with his superior in evil, the fierce and fearsome robber baron L'Innominato (the Unnamed), while Lucia will rely on the interventions of the Capuchin Fra Cristoforo, a monkly standard of Christian virtue among the patriarchs peopling the novel. Eventually, but separately, Renzo and Lucia will both find themselves stricken by the plague, he in Bergamo and she in the infested city of Milan, but both will survive. Ultimately reunited, their virtue rewarded and their destiny secured, they will be wed.

⁴⁰ The narrator notes that by the time he is telling his story in the 1820s the *bravi* as a class had long disappeared in Lombardy, but he does cite sources—like that of the Duke of Fera who indicated in his edict of February 13, 1632, that “the worst crimes are committed by the persons called bravoes” (6)—to establish the fact of their presence in Lombardy at the time of the story he is telling.

⁴¹ Regarding the name Abbondio, Emidio de Felice's Italian dictionary of onomastics states: “*Il senso dell' imposizione del prenome, come nel caso di Abbondante e Abbondanza risiede nell' augurio riferito, in età e in ambiente cristiani, all' abbondanza di grazia divina e di doti morali e spirituali.*” Manzoni names his cowardly priest ironically, as Don Abbondio in all his worldly concerns rarely evidences a whit of priestly integrity, let alone an “abundance of divine grace and of moral and spiritual gifts.”

Continually, then, the narrative raises the threat of dire circumstances within the compass of the betrothed's perilous adventure—assault, riots, imprisonment, abduction, murder, attempted rape—as well as the presence of war, famine, and plague in the larger world on which their story is staged: circumstances that at once test and prove the reality of the destiny that has been ascribed—or promised, for they are *promessi sposi*—to Lucia and Lorenzo. That their destiny is secure, no matter the misfortunes they have already and will yet endure, is apparent to Fra Cristoforo, who informs Lucia that she has been touched by God: “God has indeed visited you [*Dio vi ha visitate*]” (60). And Lucia's abductor, the infamous L'Innominato, can neither deny nor resist her numinous aura; under its influence he examines his soul, and to her he accounts the change of heart that prompts his miraculous conversion to the one true faith, whereby he will become an “instrument of salvation [*strumento di salvezza*]” (346).⁴² So it is that Lucia Mondella—in English, “light of the world”—becomes in the narrator's text “the maid of the miracle [*la giovine del miracolo*]” (386) as well. Yet the peasant girl Lucia herself does not know that by her grace and goodness destiny will ensure the love she shares with the virtuous Renzo; she does not know that they will survive not only the machinations of Don Rodrigo and his cohorts but also the havoc of famine and plague. Still, Lucia is not simply good. She is willfully good; by choice she follows the way of virtue so as to be able to fulfill her destiny without full knowledge of her destiny. She places her trust in God, and in the convent consecrates herself to the Blessed Virgin Mary for having been

⁴² The real-life character Cardinal Borromeo, delighted that he is about to receive a well known and hardened criminal back into the bosom of the church, tells L'Innominato that “He [God] has enabled you to become an instrument of salvation where you intended to be one of ruin [*Far che possiate diventare strumento di salvezza a chi volevate esser di rovina*]” (346).

delivered from Don Rodrigo; but she acts less upon articles of faith than she does upon a moral imperative.

For Manzoni's narrator in *The Betrothed*, the human will—be it in the service of virtue or vice—is a vital component in the equation of destiny. To absent one's will from the equation of destiny is to abrogate any responsibility for one's destiny. The scholar Don Ferrante, for instance, lives in the world of his library, its volumes reflecting his particular preoccupations with the outmoded, invidious culture of chivalry and with astrological metaphysics. The latter justifies his inaction in the face of the plague in Milan. Scoffing at any more recent scientific inquiries into the nature of plague, he embraces essentially medieval explanations that would attribute the plague to the “fatal conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter [*quella fatale congiunzione di Saturno con Giove*]” (588). Thus, any attempt to halt or alter the progression of the pestilence is, for Don Ferrante, an exercise in futility—for how can a man alter a cause that is astrologically lodged in the heavens? Abdicating all responsibility for his personal destiny, relinquishing any possibility that may lie within the sphere of his free will, he surrenders to the stars. He takes to his bed, where he dies “blaming it on the stars [*prendendosela con le stelle*]” (588), the narrative notes, more with irony than with sympathy. Don Ferrante allows the stars to define his destiny. In that, he may not be an immoral or ignoble man, but in the narrator's eye, he is a fool.⁴³

Considerably more consequential than Don Ferrante's folly in the progress of the narrative are the misfortunes and ills, the setbacks and plights, that destiny would appear

⁴³ Regarding the treatment of Don Ferrante's death, in chapter XXXVII of the novel, the narrator indicates that he is transcribing as closely as possible the account of the anonymous chronicler, with whom the narrator would certainly share the sense of irony apparent in this passage. The narrator may indeed have sharpened the chronicler's irony here and elsewhere in the text.

to lay in the paths of Lucia and Lorenzo. While adversity may seem repeatedly to assume the force of destiny in the course of the young lovers' story, adversity is not equivalent to destiny. For the responses of the peasant silk-weaver Renzo Tramaglino and his betrothed Lucia to adversity cannot be divorced from their realization of their destiny. It is a point that Renzo himself, who is not by nature a reflective man, perceives near the end of the novel. Having escaped death by plague—unlike countless others, among them many of the villainous *bravi* who had for years been terrorizing Lombardy (one appreciable effect of plague), and among those an unrepentant Don Rodrigo—and having been granted the hand of Lucia, whose release from her vows to the Blessed Virgin Mary was made contingent, by Fra Cristoforo, upon Renzo's forgiveness of Don Rodrigo, the prospective husband is now heading homeward to begin life anew with his beloved. It is raining fiercely, as if by torrents the land will be cleansed of the plague that has nearly run its scourge-like course. Renzo revels in the weather, for it is, too, the weather of his soul. As the narrator relates it: "Renzo, instead of being put out, wallowed in it, rejoicing in the freshness of the air, in that murmur and stir among the grass and leaves, all quivering, dripping, reviving and glistening; he drew long, deep breaths; and this sudden turn in Nature [*quel risolvimento della natura*] made him realize more freely and vividly the one that had taken place in his own destiny [*nel suo destino*]" (576).

The "sudden turn" in Renzo's destiny, however, did not occur independently of Renzo's person. Dogged by adversity on the two occasions he ventured into Milan—on the first, having got caught up in the famine-stricken city's Bread Riots, in which he escaped arrest and imprisonment; on the second, having been mistaken for one of the "anointers [*untori*]," agents suspected of deliberately spreading the plague—Renzo

considers that he may be subject to an evil planet in Milan: “A bad beginning—thought he—there seems to an unlucky star [*un pianeta*] over me in Milan” (527). Yet, whatever the shape adversity may take—famine or plague—and however it may come clothed, as policeman or bailiff, as chancellor or rabble, Lorenzo does not surrender to whichever forces destiny may have marshaled against him. No Ferrante he, Renzo responds to the workings of unlucky planets as well as the acts of ignoble men with action, and increasingly with wit and ingenuity. A naïf at the outset of his journey from the simplicity of village life, for all his ensuing scrapes with injustice, corruption, treachery, and deceit, he remains a man of virtue who proves himself worthy indeed of the inviolate Lucia. Their right to marry hinges critically on the Christian principle of forgiveness; so Fra Cristoforo on his plaguey deathbed exhorts Renzo to forgo his demand for justice vis-à-vis the shamelessly evil Don Rodrigo and, instead, to forgive the man who has brought upon him and Lucia so many sorrows. The principle is Christian; Renzo’s action upon it is moral: It prompts him to assume responsibility for his and Lucia’s destiny, for in the act of forgiveness—in pardon rather than just punishment—lies the *risolvimento* that will return to him Lucia.

Renzo having done his part in effecting the destiny implicit in the promise of *promessi sposi*, Fra Cristoforo does his. He persuades Lucia to abandon her self-imposed religious vocation—Lucia having vowed to take the veil in exchange for safe deliverance from her abductor, L’Innominato—and to marry Lorenzo, thus to fulfill the promise in their original marriage agreement. So it is that Renzo finally frees himself from the skein of ill chance and adverse circumstance that have threatened but not thwarted the destiny he has so ardently sought with Lucia. Renzo’s surname, Tramaglino, hints at his

predicament throughout most of the novel, a *tremaglio* being a kind of fishing net, and in adversity's net has he been continually caught; also, however, "*trama*" is the Italian word for "weft," and in that, Tramaglino points to the narrative resolution as well, for Renzo is a silk-weaver by trade and the silk mill in Bergamo will provide him the means to begin life afresh with his bride Lucia. Out of the name he was born to he makes of himself a new man.

*

In the narrator's romantic tale of Lorenzo and Lucia, as in the anonymous chronicler's original account, the young lovers are afforded a happy ending; the narrative leaves them wedded, hopeful, wiser for their experience, and in their destiny secure. Beyond the destiny fulfilled in the narrative, though, the narrator, who is relating their tale two hundred years after the historical events in the tale, may be prefiguring in the new man that Renzo has become the promise of another, less romantic and more republican sort of destiny: a destiny that has only begun to be realized in the Italy of 1827 (or 1840), when the narrator is retelling Renzo's story. Indeed, the narrator might well imagine in the silk-weaver Renzo the virtues of the Italian common man that the Risorgimento espoused in its nationalist drive toward the unification of nineteenth-century Italy.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Published first in 1827 and revised over the next thirteen years, *I Promessi Sposi* might be read as Manzoni's nationalist critique of the social and political situation on the Italian peninsula, with the troubles in Spanish-ruled Lombardy over the Mantuan Succession in the seventeenth century serving to illuminate the struggle in northeastern Italy against repressive Austrian rule in the nineteenth. In aid of unification, Manzoni also strove to nationalize the language of the peninsula, which comprised numerous regional dialects as well as the Spanish, French, and German of Italy's conquerors; the 1840 version of the novel set as a standard the Tuscan dialect. In the essay "*I Promessi Sposi da ieri a oggi*," Giancarlo Vigorelli writes: "Manzoni's correction of his *Betrothed* after the Tuscan idiom and all his painstaking work on the language were . . . an effort to contribute to the Risorgimento, to give linguistic unity to a nation laboriously endeavoring to achieve political unity. Manzoni's linguistic work ultimately contributed to our democracy, by greatly helping to forge a language for the people with no name [*genti di nessuno*]" (146).

Clearly, in the narrator's telling, in seventeenth-century Lombardy the perseverant, dauntless, honorable, industrious, skilled tradesman Renzo stands in opposition to the corrupt aristocracy, especially as it is epitomized in the novel by the villainous Don Rodrigo. Whereas the peasant-born Renzo's destiny may prefigure in kind that of the new man in Italy's future—a man who indeed takes charge of his future—Don Rodrigo unquestionably manifests a contemptible vestige of a dubiously glorious, chivalric past. Further, destiny as it is imagined by the scholars of the ruling class—among them, Don Ferrante, who supports a construct of destiny whereby one can attribute to a perfect, fixed divine plan not just plague but all the painful vicissitudes of human existence—has served and preserved the chivalric culture that governs the personal destinies of men and women in Spanish-ruled Lombardy: a culture that has enabled a powerful few to make victims of the unfortunate many. The narrator, then, offers two distinct perspectives on destiny. There is, on the one hand, destiny as it is perceived in the narrative to have affected the events of 1627–30 in Lombardy and, on the other, destiny as it might be conceived two centuries later, in 1827, when the events are being related in the novel. While the latter view, with the advantage of historical hindsight, exposes the shortcomings in the essentially medieval, scholastic precepts of the former, it also illuminates a new, if inchoate revolutionary component in Lorenzo's attitude toward his designated place in the social scheme of things. The former, medievalist view places man in the hands of destiny; the latter places destiny, at least in part, in the hands of man.

The medieval construct of destiny, which ascribes to earthly activities, human and natural, a divine purpose in accord with a fixed deific design, metaphysically reinforces

the injustices of the chivalric caste system, whereby feudal lords might, as if by divine ordinance, impose their will, no matter how perverse (consider *droit du seigneur*), upon the destinies of the untitled, and unentitled, peasantry in their demesne. While the quixotic scholar Don Ferrante may not be malicious in deed, he does embrace in principle the chivalric code that still, as late as the seventeenth century, thrived in Spanish-ruled Lombardy, despite edicts issued by the Roman Catholic Church banning literature that romanticized chivalric practices, especially that of dueling.⁴⁵ Of all the volumes on the sciences in his library, including those on astrology, that Don Ferrante has read and ably digested, he prides himself most on those dealing with the *scienza cavalleresca*.⁴⁶ As the narrator ironically observes: “But if Don Ferrante could call himself learned in all the above sciences, there was one in which he deserved and enjoyed the title of professor—the science of chivalry [*la scienza cavalleresca*]” (421). It is that very science of chivalry, defended with intellectual ardor by Don Ferrante, that has enabled the likes of the Spanish grandee Don Rodrigo, a man of no principle and countless iniquities, to make *punti d’onore* of his basest criminal impulses as he exercises his patriarchal authority in the service of his personal desire. He assumes himself to be a force of destiny. Were he, he would work only ill.

⁴⁵ Claudio Donati in “A Project of ‘Expurgation’ by the Congregation of the Index: Treatises on Dueling,” which appears in *Church, censorship, and culture in early modern Italy*, notes that “[i]n 1563 the Counciliar fathers assembled in Trent approved a decree which condemned the ‘detestable custom of the duel, introduced by the work of the Devil’” (134).

⁴⁶ The attempt to seize and repress by decree all publications that treated the chivalric practice of dueling was generally unsuccessful, and, as Donati remarks, “it throws light on a signally important aspect of seventeenth-century Italian culture, as splendidly symbolized in Alessandro Manzoni’s *I Promessi Sposi* by the library of Don Ferrante, an expert on ‘scienza cavalleresca,’ who ‘had in his library, and one may say in his mind, the works of the most celebrated authors on the subject; Paride dal Pozzo, Fausto da Longiano, Urrea, Muzio, Romei, Albergato, Torquato Tasso’s first and second Forno’—all of which were published before they were placed on the Index of 1596” (152). Among the authors, too, is Francesco Birago, who, the chronicler informs the reader, is a personal acquaintance of Don Ferrante.

The narrator aligns Don Rodrigo with the devil, as when he speaks of an account that “aroused the devil in Don Rodrigo, or rather, gave an extra stimulus to the devil already there” (275). Evil being noncreative, Don Rodrigo as a child of the devil can produce only more social and political as well as spiritual and moral blight. A kind of perverse agent of destiny, self-empowered, abusive of the authority he presumes by right of the chivalric culture he has continually debased with his criminal purposes, Don Rodrigo proves ultimately to be less agent than victim of destiny; for in the end the Spanish grandee who, bred on a chivalric code long since in its decrepitude, has visited a social and political plague upon the Lombard peasantry is himself a victim of the plague in Milan. It takes a plague to kill a plague. Don Rodrigo dies in torment—damned, condemned, no matter that he has been forgiven by Lorenzo and Lucia—in Milan’s *lazzaretto*. His cowardly pawn, the weak-willed Capuchin friar Don Abbondio, upon whom Don Rodrigo imposed in order to obstruct Lucia’s wedding to Lorenzo, manages, however, to survive the plague. Contemplating the purgative effect of the plague, which has rid Lombardy of Don Rodrigo and his band of *bravi*, Don Abbondio remarks with, the narrator tells us, the observation of a born survivor: “Ah! . . . If the plague did things like this always and everywhere, it would be a real shame to speak ill of it. One might say that one was needed every generation; if you could only make conditions about having it—and recover oneself, to be sure” (599).⁴⁷

Yet Don Abbondio is himself more deserving of reproach than praise in regard to the destiny of Lucia and Lorenzo as it is played out in the narrative of *The Betrothed*, for

⁴⁷ Don Abbondio, no doubt elated by his own survival, does overlook the fact that plague does not discriminate in claiming its victims, and many among the virtuous—notably in the novel the saintly Fra Cristoforo—died alongside the doers of evil. Nonetheless, Manzoni’s narrator also notes the purgative benefits of plague in cleansing the community of undesirable elements.

Don Abbondio hardly resists the wishes of the ill-intentioned Don Rodrigo. Rather, the parish priest, as much out of self-interest as fear, subscribes to—and thus, even in his passivity (by not sanctioning Lucia’s marriage to Lorenzo), helps to sustain—the corrupted chivalric presumptions of the Spanish grandee. Don Abbondio in fact adds another measure of adversity to the plot that begins to enmesh his two young parishioners when circumstances unfortunately cast the simple peasant girl, along with her companions, in the path of Don Rodrigo and his cousin Count Attilio. Modest and betrothed, Lucia rebuffs the overtures of the two men, by assumption her social betters. Her resistance, which elicits haughty laughter among the attendant *bravi*, prompts the count to make of it a wager on which will hang Rodrigo’s reputation if he fails to seduce her and her honor if he succeeds. Chivalry’s romantic *punto d’onore* is thus perverted into a dirty joke, with the fair maiden’s honor becoming a knightly prize that, if won, brings not glory to the soul but material reward. The chivalric ideal has been reduced to the dissolute Rodrigo, who, to save face and win the wager, begins to frame plans—starting with Don Abbondio—for the abduction and seduction of Lucia. Upon Rodrigo’s egregious resolve, emblematic of the debased state of chivalric culture in seventeenth-century Lombardy, hinges the narrative destiny of all the central characters in the novel.

Church decrees and government edicts both would support Don Abbondio in the pursuit of his office as a clergyman to honor the marriage agreement between Lucia and Lorenzo without interference from secular authority. In the parishes of Lombard villages in the 1620s, however, edicts of any kind held little sway in the face of noblemen’s whims. Infringements were common, for added to a nobleman’s chivalric benefit of class were the persuasive powers not only of lawless *bravi*, like the two who intimidate Don

Abbondio to submit to Don Rodrigo's will, but also of lawyers—few less scrupulous than the slippery, spurious, aptly nicknamed Dr. Azzecagarbugli, which in English would read “Quibbleweaver.” While the law on paper might ensure the promise of marriage in Renzo's destiny, it cannot in reality guarantee it.

The chivalric odds are stacked against a simple weaver like Renzo. Dr. Azzecagarbugli consults the law for him and informs Lorenzo that, indeed, a priest may not be interfered with by force or otherwise “from carrying out the duties of his office, or to make him turn it to improper uses . . .” It is no matter “whether they are committed by feudal lords, nobles, burgesses, lower orders, or plebs, says the law.” Further, Dr. Azzecagarbugli notes “that proceedings [shall] be taken by all the judiciary of the State, against all those who contravene under the above or other similar headings in any way, and that such financial and corporal punishment, deportation, the galleys, or even death . . . are the penalties for defying such an edict” (37). The law, then, is clear, and while it clearly reads in Renzo's favor, Dr. Azzecagarbugli—mistaking his young client for one of the *bravi*—provides him with alternatives that would render any such edicts relevant to the case, not to mention Renzo himself, entirely ineffectual: “For you see if you know how to manipulate proclamations properly, no one's guilty and on one's innocent . . . You must tell me who is the plaintiff, as you say; and, depending on our man's rank, state, and temper, we can see if it'd be best to hold him off by getting a protector, or by finding a way of fixing some criminal charge on him” (39). Having represented barons and *bravi* for years, Dr. Azzecagarbugli has become so thoroughly conditioned to the corruption of any legal code, be it churchly or chivalric, that he exists not to serve the law but to manipulate it. His moral reflex long lost, he can view his prospective client, this

incomprehensibly virtuous Lorenzo, only as a curiosity: a dangerous curiosity, for, to Azzecagarbugli's profound chagrin, he has learned not only that Renzo is no *bravo* but also that he is the very plaintiff who would bear suit against the *bravi* dispatched by the fearsome Don Rodrigo upon the parish priest Don Abbondio. Confronted and confounded by the audacity of a Lombard peasant who would seek justice of a Spanish grandee, Azzecagarbugli has but one choice: to rescind all services to the peasant, edicts be damned. So it is that unenforceable, or unenforced, edicts assume the force of destiny, as Dr. Azzecagarbugli winds another strand into the skein of adversity that impedes Lorenzo and Lucia in their pursuit of a promise and their destiny.

While Lucia and Lorenzo are themselves uncorrupted—and indeed incorruptible—by the plague to which the proponents of hoary chivalric codes have surrendered Lombardy's political soul, they cannot escape its diffuse effects. For all the virtue of their character and their case, neither the priest Don Abbondio nor the lawyer Dr. Azzecagarbugli is willing to resist the dictates of Don Rodrigo or risk the malice of his *bravi* on their behalf. Renzo seeks the aid of the law only to discover that there is no justice for the common man, that a nobleman's whim supersedes an ecclesiastical edict. Lucia fares better, not because she turns to the church, which has hardly been immune to the plague of political corruption, but because she turns to Fra Cristoforo. A brave man and a virtuous friar, truly called to the religious life of the Capuchin order, Fra Cristoforo agrees to intervene for Lucia, not by praying to God for the safety of her chaste soul but by confronting the rapacious Don Rodrigo and his errant *bravi* face-to-face. Although Fra Cristoforo will fail to deter Don Rodrigo from the pursuit of his malicious intent against the fair Lucia—for Rodrigo, it's a point of honor, after all—the friar will have proved his

own considerable mettle as Lucia's moral champion, a Christian knight in monk's clothing, against the depraved Spanish grandee. If Don Rodrigo stands as the irredeemably corrupt product and purveyor of the plague-infested chivalric culture in Lombardy, Fra Cristoforo represents what chivalry may have been at its ideal best.

Not that Fra Cristoforo completely escaped the plague that has assailed the social and political existence of Lombardy for decades upon chivalric decades. But he did survive it. Prior to his life as a Capuchin mendicant, Fra Cristoforo—then Lodovico—was a man of wealth if not of title, for he had risen up from the newly emerging mercantile class, which would grow increasingly powerful in the economic life of Italy's seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and would play a vital role in the Risorgimento of the nineteenth. In the 1600s, however, feudal codes, no matter that they were outmoded (and outlawed), still thrived in areas of northeastern Italy; and chivalric practices—like dueling, despite church edicts forbidding the “detestable custom” as “work of the Devil”⁴⁸ and dating from at least as early as 1563—continued to be common. So it happened that Lodovico came to be victim both of the chivalric culture's plague and of the edictal cure. For when Lodovico's guardian was killed in a duel defending him—the point of honor concerning, absurdly, who should have yielded to whom in a public walkway—again on a point of honor, it was incumbent upon Lodovico to challenge his guardian's killer. The ensuing duel left another man dead. On Lodovico's account, chivalric honor, so called, had cost two men their lives, one of them by his own hand. Racked by guilt, remorseful, in expiation for his base crime (the very “work of the Devil” by the church's claim), Lodovico abandoned his family and town for a monastic life. He also escaped certain death for his crime. Still, among the Capuchins he experienced a true

⁴⁸ Donati (134). See footnote 10.

vocation, and as a brother he took the name of his erstwhile guardian, Cristoforo.⁴⁹ In his exile to God he found an honor higher than that ascribed to worldly absurdities, yet the friar Cristoforo brought to his vocation a genuine knightly temperament that obliged him nobly to be a defender of the faith and a protector of the faithful. While he does not in the conventions of a chivalric romance pay court to a fair lady and against infidels or ogres heroically save her virtue, Fra Cristoforo does willingly risk his life against Don Rodrigo and his unholy band in an attempt to spare the chaste Lucia the consequences of a despicable wager.

On the occasion of Fra Cristoforo's confrontation with Don Rodrigo, as it ironically happens in the narrative, the reprobate grandee and three of his cohorts—his cousin Count Attilio, the mayor, and the lawyer Dr. Azzecagarbugli—are arguing a particular, and trivial, point of chivalric protocol that arises in Torquato Tasso's epic poem *La Gerusalemme liberata*.⁵⁰ Albeit Tasso's heroic narrative, written at the height of the Italian Renaissance, grandly romanticizes chivalric principles in its depiction of the eleventh-century combat between the Christians and Saracens during the siege of Jerusalem at the end of the First Crusade, Don Rodrigo and his comrades are hardly debating the qualities of Tasso's verse or the noble religious sentiments and moral scruples that inform the poet's rationale for the Crusades at the moment when Fra Cristoforo—acting as messenger on Lucia's behalf—interrupts them. Rather, they are bickering over whether a messenger in Tasso's work should have been trounced had he

⁴⁹ Cristoforo, or Christopher in English, translates as "the bearer of Christ." In Catholic iconography he carries the Infant Jesus on his shoulder across a stream with strong currents.

⁵⁰ Notably, a copy of this volume as well as one of its earlier, more graceful 1580 edition, *La Gerusalemme liberata*, is housed in Don Ferrante's library, although it does not appear to have been included among the works by Tasso banned by church edict in the Index of 1596.

failed to ask for permission to deliver his terrible message.⁵¹ For Count Attilio it is a point of conduct that brooks no ambiguity; he argues rigidly that “according to the laws of modern chivalry [*le leggi della cavalleria moderna*], which is the true one, I say and still maintain that a messenger who dares to hand a gentleman a challenge [*una sfida*] without first asking his leave is an insolent rascal who should not only be beaten, but who richly deserves it” (68). It is idle banter that makes hollow heroics of the picayune as in chivalric privilege it justifies the mentality of a bully. “*La cavalleria moderna*” has diminished Tasso’s ideal of knightly courage and courtesy exemplified in his narrative of the First Crusade to the brutish likes of the count, mayor, lawyer, and don, who feed like a plague upon the land. If they are comic in their bluster, they are dangerous in their disdain. Still, they spare the punctilious but resolute messenger Fra Cristoforo a trouncing, even as the fearless friar in godly indignation damns the devil Rodrigo, who will not be persuaded to relent in his lascivious purpose against Lucia.

“I pity this house. A curse hangs over it,” admonishes Fra Cristoforo: “You think God made a creature in His own image to give you the pleasure of tormenting her. You think God won’t be able to defend her! You have spurned His warning. You are judged for it [*Vi siete giudicato*]” (78). Failed though he has in his plea for the safety of Lucia, the good friar, her Christian knight and savior, remains unyielding in the face of Don Rodrigo’s evil. Having cursed the house of Lucia’s tormentor, Fra Cristoforo consigns his foe to God’s justice. “A day will come [*Verrà un giorno*]” (78), he foretells, and when it

⁵¹ In book six of *Jerusalem Delivered*, translated by Ralph Nash in 1987, a messenger from Argente, the Saracen warrior, delivers a challenge to Godfrey of Bouillon, the Christian leader of the Crusades. “And when he [the messenger] arrived in the royal presence of Prince Godfrey and his barons he asked: “My lord, among you is license of free speech granted to messengers?” “It is,” replied the captain, “and you may present your proposal without fear.” He resumed: “Now will it be seen whether my noble message be pleasing or fearful” (Canto VI, verse 17).

does, in pain—indeed, in the most wretched of plague deaths—and perdition will the unrepentant Don Rodrigo, by his execrable choices if against his will, meet his unwanted but warranted destiny.

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The plague of 1629–30 comes to Milan as a matter of narrative fact. Whereas its cause is scientifically indeterminate, its effects are mathematically discernible, the numbers of its victims multiplying rapidly at a geometrical ratio until—as in the plague depicted by Defoe’s H. F. (and Camus’s *The Plague* follows a similar pattern)—the contagion begins to attenuate and finally passes away. In his depiction of the plague Manzoni’s narrator, writing two hundred years after the event, has the advantage of historical hindsight and resources, and in his narrative account of the Milanese plague he relies heavily, as he indicates in the introduction to the novel, on a text written some years after the fact by an “anonymous chronicler”: a “narrative of events that occurred in the times of [his] verdant youth” (xi). In fact, the chronicle is itself a fiction: a narrative device fabricated by Manzoni to lend the illusion of historicity to his nineteenth-century narrator’s reconstruction of the plague’s progress in seventeenth-century Milan. Further, the narrator informs the reader that he has not only translated the chronicler’s vernacular into the Tuscan dialect of his own time—the particular regional dialect preferred by Manzoni himself⁵²—but also paraphrased the often awkwardly composed text for the purposes of his narration; in so doing he would of course be altering the perspective of the original. He has had to be inventive as well, because in his copy of the chronicle the

⁵² Manzoni wrote much of the first draft in his native Milanese. He sought, however, to establish a national language in writing *The Betrothed*—an ambition he shared with Dante Alighieri, who composed his *Divine Comedy* in what he called “Italian,” a literary language also based primarily on the dialect of Tuscany. During an extended stay in Florence, wherein Manzoni strove to master more completely the Tuscan dialect, he often called upon his servants for assistance with the idiom.

text is frequently illegible, scarred as it is by blotches and doodles [*scarabocchio*]. In addition, the narrator indicates that he has also sometimes corrected and qualified the chronicle with references from the texts of other plague literature, in particular the firsthand, if frequently discrepant, accounts of the Milanese historians Alessandro Tadino and Giuseppe Ripamonti. The fact of the plague, then, has been continually altered—and to varying degrees fictionalized—by the perspectives of all its various chroniclers and historians (as it is again by that of the narrator in his reconstruction of the seventeenth-century event). The plague, in fact, was being subjectively perceived even while it was being (supposedly) objectively witnessed and recorded.

The narrator's grasp of the play between perception and observation is reflected as much in the fiction he creates as it is in the facts he employs. The Milanese plague affects—indeed, afflicts—all the significant characters in the narrative reality of the novel: Lorenzo, Lucia, Abbondio, Ferrante, Rodrigo, Cristoforo, most of whom will be quartered and quarantined at some point in Milan's *lazzaretto*. All of them will perceive the plague as more than a disease, because the disease radically alters or redefines what they have conceived as their destiny. So the disease does not in itself equal destiny. Rather, as it is experienced, it is perceived to be a force of destiny. Thus, Don Abbondio sees plague as a scourge that has purged the land of the accursed *bravi*. Don Ferrante, on the other hand, tries to reason it out of human existence; he attributes to planetary conjunctions the power of destiny that Don Abbondio would lodge in divine purpose. While Don Rodrigo, who has without second thought or moral measure indulged his every reprobate impulse throughout his life, may stand among Abbondio's accursed, he himself brings neither foresight nor hindsight, nor insight, to his fate or his affliction;

rather, his unhappy destiny, his damnation in the company of the unredeemed and unredeemable, is ascribed to him by the narrator, largely through the pronouncements of Fra Cristoforo. Cristoforo's moral eye, Lorenzo's will, Lucia's heart, Ferrante's mind, Abbondio's fancy, the narrator's empathic imagination—they all figure integrally, then, into the equation of destiny as it is reconceived in, or wrested from, the devastating fact of plague.

In chapters XXXI and XXXII of the novel, the narrator interrupts the progress of Lucia and Lorenzo's woe-filled tale to consider the historical facts of the woeful Milanese plague: "Our aim in this account," says the narrator, "is not only frankly to represent the condition in which our characters will find themselves but also to make known at the same time, as far as our restricted space and limited abilities allow, a page of local history which is more celebrated than it is known" (470). To accomplish his aim—to separate the plague's seventeenth-century reality from the myth it has since become; to discern between what in its history has come to be "celebrated [*famoso*]" and what can indeed be "known [*conosciuto*]"—the narrator resorts, of course, to the (fictive, authorially contrived) account of the anonymous chronicler. But he does not rely on the chronicle alone; rather, he measures it against other (actual, firsthand) historical accounts by figures contemporary with the fictive chronicler, most notably, among many, those of Alessandro Tadino, a physician and the author of *Ragguaglio dell'origine et giornali successi della gran peste contagiosa, venefica et malefica, seguita nella città di Milano e suo Ducato dell' anno 1629 sino 1632*, and Giuseppe Ripamonti, whose *De peste quae fuit anno 1630* was published in 1640 (*Libri V. Mediolani, 1640, apud Malatestas*).

In the Milan of 1629–30 both Dr. Tadino and Ripamonti sat on the city’s Council of Ten; both men witnessed firsthand the effects of the plague, and both men survived its ravages. They both provide vividly detailed, presumably reliable historical accounts of the plague, yet on significant points—as, for instance, in the matter of identifying patient zero—they frequently disagree. The narrator notes, “Both historians say it was an Italian foot-soldier in the service of Spain: but they do not agree very much on anything else, even on the name of patient zero. According to Tadino, he was a certain Pietro Antonio Levato, quartered in the territory of Lecco; according to Ripamonti, a certain Pier Paolo Locati, quartered at Chiavenna” (475-6). Nor, according to the narrator, do the two historians agree on the date that patient zero entered the city of Milan, Tadino placing it at October 22, 1629, and Ripamonti one month later. In any case, “[n]either of the dates can be accepted,” the narrator adds, “for both of them are inconsistent with other and much better established facts” (476). And the narrator’s concern in the documentary chapters XXXI and XXXII is “established facts.”

Setting aside the issue of the Italian foot soldier’s name and the date of his arrival in Milan, the narrator strives neither to embellish (though the storyteller in him cannot resist identifying the hapless infantryman as a “bearer of misfortune [*portator di sventura*]”) nor to speculate as he attempts to distill from various seventeenth-century sources, not least among them that of the anonymous chronicler, what might be considered the facts in regard to the origin and progress of the plague: “Whatever the date may be, this unfortunate foot-soldier and bearer of misfortune entered the city with a large bundle of clothes bought or stolen from the German troops” (476). With efficient narrative strokes in largely unadorned prose, the narrator follows the soldier to the “house

of relations in the district round the Porta Orientale, near the Capuchin convent,” where “[s]carcely had he arrived than he fell ill” (476). The matter-of-fact tone plays against the drama inherent in the moment, but it does not dispel the chill in the next two sentences: “He was carried to the hospital, where a tumour [*un bubbone*] found under the armpit made the attendant suspect what was, in fact, the truth. On the fourth day he died” (476). The telltale bubo under the soldier’s armpit signals the imminence not only of his private death but also of possible public catastrophe. Despite the actions of the city’s Tribunal of Health, which quarantines the soldier’s family, and the efforts of the hospital, in which two attendants and a friar fall ill, “all three of the plague [*tutt’e tre di peste*],” but which otherwise contains “the contagion [*il contagio*],” all precautions prove to be of no avail. For “the soldier had left a seed outside, which did not take long to sprout. The first to catch it was the owner of the house at which he had lodged, one Carlo Colonna, a lute-player” (476). Again the Tribunal of Health takes action—“all the tenants in the house were taken to the *lazzaretto*, where most of them fell ill: some died shortly afterwards, of obvious infection” (476)—but the plague has already assumed its own inevitability. Out of the facts emerges a verifiable empirical phenomenon as well as a recognizable narrative pattern; for in Defoe’s *Journal*, too, “a man, possibly a silk merchant,” ventures to a major city—in this case, from Holland to London—where he finds lodging in Long Acre, falls ill with fever, and dies shortly thereafter, but not before the seed of contagion, which will spread through the city with terrifying rapidity, has been planted.⁵³

Significantly, the narrator in his reconstruction of the events in Milan in 1629 calls the plague a plague, in his reference to its three victims at the hospital, although the

⁵³ The plagues in both London and Milan occur during the Thirty Years War (1618–48). One of the most devastating plagues of war in European history, it was wrought essentially by the doctrinal conflict between Protestants and Roman Catholics that intensified during the period of the Counter Reformation.

contemporaries of Ripamonti and Tadino would surely have preferred the use of the more generalized and neutral “*contagio*” to the terrifyingly specific “*peste*.” Indeed, the narrator gleans from his seventeenth-century sources that initially “the very word was taboo [*proibito anche di proferire il vocabolo*]” (486). The first response, then, to the fact of plague on the part of the general populace as well as of health commissioners and physicians—and not unlike the citizens of London in Defoe’s *Journal* or those of Oran in Camus’s *The Plague*, or the merchants in Mann’s *Death in Venice*—is denial, as if the reality of plague lay in the word “plague.” As the disease spreads and the death toll mounts, however, “the idea” of plague is “admitted indirectly [with an] adjective [*s’ammette per isbieco in un aggettivo*]” in the designation “pestilential fever [*febbri pestilenziali*]” (486). Eventually, when its contagion becomes patently undeniable, it is still “not real plague . . . not true plague but something for which no other name could be found [*non vera peste . . . no peste proprio, ma una cosa alla quale non si sa trovare un altro nome*]” (486). Thus, as the narrator, citing Tadino, notes, the citizens of Milan who appeared to have escaped affliction reasoned that if it were truly plague they would not have survived to witness it (a position that may be rather like tempting fate): “[I]t was said by the Plebs and also by many biased doctors, that it was not real plague, or they would all have died of it” (485). Finally, though, the language of evasion, as aesthetically devious and temporarily efficient as it may have been, appears to cede “without any doubt or contradiction [*senza dubbio e senza contrasto*]” to the bald reality of the thing itself, except that “already another idea—the idea of poison and sorcery—had become attached to it, which altered and confused the meaning of the word that could no longer be suppressed [*ma già ci s’è attaccata un ‘altra idea, l’idea del veleno e del maleficio,*

la quale altera e con l'idea espressa dalla parola che non si può piu mandare indietro]" (486). Plague as fact remains inconceivable; the matter of fact being a matter of overwhelming awe, what can no longer be disputed by experience or disguised in language is now imputed equally as aesthetically by superstition to practitioners of "poison and sorcery": to scapegoats.

Scapegoating is commonly bred when elemental fear educes irrational panic; and however plainly scapegoating may have defied logic in plague-ridden Milan—no matter that the misplacement of blame endangered many more lives than any it purported to save—the notion of poisoners and sorcerers no doubt satisfied the desire among the Milanese for a construct of causation. So it is that ignorance, fear, superstition, and the persistent denial of the fact of plague even in the face of plague prompt an "unbridled orgy of suspicion." The phrase is Ripamonti's, as is the description which precedes it of "corpses always strewn about and lying in heaps before our eyes and underfoot [that] made the entire city seem like an immense charnel-house" (498). Out of the unavoidable, visible fact of such daily horrors, which feed the "mutual frenzy, that unbridled orgy of suspicion [*in quella sfrenatezza e mostruosità di sospetti*]" among the Milanese, arises "something even more ghastly, even more appalling" [*c'era qualcosa di più brutto, di più funesto*] and that is the fiction—the ill-conceived, aesthetically contrived notion of poisoners and anointers, plague-bearers who deliberately transmit the disease by contaminating fruits and vegetables in marketplaces with their demonic touch or by wiping church pews, city walls, and house fronts with deadly unguents—by which "not only was a neighbor, a friend, or a guest distrusted; even those names that are the bonds of human love, husband and wife, father and son, brother and brother, became words of

terror; and (horrible and infamous to tell!) the family board and the nuptial bed were feared as hiding-places for the lurking poisoner” (498). When everyone is suspect, no one is safe. Victims of mass hysteria, as if in their dread fingertips lay the sting of destiny, poisoners and anointers, witches and sorcerers, were sought out and hunted down (Renzo among them), were jailed and tortured, and on occasion were burnt at the stake. With no want of irony, of course, plague was in fact transmitted not by criminally motivated agents of anointment or by witches in league with the devil but randomly, and as surely as randomly, by human touch and physical contact.

From the onset of Milan’s plague in 1629, then, the fact of it had been inextricably wed to the aesthetics of it. The accounts of the anonymous chronicler as well as of Ripamonti, Tadino, and other seventeenth-century Italian historians all attest to an essentially aesthetic response to the plague—to its inconceivable, terrifyingly unbearable fact (although such emotionally charged qualifiers already have more to do with perception than fact)—not just by the general populace but also by the city’s council, the health tribunal, and much of the medical establishment. Fear of the fact sired the folly evident in the lexicon of denial and the logic of avoidance, which in their turn produced dangerously fanciful notions that manipulated the observable effects of the contagion to fabricate false causes for the contagion. With reason and foresight thus capitulating to superstition and hysteria, anyone might be suspect of disseminating plague through poison or sorcery or unguents and thereby be construed to be an agent in the service of a malignly purposed force of destiny. The construct no doubt enabled the hysterics, as by it they justified their persecution of the supposed anointers; it also fueled the panic that

gripped the city and crippled the council. But it did nothing to stem the course of the plague.

Still, the lexicon and logic of the perceptions that informed such constructs of destiny did affect the toll of the plague. Rather than acknowledging the fact of the plague and adopting preventive measures against the contagion, many among the populace were more likely, for example, to resort to a primitive faith in the magical properties of herbal wards to fend off evil. H. F. in Defoe's *Journal* marks a similar response during the London plague of 1665, but Manzoni's narrator apparently takes the example from Dr. Tadino, who observed that "people seemed like savages, carrying in their hands sprigs of mint, or rosemary, or rue, or phials of vinegar" as they walked about (473). While vinegar, mint, rosemary, or rue would hardly harm the person who bore it, neither could it protect her or him from exposure to the plague in public places. Of far more peril than a misplaced faith in the magic of herbs was the willful ignorance or lack of foresight in regard to large public gatherings, as in the case of the governor, who, on November 18, 1629, irresponsibly "issued a proclamation ordering public festivities for the birth of Prince Carlos, the eldest son of Prince Philip, without suspecting or bothering about the danger of crowding together in such circumstances—all just as if times were normal, as if nothing had been said to him at all" (474). Even more catastrophic was the decision—in response to the public hysteria at the height of the contagion and against the better judgment of the Cardinal of Milan, Federigo Borromeo—to parade through the city the relics of the plague saint San Carlo (Borromeo), Federigo's uncle, who, in the epidemic of 1583, had processed through the streets of Milan, as had St. Gregory in Rome during the Justinian Plague of the sixth century, to make expiation for the people's sins so that

God might be appeased and the reign of disease be lifted. On the occasion of the procession in 1630, on the eleventh day of June, through every quarter of the city, more people were infected by the plague than on any other single day of the epidemic. Disease inhabits its own destiny.

Just as the response to the plague of Milan, and concomitantly to the city's massive panic and disorder, was aesthetic both in its denial of empirically verifiable effects and in notions that wedded cause to malign agents of destiny, so too was the ideation by which scholarly minds strove to explain the phenomenon. Don Ferrante was not alone in ascribing the disease and disorder on earth to disruptive heavenly influences. Tadino records in his *Ragguaglio*, the narrator points out, that many among Milan's learned "saw the announcement and also the cause of all these misfortunes in a comet which had appeared in the year 1628" (500). Furthermore, along with the appearance of the comet was reported "a conjunction of Saturn with Jupiter, 'the aforesaid conjunction,' writes Tadino, 'inclining so clearly over the year 1630, that everyone could understand it. *Mortales parat morbos, miranda videntur* [Prior to deadly diseases, wonders appear]" (500). As if to prove the prophecy, in 1630, in June, the very month of the procession of San Carlo's relics through Milan, in the heavens another comet appeared; it was interpreted as "a new warning [*un nuovo avviso*]" in regard not just to the spread of the plague but to its propagation at the hands of the anointers. And to support the interpretation, scholars turned to countless sources—"From Livy, Tacitus, Dion, even Homer and Ovid and many others of the ancients who have described and alluded to similar things; and of modern ones there was an even greater abundance" (500)—to substantiate the proposition that pestilence was the product of baneful human effort, of

poison and sorcery. (With some regret the narrator notes that even Dr. Tadino, in every other way an exemplary physician who acknowledged the fact of the plague and warned against the danger of contagion by contact, subscribed to the notion of anointment.)

Don Ferrante places the cause of the plague, or *il contagio*—or perhaps, rather, the malady, as he does not admit to the existence of the plague—at an even greater remove from the increasingly alarming sphere of human experience in Milan. He locates its cause literally in the sky, for by his systematic application of Aristotelian logic to the evidence at hand, not to mention in the *lazzaretto*, he has reasoned *il contagio*, both its origin and transmission, out of earthly existence. While he observes the everywhere apparent manifestations of a terrible malady in Milan—“blotches, weals, carbuncles, violet tumours and black swelling”—he divorces the scientific fact of them from their painful reality; for Ferrante, they are “respectable words, each with its own definite meaning. But they have nothing to do with the question. Who denies that these things do exist? In fact these things do exist. The whole point is to see where they come from” (587). That they are borne by the afflicted among the Milanese does not mean that *il contagio* itself is born of Milan, or indeed of any other place on earth. Positing that “[i]n *rerum natura* there are only two kinds of things, substances and accidents” (586), Ferrante proceeds syllogistically to prove that *il contagio* is neither and therefore does not exist, “that [it] is a chimera [*che è una chimera*]” (586).⁵⁴

In regard to substance, Ferrante, following Aristotle, premises that it is either spiritual—a possibility vis-à-vis contagion that he dismisses as an “absurdity

⁵⁴ Don Ferrante’s argument in regard to the origin and transmission of the contagion in Milan appears not in the narrator’s historical account of the plague in chapters XXXI–XXXII but in a passage at the end of chapter XXXVII, which also relates the details of Don Ferrante’s death. The narrator states that he has closely transcribed the entire passage from the record by the anonymous chronicler. See footnote 8.

[*sproposito*]”—or material, its materiality being either simple or compound. A simple substance, Ferrante argues, would evidence its materiality in an elemental manner. If aqueous, it would drench or dampen; if igneous, it would burn; if terreous, it would be visible; and if aerial, “instead of passing from one body to another it would fly off at once to its proper sphere” (586). (That the plague in fact may have been transmitted from body to body, as physicians like Tadino averred on the basis of scientific observation and empirical evidence, is a disputable point, but it falls outside the premise of the syllogism, in that aerial substance by definition of its elemental nature and sphere of influence precludes the possibility of such transmission.) Neither is the contagion a compound substance, Ferrante asserts, for if it were, it would prove to be “sensible to the eye and the touch; and,” he rhetorically asks, “who has ever seen this contagion? Who has ever touched it?” (587) Having proved to his satisfaction that the contagion is not a substance, Ferrante applies his same deductive powers to the matter of its being an accident. At the same time that he scoffs at doctors who purport that what they call plague is passed from body to body and who then make of the claim a pretext for useless or ridiculous prescriptions like quarantining the afflicted or burning the clothes of the dead, Ferrante employs the physicians’ claim to demonstrate that *il contagio* does not qualify as an accident, because an accident cannot be passed from body to body—an accident is not transferable. Indeed, Ferrante posits, a “transferable accident [*accidente trasportato*]” comprises “two words which contradict each other completely, for there is nothing plainer and clearer in the whole of philosophy than this: that an accident cannot pass from one subject to another” (587); for once an accident is uniquely “produced” [*se è prodotto*], it cannot then be “propagated” [*non si propaga*]. With a *coup de logique*, then,

Ferrante disposes of plague as an accident; yet, while an accident may not by logic be transferable, the pest in pestilence—the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*,⁵⁵ which would be identified by the end of the nineteenth century as the cause of bubonic plague—is, and accidentally, randomly, and catastrophically was (transferable), via fleas from the bodies of rodents to the bodies of humans, in Milan in 1629–30.

Of scholastic and syllogistic cast of mind, Ferrante has by his deductions, then, determined what *il contagio* is not. Having established to his academic self-satisfaction that it is neither a substance spiritual or material—be it simple, of earth or air or fire or water; or compound, perceptible by sight and touch—nor an accident, and therefore not of the terrestrial world, not *in rerum natura*, with a leap of faith in logic and the stars he concludes that the origin of all the afflictions—the pustules, carbuncles, weals, tumors, swellings—must thus lie in the celestial realm: in the fatal planetary conjunction of Saturn with Jupiter. Ferrante brooks no counsel from physicians who admonish the Milanese to avoid contact with any possible sources of infection, even while they acknowledge the influence of the malignant conjunction, or the health officials who would have the people burn the contagion in clothes, as if you could burn what is born in the heavens: “Poor fools!” Ferrante exclaims, “will you burn Jupiter, will you burn Saturn? [*Povera gente! Brucerete Giove? Brucerete Saturno?*]” (588) So it is that Don Ferrante abjures all precautions against the city’s malady; he surrenders himself and his will to what he construes to be a star-borne destiny. He dies, as does his wife Donna Pressade, and their entire household (including Lucia, who has found temporary, though unwanted, shelter there) is infected, far less by what Don Ferrante has aesthetically

⁵⁵ Alexandre Yersin, a Swiss-French bacteriologist associated with the Pasteur Institute, identified the rodent-borne bacillus and linked it to bubonic plague in 1894.

constructed to be destiny than by his unwillingness to take any measures in exception to his aesthetic. The plague meanwhile assumes its own destiny, as a matter not of sophisticated fancy but of fact.

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In the narrator's introductory comments to the novel, in which he remarks upon the text of the anonymously authored chronicle, he quotes the opening page of the (supposed) seventeenth-century original. Its allusions to correspondences material to the Great Chain of Being—"the most Catholick King [being] that never-setting Sun . . . that never-waning Moon, the Vice-Roy . . . the fixed stars, the most noble Senators, and with them shedding light in all directions, the other worshipful Magistrates, thus forming a glorious Firmament" (xi)—clearly place the chronicle in an ideational context that reflects the cosmology of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (as does Don Ferrante's disquisition regarding the influence of celestial phenomena on terrestrial events) rather than one that harbingers the aesthetic and intellectual revolutions to come in the eighteenth century with the Enlightenment and in the nineteenth with Romanticism.⁵⁶ Separated by two hundred years, the narrator and the chronicler travel in fundamentally different worlds of the mind. In light of an heroic world view, embraced by the Age of Chivalry but rooted in the postulates and syllogisms of medieval metaphysics, the chronicler in his account not surprisingly individualizes the dons and magistrates in that "glorious Firmament"—noble men who played important roles in the combat against Milan's famine and plague (among them Don Ferrante)—although, "out of respect [*per degni rispetti*]," their real names, "their Patronimicks [*la parentala*]," have in most

⁵⁶ A. O. Lovejoy in *The Great Chain of Being* and E. M. W. Tillyard in *The Elizabethan World Picture* both explore the divinely ordered hierarchical worldview with its Aristotelean links and correspondences that was embraced by the medieval scholastics and Renaissance scholars and which informed in elaborate and minute detail the arts and sciences until the close to the eighteenth century.

instances been withheld (xi). What is surprising is the chronicler's positioning of the humbly born Lucia and her betrothed Lorenzo, a silk-weaver, a mere tradesman, at the center of the heroic narrative in his record of the tumultuous events in Lombardy at the end of the 1620s—if, indeed, the heroization of the *promessi sposi* is the doing of the chronicler. While it is evident from the narrator's asides in the novel—whereby the narrator often takes occasion to comment, usually with irony, upon the stylistic shortcomings and narrative method of the chronicler—that the peasants Lorenzo and Lucia figure among the historical personages in the seventeenth-century text, it is not apparent to what degree the chronicler's history of their travails among Spanish-ruled Lombardy's patriarchies has been reshaped and rewritten by the narrator to serve his more modern, nineteenth-century purposes. Clearly, though, the sentiments and sensibility, the intelligence and temperament, that inform the novel's narrative reflect far less the indulgences of the chronicler's baroque fancy than they do the aesthetics of an Italian romanticism notably similar to that of the novel's author, Alessandro Manzoni. Among a number of negative criticisms leveled at Manzoni when the novel was first published in 1827, before the Risorgimento, was the literary impropriety of representing peasants as heroic characters; it is a criticism that the novel's narrator would have shared. Aesthetically, the narrator and the author do not stand at far remove, the former serving as a narratorial persona for the latter.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Not that rustics wanted representation in the arts of the seventeenth century; poetry in the pastoral manner of Horace and Virgil as well as courtly entertainments in baroque and rococo fashion exalted an arcadian alternative—an idealized bucolic existence among simple (if not simply costumed) shepherds and shepherdesses—to the business of sophisticated society and city life. Manzoni, in his preference for historical realism, had little taste for the rustic artifice (or sexual frivolity) of such popular entertainments, unlike Don Ferrante, evidently, who “died like a hero of Metastasio, blaming it on the stars” (588). The allusion to Metastasio—a celebrated librettist (1698–1782) who cared much less for historical facts than he did for the lovesick hearts of heroes, gods, and royals in shepherdly guise—is amusingly satiric; it is also

That the narrator throughout his retelling of the chronicler's tale weds romantic aesthetics integrally to a nineteenth-century Roman Catholic ethos (with its emphasis on the New Testament), which has been tempered by Enlightenment principles, further reflects the measure of Manzoni's own singular imagination. Archibald Colquhoun notes in *Manzoni and His Times* that the particular, Italian brand of romanticism in *The Betrothed*—quite distinct from the “search for the bizarre” and “renunciation of common sense” that for Manzoni characterized Nordic romanticism—always bore the mark of Manzoni's own faith in the sort of Christian doctrine embraced by the fictional Fra Cristoforo and actual Cardinal Borromeo in the novel, whereby, asserts Colquhoun, “in the famous words of Cardinal Federigo [Borromeo],” the living of a life becomes “a responsibility for all, for which each one will have to render an account” (153).⁵⁸ Throughout the novel, in the instances of all the significant characters, who in varying degrees assert responsibility for their destinies through acts of their free will, accounts are rendered; so, too, are judgments passed, usually through the narrator's, and Manzoni's, moral interlocutor: Fra Cristoforo, who is also Lucia's and Lorenzo's spiritual guide. While the novel sets Lucia's plight and Renzo's quest, both the result of Don Rodrigo's unknighly wager on a fair maiden's chastity, upon the accurately detailed stage of Lombardy's seventeenth-century history, without forfeiting romance or adventure the narrative focuses essentially on the moral implications of the betrothed's tale as they strive against adversity—and at critical moments with the wisdom of Fra Cristoforo—to achieve their destiny by virtuous account. History afforded Manzoni no want of

anachronistic, in the chronicler's if not the narrator's context, as Metastasio's operas appeared a century and more after Ferrante's death in the plague of 1630.

⁵⁸ Chandler observes, “For Manzoni, as against Locke, Hume, Condillac and Rousseau, the definition of the individual is not the unifying memory of feelings or perception, but the enduring moral personality” (110).

adversity, as he indicated in a letter written in 1821 to his friend Claude Fauriel, when he began working on the novel: “The memoirs that we have from that period show a very extraordinary state of society; the most arbitrary government combined with feudal and popular anarchy; legislation that is amazing in the way it exposes a profound, ferocious, pretentious ignorance; classes with opposed interests and maxims . . . a plague which gave full rein to the most consummate and shameful excesses, to the most absurd prejudices, and the most touching virtues . . . that’s the stuff to fill a canvass.”⁵⁹ From the outset, it would appear, Manzoni’s aesthetic concern was to bring to his literary canvass not just a historical novel but also a moral tale.

That “very extraordinary state of society” has not escaped Fra Cristoforo. The good and righteous Capuchin comes to the story of the betrothed with wide experience in the secularity of a world ruled by “feudal” dons and “arbitrary” magistrates, although he would hardly place the unprincipled, dubiously chivalric likes of Don Rodrigo and Count Attilio and Dr. Azzecagarbugli in so glorious or “heroick” a firmament as that rendered by the chronicler. Fra Cristoforo has also known the world’s adversity; he comprehends fully the reality of its blind force in shaping the destinies of princes and peasants, of grandees and tradesmen, not to mention of merchants and mendicants, and in his faith he reasons that to secure one’s destiny both in this world and in the next, blind force must be

⁵⁹ The original text, written in the exemplary French style of Manzoni’s correspondence with Fauriel, reads: “*Les mémoires qui nous restent de cette époque, présentent, et font supposer une situation de la Société fort extraordinaire. Le gouvernement le plus arbitraire combiné avec l’anarchie féodale et l’anarchie populaire, une législation étonnante parce qu’elle présente et parce qu’elle fait deviner ou qu’elle raconte une ignorance profonde, féroce, et prétentieuse.—Des classes ayant des intérêts et des maxims opposés . . . une peste qui a donné de l’exercice à la scélératesse la plus consommée et la plus déhontée, aux préjugés les plus absurdes, et aux vertus les plus touchantes, etc. etc. . . . voilà de quoi remplir un canevas*”: from *Epistolario di Alessandro Manzoni*, Il Manzoni Ed Il Fauriel, Studiati Nel Loro Carteggio Inedito Da Angelo Gubernatis, Appendice, Letter, XL11, Milan ce 29 Mai, 1822 (337). See also Colquhoun’s biographical study in *I Promessi Sposi*, (613). Glenn Pierce explores the influence of particular canvases by artists like Caravaggio and Murillo on Manzoni’s work in *Manzoni and the Aesthetics of the Lombard Seicento: Art Assimilated into the Narrative of I Promessi Sposi*.

met with moral vision. In virtue is redemption earned, in the virtue of a person's deeds and choices. Certainly, Fra Cristoforo has earned his, and continues to earn it as he ministers not only to the novel's peasant heroes Lucia and Lorenzo but also to the city of Milan, where, in martyrdom to the historic plague, the unremittingly penitent friar will recompense his mortal sin—for in another life, as Lodovico, he killed a man, on a *punto d'onore*, against church edicts—and surrender himself finally to the grace of God.

To Don Rodrigo—as to some among Manzoni's critics in 1827, apparently—Lucia and Renzo are “nobody's people [*gente di nessuno*]” (166): peasantry, dispensable, worthy of neither a simple kindness nor a second thought, decidedly unheroic. But not to Manzoni, who finds in them—as well in the masses of people like them, whose virtues in words and deeds history has for generations left unrecorded and overlooked⁶⁰—qualities of honor and honesty that governors and legislators in their “profound, ferocious, pretentious ignorance” seem almost universally to lack. In the figures of Lucia and Lorenzo, too, Manzoni is able to embody an innocence of spirit that may be subject to the patriarchies of seventeenth-century Lombardy but that remains uncorrupted by the values that the rapaciously rich and politically powerful espouse. Lucia and Renzo proffer the possibilities of true virtue. In the novel Manzoni yields his authorial perspective to that of the narrator, who makes of Fra Cristoforo the moral linchpin in a tale that extracts from the chronicler's account of the betrotheds' romantic adventure and his documentation of

⁶⁰ According to Colquhoun, Manzoni, in the introduction to his verse drama *Adelchi* (1822), writes: “An immense multitude, one generation after the other, passing on the face of the earth, passing on its own native piece of earth, without leaving a trace in history, is a sad phenomenon the importance of which cannot be overlooked; and the causes of such a silence may give rise to even more important discoveries” (615-6). While Colquhoun, in the biographical study previously cited, places this statement in Manzoni's introduction to *Adelchi*, it does not appear in any edition of the work, either in the original Italian or in English translation, that I have been able to locate.

horrors in plague-ridden Milan—“the most shameful and consummate excesses”—an Augustinian vision of divine grace and human redemption.

It is Fra Cristoforo who recognizes in Lucia a purity of soul and a goodness of being so genuine that he can conclude only that she has been visited by God: that she is truly one of God’s own, her heavenly destiny being thus blessedly assured. The destiny she would realize in her earthly life with her beloved and betrothed Lorenzo, meanwhile, grows less secure, although her willful resistance to the base intents first of Don Rodrigo and then of L’Innominato prove her to be as much protected as rewarded by her virtue. Lucia’s nature is not so much changed in the course of the novel’s calamitous events—she escapes seduction and dishonor, she survives famine and plague—as it is illuminated, or as the light (*la luce*) that defines it is unveiled. What Lucia possesses at birth and by nature, or predestination, Lorenzo gains. In his journey from Lecco to Milan, from untried innocence to worldly experience, Renzo’s worthiness of Lucia in the eyes of God is continually being tested—by the presumptions of the *bravi*, by the chicanery of solicitors, by the vacillations of the clergy; by false accusations, by mob hysteria, by deadly contagion—and again and again it is proved. His is a pilgrim’s progress, and in it he assumes fully the responsibility for his destiny, in the end by heeding the moral wisdom in Fra Cristoforo’s admonitions. In forgiveness, Lorenzo quells his wrath—a deadly sin by which he himself has affronted God—along with his blind desire for justice against the villainous Don Rodrigo, now dying horribly of plague. In blessing his mortal enemy Renzo evidences himself truly to be worthy of Lucia’s eternal love and of God’s infinite grace, as Fra Cristoforo, in his “power to speak in His [God’s] name” (572),

acknowledges.⁶¹ The destiny of the now-worthy Lorenzo and unfailingly virtuous Lucia, says Fra Cristoforo, lies not in “a temporal and worldly joy which, however complete and unalloyed with any disappointment, must anyway end in great pain at the moment of separation”; rather than completing their destiny, their marriage will merely herald it by “put[ting] both of [them] on the road to the joy that knows no end” (572). They thus live in the hope that ultimately, eternally, in each other’s arms will they together be in God’s embrace.

Fra Cristoforo continues with instruction: “Love each other as fellow-travellers, with the thought that you must leave each other, and with the hope of finding each other again forever” (572). That death will in time separate Renzo from his beloved Lucia is a certainty, whereas the destiny that the friar envisions for them beyond death—by God’s grace the two of them abiding together forever in the glory of heaven—is cast as a possibility rather than a predetermined certainty. Inarguably, they “must leave each other” in this life, but the prospect of their “finding each other again” in the next is a matter of hope. And of faith, in that the hope for their destiny, their eternal union in the arms of God, as Fra Cristoforo constructs it, evolves from his faith in their destiny. Indeed, the aesthetic by which Fra Cristoforo delineates the hope he envisions is bred by the ethic at the core of his Catholic faith. What the Capuchin friar might define as virtue in principle—acts of good conscience accomplished, in despite of adversity and in praise of God, through the exercise of free will for the benefit of one’s Christian soul and one’s fellow beings—Lucia and Lorenzo, by the end of the trying, perilous course of their

⁶¹ There is more doctrine than poetry in the priestly power that Fra Cristoforo here asserts. The New Testament Gospel of St. John 20:23—“Whose sins ye shall forgive they are forgiven and whose sins ye shall retain they are retained”—is cited by church orthodoxy, and by Manzoni himself in *A Vindication of Catholic Morality* (178), in support of the ordained priest as God’s earthly agent of forgiveness.

separate journeys from the lakeside village of Lecco to worldly Milan, have demonstrated repeatedly in deed. If Cardinal Borromeo would have them thus render their accounts, Fra Cristoforo would doubtless deem them worthy of divine grace and in their virtue find hope that they would achieve their heavenly reward. In that, the friar stands closer in theological spirit to the nineteenth-century narrator and to Manzoni himself than he does to his churchly contemporaries, as the tenets that inform the morality in the story of Lucia and Renzo derive from a variety of sources in Manzoni's own history in the Roman Catholic faith.

A cradle Catholic, Manzoni had lost his faith by the time he was twenty, but he had found Paris, where he became enamored of French literature and thought, and especially of Voltaire, whose rationalist wit and voice of reason epitomized the French Enlightenment. His mother, Giulia, in search of a wife for him, met a Swiss Calvinist who lived in Milan with his daughter, Henriette, a devout and pious young woman. Manzoni married Henriette Bondel in a Calvinist ceremony. Later she converted to Roman Catholicism at her husband's behest in 1810, when Manzoni's fear of damnation persuaded her to have their first child baptized in the Catholic faith. Soon after, the twenty-five-year-old Manzoni experienced a revelation he himself compared to that of St. Paul on the road to Damascus. Or as T. F. Crane noted on the publication of Manzoni's correspondence, Manzoni, like St. Augustine, cried, "Lord, if you exist, reveal thyself to me."⁶² That Manzoni's priests—Todi in Milan and Dègola in Paris—both had Jansenist sympathies attests perhaps to the searching, unsettled nature of Manzoni's (and Henriette's) religious faith at this time, in that the Jesuits accused the Jansenists of being

⁶² Crane's esteem for Manzoni is evident in his review of the author's correspondence with Claude Fauriel in "Recent European Publications" for the *North American Review*, Vol. 13, No. 288 (Nov. 1880), 457-463.

essentially Calvinists—or else heretics. The priests in their instruction may also have had a discernible influence upon Manzoni’s spiritual and intellectual views, as may have the *Provinciales* of the avowed Jansenist Blaise Pascal and the literature of seventeenth-century churchmen with Jansenist sympathies like Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet and Jean-Baptiste Massillon—none of which means that a novel twenty years in the writing, from 1820 to 1840, can be read strictly or even largely, and certainly not systematically, in terms of Jansenist doctrine. (At least equally influential upon the young Manzoni was the work of Voltaire, who was anti-Jansenist to his *philosophe* core.) Manzoni points out in a footnote to *A Vindication of Catholic Morality*, “I deem it right to quote authors, to whom I might pay tribute of esteem even while I combated their opinions” (125).

The Jansenists, like Calvinists, held that only a certain but indeterminate number among postlapsarian humanity—an elect—were destined—or predestined, rather—to be saved in eternity, whereas their less fortunate brethren were doomed to perdition.⁶³ Certainly, to Fra Cristoforo’s pious eye, Lucia in her purity of soul stands among the former, and the irredeemable Don Rodrigo—even on his deathbed he refuses the sacrament of extreme unction, by which his sins might be remitted and grace conferred—among the latter. L’Innominato, however, for all his willfully wicked deeds, does genuinely, indeed miraculously, under the influence of Lucia, experience a conversion, which, along with due penance (as an “instrument of salvation,” by making his estates a haven for the fearful fleeing the plague), might win him the grace of God and at least the

⁶³ The Jansenist logic that condemned humanity along with Adam is treated succinctly by Mina Waterman in *Voltaire, Pascal, and Human Destiny*; her exposition, in part: “Basing its doctrine on the theory of original sin, Jansenism held that, because of Adam’s fall from grace, mankind was condemned as a whole to eternal damnation

. . . [and] no effort on the part of the condemned being could prevail against the awful weight of sin, since, because of his error, Adam had lost free will for the human race. Man was therefore predestined to his fate and could not hope to enter the kingdom of God by dint of good works.” (18).

possibility of salvation, if human will and virtue were able, contrary to Jansenist doctrine, to alter a destiny that has been divinely predetermined.⁶⁴ Unlike Calvinists, the Jansenists rejected the tenet that imparted to human will a role in *redetermining* the course of one's destiny, in that just as Adam's fall from grace extends to all mankind, so does his forfeit of free will, by which he committed the original sin in an act of disobedience to God. In acknowledging at least the redemptive possibilities in a human will awakened and dedicated to virtuous deeds and Christian purpose, neither Fra Cristoforo nor Cardinal Borromeo stand with the Jansenists on the issue of will (or with the Calvinists, for that matter, as they allowed human will freedom only to choose evil). The doctrine of grace, as derived from the teachings of St. Augustine, also assumes a key position in Fra Cristoforo's moral paradigm, just as it does in Jansenist theology. The Jansenists, however, link the divine dispensation—efficacious grace—not to the principle and practice of virtue, and thus to the operation of will, but to predestination alone; grace therefore applies only to the elect.⁶⁵ (Of course, as the elect do not know they are the elect, even though they live in blessed assurance of salvation, they must continually strive to prove their obedience to the sovereignty of God in words and deeds.) The friar and the real-life character Cardinal Borromeo apply the doctrine of grace in a more liberally orthodox Catholic manner to the Christian experience, by which, in addition to the sufficient grace granted to all mankind by the suffering of Christ, the orthodox Catholic

⁶⁴ While critical consensus places Manzoni by nature closest to the characters of Fra Cristoforo (as a model to which he aspired) and Don Abbondio (as a vessel of human timidity), the conversion experienced by L'Innominato derives much from Manzoni's own dramatic (re)conversion.

⁶⁵ "Efficacious grace was granted only to the elected few . . . assuring them of eternal salvation," notes Waterman, and in a footnote distinguishes Jansenistic efficacious grace from both sufficient grace and irresistible or efficacious grace as defined by orthodox Catholicism, which, by virtue of the Passion of Christ grants sufficient grace to all men: "It was not sufficient for salvation, however, but it enabled men to be virtuous and to appeal to the mercy of God . . . [so as to] obtain, in addition to 'sufficient' grace, an 'irresistible' or 'efficacious' grace whose function is exclusively salvation" (18-9).

might through the exertion of human will in the service of virtue and through God's mercy attain the irresistible or efficacious grace that St. Augustine deemed essential for eternal salvation. In the narrator's mind and from Fra Cristoforo's churchly perspective, Lucia's destiny would appear to be secure in its guarantee of eternal salvation by efficacious grace, whereas Lorenzo in his words and deeds demonstrates—clearly, to Fra Cristoforo—sufficient grace in the trials he suffers not only to win earthly love but also to attain heavenly grace. Likewise, might even L'Innominato in the miracle of his conversion discover sufficient enough grace in this world to negotiate his way efficaciously to the next. As subtle, intricate, contradictory, and on occasion impenetrable as the influences that shaped and continually reshaped Manzoni's theological disposition may be, the moral paradigm that emerges in the tale of the betrothed is clear.

The aesthetic and the ethic in *The Betrothed*, then—i.e., Fra Cristoforo's (as well as the narrator's and Manzoni's) construct of destiny and the moral paradigm that informs it—do more perhaps to justify God's ways to man than they do to illuminate the cause and nature of the plague or to mitigate the progress of its effects. The scourge, as the politically pragmatic and clerically accommodating Don Abbondio perceives it, may rid the land of feudal vermin like Don Rodrigo and his *bravi*, but the pestilence also claims the exemplary churchman Fra Cristoforo, who contracts the plague while ministering selflessly to the spiritual and physical needs of the sick and dying in Milan's *lazzaretto*. The plague does not discriminate among its victims, does not distinguish between the conscientiously good and willfully evil; but it did vanquish nearly half the population of Milan—60,000 deaths—in 1630. Among the dead in the novel lie the lordly, scholarly Don Ferrante and nearly his entire household, not because he lodged the

cause of the contagion in the heavens or because he declined to name the everywhere-apparent malady bubonic plague, but because he refused to acknowledge its empirical fact outside his aesthetic constructions. The plague respects not class or intellect. It simply runs its natural, disastrous course, no matter how many anointers are jailed or witches burnt. The plague cannot be otherwise contained. Its terror spreads unreined, and the human imagination seeks to explain aesthetically what it cannot comprehend intellectually: God. The plague may fell the blessed beside the damned, but by the sovereign God's grace the good shall be redeemed in heavenly embrace while the evil shall perish in hell. God selects; the plague is.

Chapter Four
Death in Venice

Character is destiny.—Heraclitus

No work of art is possible without the help of the devil.
—André Gide

Thomas Mann declared that everything in his 1912 novella, *Death in Venice* (*Der Tod in Venedig*), was drawn from real life—that he had only to put it all together. According to his wife, Katja, in her *Unwritten Memoirs*, the novella originated during a holiday she and Mann spent with his brother in Venice in 1912, on which occasion Mann encountered a beautiful Polish youth who became the model for the character he named Tadzio (60-3). The novella's composition may owe a creative debt as well to a 1911 newspaper account of an actual Asiatic cholera epidemic that had crossed the Adriatic and infested Venice and its environs, although the topic of plague, be it metaphorical or real, appears to have commanded a fascination for Mann throughout his career, as his novels *The Magic Mountain* (1924) and *Dr. Faustus* (1947) attest. In those works, too, disease (tuberculosis, syphilis) is linked intimately to the evolution of the protagonist's destiny.

As in the texts of Defoe's journal and Manzoni's history of a plague year, in Mann's novella disease substantively redefines destiny. However, whereas Defoe and Manzoni, at least in part, aesthetically invest the earthly fact of plague in seventeenth-century London and Milan with the divine force of destiny by which human souls are justly damned or providentially redeemed, Mann envisions the destiny of his protagonist,

Aschenbach, not as the product of heavenly agency but as an aesthetic process lodged in the human psyche. While Mann, then, internalizes his protagonist's destiny, it is not so much willfully or consciously determined by Aschenbach as it is evolved out of myriad impulses and long-repressed desires and feverish dreams, and plague. For, indeed, in the case of Aschenbach in *Death in Venice*, plague, too, is internalized; Mann's narrative focuses almost exclusively on the anguish of the disease that Aschenbach so poignantly and profoundly suffers in his psyche, the novella's title referring less to the death that comes to Venice from across the Adriatic than to Aschenbach's lonely, singular death in Venice, ostensibly by cholera.

“A development is a destiny [*Eine Entwicklung ist ein Schicksal*],” remarks the narrator of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* as he surveys the literary career of the celebrated author Gustav von Aschenbach in chapter 2 of the novella. Reflecting upon the process of this “development”—this “self-formation of a talent”—the narrator observes, further, that “when a great talent grows out of its libertinistic chrysalis-stage, [it] becomes an expressive representative of the dignity of the mind” (105). The product of that process, then, is the realization of a talent in its papilionine maturity: in the works by which a talent reveals and fulfills its destiny. The narrator's discourse herein capsulizes his perspective on the process by which evolved and out of which emerged the product of the mature artist, the skepticism and irony of his radical youth yielding in time—Aschenbach has turned fifty—to a magisterial dignity. Thus is a development a destiny.

Given his progress into middle age, Aschenbach might well have expected his destiny to develop as he had imagined, even “as a young boy,” it would: “For he dearly longed to grow old, for it had always been his view that an artist's gift can only be called

truly great and wide-ranging, or indeed truly admirable, if it has been fortunate enough to bear characteristic fruit at all stages of human life” (101). By continuing to evolve his talent even in the reaches of old age Aschenbach would emulate his especial German literary hero, Goethe. The narrator, however, would not appear to share Aschenbach’s faith in his artistic possibilities, in that he has in recent years assumed “something of an official air, of an educator’s stance” and his style in public presentations has “developed toward the exemplary and definitive, the conservative, and formal and even formulaic” (105). That “the education authority adopted selected pages from his works for inclusion in the prescribed school readers” (105) suggests that any danger in Aschenbach’s creativity has been buried in respectability. Aschenbach, though, is not done with danger. Or with his destiny.

“*Eine Entwicklung ist ein Schicksal.*” Development may be destiny, but what is striking about the narratorial assertion is the use of the indefinite article “*ein(e)*.” So it is *a* (or any) development that is *a* destiny, and the development and destiny both are nondefinitive. Implicit in *eine Entwicklung* and *ein Schicksal* is *eine Fortführung*: a continuation. For middle-aged Aschenbach’s development and destiny are as yet unfinished, no matter that excerpts from his work have found a lifeless place in texts “prescribed” by “the education authority.” Nor will his destiny be realized as he might have reasonably expected it to be—publicly, in the body of a long life’s work—had he not unexpectedly experienced in his middle age the strange, unsettling psychic goads that would bring him to *the* destiny defined in the novella’s title, *Death in Venice*.

In its every detail the narrative illuminates and is illuminated by the title, in that death in Venice—be it *a* death or Aschenbach’s death, *the* death or the plague, or the

effluvium of unmodified, abstract Death—stands at once at the center and the circumference of the story. It both generates and contains the significance of the novella’s discourse and events. With narrative inevitability Venice will prove to be Aschenbach’s destination, as will death prove to be his destiny; for Aschenbach, like the city, has been stricken with plague—and indeed he is stricken with *a* plague before he is ridden by *the* plague. It is the narrator, however, who will give the artist Aschenbach his aesthetic due, by making of the illustrious author’s sad journey an exercise in literary destiny. Fittingly, in the narrator’s mind, that destiny is defined at the outset of Aschenbach’s literary career by his youthful attraction to the figure of Saint Sebastian as a hero-type, for the artist of the modern age, like the martyred Sebastian, makes of the passive endurance of suffering “an active achievement” (103): a triumph of self-control in the service of aesthetic form and moral accomplishment. Ironically, though, as the middle-aged, magisterial Aschenbach’s destiny continues to evolve in his Italian sojourn, he will not find—or seek—succor in the ministries of the patron saint Sebastian, in Christian hagiology, a protector against plague.⁶⁶

What Aschenbach experiences in the course of the journey that takes him from Munich to the canals, alleyways, squares, and beaches of Venice, the narrator explains and interprets and constructs. In *The Ironic German*, Erich Heller posits that in Mann’s

⁶⁶ That the Roman martyr Sebastian—by legend, an officer in Diocletian’s imperial guard whose body was pierced (but not killed) by the arrows of the Mauretanian archers on the discovery of his faith in 286 (*The Catholic Encyclopedia*)—should have been designated by the early Christians as a protector against the plague in all likelihood owes something to the Greek mythic tradition of the archer god Apollo, who visits pestilence upon the earth. The Christian saint protects man from what the pagan god delivers, perhaps. Of course, Apollo is as well the god of poetry, and Aschenbach clearly aspires toward the Apollonian ideals of formal beauty and intellectual luminosity in his works, born though they may be of personal anguish and trying experience; in that, Apollo’s gift might also be considered a disease, a thing to be suffered and not so much endured as transmuted in the process of composition “by some ecstasy of the will,” in the words of Mann’s narrator, “and by wise husbandry [of one’s scanty resources] . . . into a semblance of greatness” (103)—by the artist as the wounded but triumphant Sebastian.

novella there is “hardly a detail which is not ‘telling,’ which does not tell in its miniature way the entire story.” *Death in Venice* thus achieves its “monumental vision” of “a man meeting his fate in beauty” without ever deviating in its portrayal from “strict realism”: “Everything is what it is: the tramp is a tramp, the street-musician is a street-musician, the hotel is a hotel and Venice is Venice.” Yet, however “ordinary” may be the world of the novella, Heller observes, “we feel that at any moment we may be left with the purest extract from reality: man, sea, sky, and empty beach—playthings in the hands of Fate” (100). With Aschenbach’s eyes we see the tramp, the street-musician, the hotel, and with his eyes, too, we read the text of his experience as he perceives it, as he sees, hears, smells, tastes, touches, feels, and reflects upon the details that compose it. But not with Aschenbach’s eyes only.

The text of Aschenbach’s experience everywhere evidences a narratorial, often interpretative and critical gloss. Indeed, the story, as it is told (or retold), owes as much to the narrator’s eye as it does to his subject’s. The collusion of various random as well as reasoned circumstances with Aschenbach’s psychological disposition prompts the restive fifty-year-old to travel south, eventually to Venice, where he may in fact meet his destiny, although that hardly seems to be his intent, even as he responds to situations in a manner that could prove to be as fatal as it is careless. As T. J. Reed states in *The Uses of Tradition*, fate, as it operates in *Death in Venice*, “was not really an outside agency as in Greek tragedy, and the figures along Aschenbach’s route to death were not really ‘sent to fetch’ him. They were the formal means by which the modern writer chose to externalize the character’s inner decline, especially his slackened will” (231). When Aschenbach rejoices at the misdirection of his luggage (because it gives him a reason to remain in

Venice), he blithely calls it “a quirk of fate” as well as a “mishap” and “welcome piece of ill luck” (128). Reed argues that in fact “he is acquiescing in what, by this very attitude, becomes his fate. He lives his life forward, creating it in response to what he encounters. It is his author who views it in the light of its ending as complete and ‘fated’” (231).

It is, then, the narrator who “views” and who “externalize[s]” in literarily fateful figures the progressive internal breaking down of Aschenbach’s will to reason or to respond rationally, the narrator being the stand-in for the “author” or “modern writer” in the text of the narrative. It is the narrator who makes virtually every detail in the story “telling.” It is the narrator who imbues a chance encounter with a sense of doom, as when Aschenbach, awaiting the tram in Munich’s Northern Cemetery at the outset of the story, espies the “moderately tall, thin, beardless and remarkably snub-nosed” figure of a man, his Adam’s apple “stark and bare,” whose straw hat gives him “an exotic air, as of someone who had come from distant parts” (96). Their eyes are momentarily locked in a gaze, the stranger’s “so aggressively” that Aschenbach is forced to turn away “in disagreeable embarrassment,” only to discover, either because of the “stranger’s itinerant appearance” or perhaps some “other physical or psychological influence,” that he has been overcome by an unanticipated craving for exotic climes: seized by “a desire to travel [*eine Reiselust*]” (97). It is the narrator, though, who articulates what Aschenbach feels and sees, and what he doesn’t see, for as mysteriously as the red-haired, snub-nosed stranger had appeared “in the portico of the chapel, above the two apocalyptic beasts that guard the steps leading up to it” (96), he has disappeared: “he was no longer standing where he had stood, nor was he to be seen anywhere else at the stop or in the tramcar” (100). Does not the language of narrative half create what it articulates? Aschenbach sees

a stranger, to some disconcertment; the stranger vanishes. The narrator makes of him a “mystery,” an angel of death perhaps—“the two apocalyptic beasts” conjure plague and death—or, more certainly, an agent of Aschenbach’s destiny.

A fortnight passes before Aschenbach is able to act upon the unexpected lust for travel that overwhelmed him in Northern Cemetery, and with plans to retreat to his summer house on his return in a month’s time, he prepares not for his destiny but for a journey. His unsettled soul may desire both, but fifty years have prepared him for neither. Five decades earlier Gustav Aschenbach was born of a Silesian father and a mother from Bohemia, he “a highly placed legal official” and she the daughter of a music director: “It was from this marriage between hard-working, sober conscientiousness and darker, more fiery impulses that an artist . . . had come into being” (100), declares the narrator, focusing upon what has proved to be a creative dichotomy in Aschenbach’s psyche, wherein, during his sojourn in Venice, Aschenbach’s unrealized Apollonian aspirations as an artist will war with his long-unacknowledged Dionysian impulses. “[I]ntent from the start upon fame” (100), Aschenbach has enjoyed phenomenal literary success with such works as his epic biography *Frederick of Prussia*, the novel *Maya*, a strange but powerful tale titled “A Study in Abjection,” and the treatise *Intellect and Art*; on his fiftieth birthday he was granted minor nobility with the title *von*. He has meanwhile made his “permanent home” in Munich and in “the kind of upper-bourgeois status which is occasionally the lot of certain intellectuals” (105). As a public figure, Aschenbach has satisfied the requisites of bland bourgeois respectability, which holds little more than the cold promise of permanence, while in “cloistral tranquility,” monk-like, the private man, a solitary man, has existed mostly in the “intensified life” that is art: intensified but

composed only of “imaginary and intellectual adventures” (106). Reality as an immediate, restively sensuous, emotionally vital experience has made of Aschenbach its widower. “The marriage which he had contracted while still young with the daughter of an academic family had been ended by his wife’s death after a short period of happiness. She had left him a daughter, now already married. He had never had a son” (105). While Aschenbach’s professional life may be rich with achievement, his personal biography, as the narrator presents it (or dispenses with it, in less than fifty words), is a matter of a mere few dispassionate facts. Outside his work, outside the life of the mind, Aschenbach appears to have been untouched by joy, anguish, grief, regret, or delight. The “disciplined, decently austere life in the service of the king and the state” (100) that typified Aschenbach’s forebears on his father’s side would appear to have checked any maternal “strain of livelier, more sensuous blood” (100) in Aschenbach’s veins—at least until the urge to wander comes upon him “as nothing less than a seizure” (97).

Discontent, spiritually dislocated in the austerity of his bourgeois existence, Aschenbach responds to the “intensely passionate and indeed hallucinatory force” (97) of his seizure and in the latter part of May makes his departure.⁶⁷ Escaping the wintry rigors of his intellectual life in Munich he goes first to Trieste (for a day), then the island of Pola (for ten), and finally to sultry, seductive Venice. The brief description of Aschenbach’s visit to Pola, with its “colorful ragged inhabitants speaking a wild, unintelligible dialect” and its “picturesque fragmented cliffs overlooking the open sea,”

⁶⁷ Isadore Traschen, in “The Uses of Myth in *Death in Venice*,” reads Mann’s novella as a modernist parody of the “monomythic pattern” defined by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* as “the Adventure of the Hero,” which is “divided into the phases of Departure, Initiation, and Return” (88). However, in the case of the honored, if qualifiedly heroic Aschenbach, whose departure from familiar, bourgeois Munich takes him to exotic Venice, where in a series of challenges and tests he undergoes an unanticipated initiation, the now-transformed hero does not return. In modernist irony, he chooses not to resist death in Venice.

everywhere suggests Aschenbach's disorientation: by the place, the inhabitants, the dialect, the weather, the inaccessibility of a beachless sea, and the "self-enclosed petit-bourgeois Austrian hotel clientele," so annoyingly remindful of the world that at least for a month he would leave behind. He feels that he has, as the narrator phrases it, "not yet come to his journey's end" (106). Yet, even though he "had gone completely astray," all along, says the narrator, the "self-evident destination stared him in the face" (107): Venice.

The crossing to Venice, executed in its every detail with narrative realism, is not without "telling" narratorial portent. The signposts that mark the progress of Aschenbach's journey on "an ancient Italian boat, out of date and dingy and black" (107), bode ill. The ship's purser, "a grubby hunchbacked seaman," is "goat-bearded" (107). (Snub noses and goat beards take on an increasingly ominous quality in the course of Aschenbach's decline.) A steward appears indecorously in "a grease-stained frock coat" (109). A passenger youthfully decked out in "a light yellow summer suit of extravagant cut, a scarlet necktie and a rakishly tilted Panama hat" on a closer look proves to be an old man, his beard dyed, his teeth false, his cheeks rouged; Aschenbach responds with "a spasm of distaste" (108), though at his journey's end he'll find himself similarly attired and cosmetically, corpse-like masked. On debarking, Aschenbach hires a gondola, which the narrator, in rhetorical mode, describes as being "characteristically black, the way no other thing is black except a coffin—a vehicle . . . evoking death itself, the bier, the dark obsequies, the last silent journey!" (111). The gondolier, "a man of displeasing, indeed brutal appearance" with "a blond mustache curling under his snub nose" and a "fraying straw hat rakishly tilted on his head" (112), grows surly when Aschenbach insists that he

be taken to San Marco and not the Lido; the gondolier asserts that, wherever, he will row his passenger well, and Aschenbach reflects that even so he might be dispatched to “the house of Hades” (114). As it turns out, Aschenbach’s arrival in Venice via the black coffin of a gondola may indeed be his delivery to Hades, but he will have had a free trip to hell—“The signore has had a free trip,” says the old dockhand (114)—as he had been ferried by, ironically, an unlicensed Charon of a gondolier who cannot linger to collect the customary fare (in the case of the mythical Charon, the coins on a dead man’s eyes). As was the cemetery’s snub-nosed stranger in a straw hat, so are the goat-bearded purser, the grease-stained steward, the grotesquely foppish old man and snub-nosed gondolier (both also wearing straw hats), and the old dockhand all effectively rendered with narrative realism; but the narrator sees more in them than meets Aschenbach’s eye. Aschenbach responds to them at the moment in the narrative, and moves on. The narrator, however, views them in terms of the story’s end and Aschenbach’s final passage; the narrator makes of them agents of Aschenbach’s destiny, as they share their features of nose and beard not only with each other but also with Silenus, an instructor to Dionysus, as well as with Socrates,⁶⁸ who, like Dionysus, will figure significantly in Aschenbach’s feverish visions. With allusion, metaphor, diction, and image, with thematic and figurative motifs, then, the narrator primes the reader for Aschenbach’s death in plague-ridden Venice so that it assumes more than simple narrative inevitability. It fulfills his destiny, sadly, ironically, perhaps tragically, and unquestionably aesthetically.

⁶⁸ The satyr-like appearance of Socrates prompts frequent comment in the writings of his students, especially in Plato’s *Symposium*. Isadore Traschen points out that Plato “has the drunken Alcibiades charge that Socrates ‘clothes himself in language that is like the skin of a wanton satyr’” (96).

However heavily “the horrible old made-up man” and “the illicit gondolier” may yet be “weighing on the traveler’s mind” (115) on his arrival at Hotel des Bains, they are banished from his thoughts by dinnertime, when Aschenbach catches his first astonishing sight of an “entirely beautiful” boy who is about fourteen: “His countenance, pale and gracefully reserved, was surrounded by ringlets of honey-colored hair, and with its straight nose, its enchanting mouth, its expression of sweet and divine gravity, it recalled Greek sculpture of the noblest period” (116). Emotionally overwhelmed, Aschenbach feels, in aesthetic terms, that “he had never beheld, in nature or art, anything so consummately successful” (116). The diction—“gracefully reserved,” “enchanting,” “sweet and divine gravity,” “noblest,” “consummately successful”—and descriptive detail, especially the boy’s not snub but classically “straight nose,” suggest not only “the purest formal perfection” (116) but also an antithesis to the “essentially strange” and “disturbing” figures (115) that Aschenbach has encountered on his recent journey: figures who, in the narrator’s view, harbinger the solitary traveler’s darker, Dionysian destiny. Indeed, in Aschenbach’s eyes, the boy would appear, like a Greek sculpture, to wed nature and art in a classical, virtually deific ideal, “symboliz[ing] Nietzsche’s idea of the highest reaches of Apollonian art,” according to Isadore Traschen in his study of Mann’s narrative use of the mythic Apollonian-Dionysian dichotomy explored by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* (98).⁶⁹ In the narrative, as in the narrator’s eyes, however, this boy of blond, godlike beauty will prove to be by far the most potent, and perilous, of the agents who shape Aschenbach’s destiny.

⁶⁹ The tension between the Apollonian and Dionysian so fundamental to Mann’s shaping of the novella is apparent, Traschen notes, in the name Mann gave to his hero: “But Mann is at once ambiguous about his hero, for the name means both life and death. *Bach* is a brook or stream, a life symbol; but also the root of Bacchus, or Dionysus, a death symbol here, as is *Asch*, ashes” (88).

Aschenbach's initial response to the boy—Tadzio is his name, as Aschenbach will discover in his observation of him on the very accessible beach the following day—is aesthetic and emotional: an artist's response; and he will in time imagine Tadzio to be his inspiration, a muse. Gazing upon Tadzio as if he were "gazing on Beauty itself, on Form as a thought of God," Aschenbach will be overcome by "emotional intoxication" and "the aging artist" will welcome his excited emotions "unhesitatingly, even greedily" (133). Further, "us[ing] Tadzio's beauty as a model," he will produce, as the narrator describes it, a "brief essay—that page and a half of exquisite prose which with its limpid nobility and vibrant controlled passion was soon to win the admiration of many" (135). At once Apollonian in its nobility and Dionysian in its passion, "vibrant" yet "controlled," it will appear not only to introduce a new element into Aschenbach's prose—a certain "naïveté," perhaps, that he had sought to bring to his work when writing "A Study in Abjection" (104)—but also to fuse it with his much-praised dignity and discipline, in a process of composition unlike any Aschenbach has experienced before:⁷⁰ "How mysterious this act of intercourse and begetting between a mind and a body!" (135). That the artist's imagination in its creative heat commingles the intelligence and the emotions, thereby to issue a composition that weds thought to feeling, perception to sympathy, is a common enough romantic notion, but the nonspecific, impersonal articles—"between mind and body; in the German, "of *the* mind with *a* body [*des Geistes mit einem Körper*]"—in the exclamation suggest it might be the coupling of Aschenbach's mind

⁷⁰ The body of Aschenbach's previous work as it is presented by the narrator in Mann's novella manifests in its artistry neither pure Apollonian spirit nor dedication to Dionysian passion; rather, it recalls what Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* ascribed to the mode of intellectual enquiry introduced into classical Greece by the Socratic philosopher Plato: the work not of Nietzsche's "poetic man" but of his "theoretical man" (86); or, in Friedrich Schiller's terms, the "sentimental" product of a moral intelligence rather than the "naïve" poetry of a inspired genius.

with [*mit*] Tadzio's body that has made poetry of writerly prose. For the narrator also notes that the world need not know the origins of the work, as "knowledge of the sources would often confuse readers and shock them, and the excellence of the writing would be to no avail" (135). Therein lies more than a narratorial hint at the darker side of the artist's infatuation with his "model and mirror of intellectual beauty" (133). While the apparent wedding of Aschenbach's infatuation to inspiration produces the exquisitely realized, if brief piece of at once noble and passionate prose—"never had he known so clearly that Eros dwells in language" (135)—Aschenbach's moment of genius whereby his intellect so perfectly accommodates his passion is also brief.⁷¹ Aschenbach's responses to Tadzio will grow to be as feverishly sensuous as they are aesthetic, as desperately appetitive as they are emotional. Increasingly the artist that is Aschenbach will yield to the man within Aschenbach, and ultimately, in his dreams and imagination, to the goat. Silesia will yield to Bohemia; "sober conscientiousness" to "darker, more fiery impulses" (100); Apollonian discipline to Dionysian dissolution. Contemplation will surrender to obsession. Aschenbach will lose himself to Tadzio.

The crux of the narrative lies in Aschenbach's failure to leave Venice; or, more accurately, in his decision to stay. On the second day of his visit, after his morning on the beach, he takes "the *vaporetto* across the stale-smelling lagoon" to San Marco. It is unseasonably warm; "an unpleasant sultriness pervade[s] the narrow streets" (124). He is offended by the throngs of people, cigarette smoke, the odors of food, the stench, the beggars. He is oppressed by the "combination of the sea air with the sirocco" and the "condition of simultaneous excitement and exhaustion" that accompanies it (124). He

⁷¹ Reed avers in *The Uses of Tradition* that "Aschenbach writing in view of Tadzio as the boy plays on the beach corresponds obviously to the idea that love could inspire poetry. Mann's work notes confirm that it was meant so" (160).

begins to sweat, he's feverish; his vision blurs, his chest feels constricted, his pulse throbs in his head. "To stay on willfully would be contrary to good sense" (125), he reasons, sensibly, for Venice is turning out to be unquestionably injurious to his health. The city itself appears to be sick. So it is that the next morning, after breakfast, Aschenbach departs the hotel, but with a nagging, profound regret, no doubt prompted by a last glance, "soft and full" (126), from Tadzio, who had crossed Aschenbach's path as he was leaving the breakfast room. At the railway station Aschenbach, now a reluctant traveler, learns that his luggage has in error been dispatched to Como. Accidents happen; yet Aschenbach determines to play this bit of bad luck to his advantage. Although his misdirected trunk could be sent forward to the proper destination as easily as it could be sent back to Hotel des Bains, a gleeful Aschenbach—"A wild joy, an unbelievable feeling of hilarity, shook him almost convulsively to the depths of his heart" (128)—declares his unwillingness to travel on without his luggage. As he returns to the Lido, he considers that "even a man born under a lucky star could not have had a more welcome piece of ill luck" (128). The random thus becomes a determinant, but by an act of Aschenbach's will, which has fallen, uncharacteristically for him, under the sway of his desire: "[H]e felt the rapturous kindling of his blood, the joy and anguish of his soul, and realized it was because of Tadzio that it had been so hard for him to leave" (129).

The psychological realism inherent in Aschenbach's decision sustains rather than diminishes the aesthetic vigor in the narrator's construct of Aschenbach's destiny. The hotel employee responsible for the misdirection of the luggage might be viewed as a bit player if not as an agent in the redirection of Aschenbach toward his fate, yet he hardly determines Aschenbach's course of action—any more than does the stranger in the

cemetery or the hunchbacked purser or the surly gondolier; or Tadzio, for that matter. What appears to be inexorable as it evolves, or develops, in the progress of Aschenbach to his death in Venice, in narrative fact happens not by virtue of agents in the service of some deific, external force committed to his destiny but as a result of the internal workings of Aschenbach's human will, which he surrenders more and more to his desires until he succumbs first to the plague upon his soul and finally to the plague itself. The narrator (or Mann as the narrator) thus shifts the locus of destiny as it has been commonly presented in plague literature (such as it was in Defoe and, qualifiedly, in Manzoni), in that it becomes a force that operates from within the human psyche rather than one that operates upon human existences from without. Destiny is internalized, and out of the impulses of one's will—by one's ambitions, wishes, dreams, and desires, rather than by providential necessity (although perhaps by the aesthetic design of the narrator/author)—one develops. A development is a destiny.

Aschenbach's realization as to why it was difficult for him to leave Venice comes near the end of chapter 3. At the end of chapter 4 he acknowledges why, even after the recovery of his luggage, with resolve he has stayed. Day after day Aschenbach has stayed. Morning after morning, on the beach of a radiantly sunlit sea, he has beheld, contemplated, admired, and with his artist's imagination embraced Beauty in the form of a golden-haired boy and in his mind, as well as in an exquisite if brief essay, created beauty out of Beauty; or in the evening, watching Tadzio at play in the park, he has imagined "he was watching Hyacinthus, doomed to perish because two gods loved him" (138). On such occasions Aschenbach himself has felt both "Zephyr's grievous envy of his rival" and the sorrow of Apollo, "who had forgotten his oracle and his bow and his

zither” (for Apollo functions as the deity of music, archery, and prophecy, as well as medicine and, not incidentally, plague), as he held the beautiful youth’s broken body in his arms (138). While Aschenbach’s sympathy with both Apollo and Zephyr in their love for Hyacinthus illumines, and aesthetically veils, Aschenbach’s homosexual yearnings for Tadzio, it also suggests a likewise taboo incestuous longing, as in his paternal admiration and concern for the boy, Tadzio is the son he never had. On another evening, to more sinister effect, Aschenbach sees something of Narcissus in Tadzio, more particularly in his smile, which is “provocative, curious and imperceptibly troubled, bewitched and bewitching” (139): the smile that enchanted Narcissus into a fatal kiss as he leaned into the water mirroring his own reflection. Only in this instance the smile is bestowed upon Aschenbach, for whom, the narrator relates, it is “like a fateful gift” (139). Shaken, Aschenbach retreats into the dark. First, with parental alarm, at once “tender and indignant,” he speaks to the darkness, “One mustn’t, do you hear, one mustn’t smile like that at anyone!” (140). Then, shuddering, in amorous bewilderment, he utters to himself, at the close of chapter 4, what the narrator describes as “the standard formula of the heart’s desire—impossible here, absurd, depraved, ludicrous and sacred nevertheless, still worthy of honor even here: ‘I love you!’” (140) In those words Aschenbach may poetically read his destiny; with them the narrator aesthetically seals it.

It is the depravity that overwhelms Aschenbach, no matter the literary patina he may apply to it, as when he imagines himself as Apollo to Tadzio’s Hyacinthus or when, contemplating Tadzio’s “noble figure” (133) on the beach earlier in chapter 4, he envisions himself as Socrates and the youth as Phaedrus: “one elderly and one young, one ugly and one beautiful, the wise beside the desirable” (134). “Instructing Phaedrus on

desire and virtue,” “wooing him,” Socrates concludes that “Beauty is the lover’s path to the spirit” and then asserts slyly that “he who loves . . . is more divine than the beloved, because the god is in the former, but not in the latter”: an assertion that, for Aschenbach, is “a thought alive with all the mischievousness and most secret voluptuousness of the heart” (134). The “mischievousness” in the thought and its “secret voluptuousness” in the heart place Aschenbach in the danger of passions he has long denied, should he, as the lover-philosopher in Plato’s *Phaedrus* might, fail to resist the pull of sensual desire in the presence of a boy who is for him the “model and mirror of intellectual beauty.” In the *Phaedrus* Socrates likens the human soul to a chariot being drawn by two steeds, one white, one black, the white one noble and good, the other more darkly disposed and shamelessly subject to mischievous instinct; so it is that the lover-philosopher, like a charioteer, must continually strive to control the recalcitrant steed when it responds to the desire the lover harbors for his beloved, even as in its wantonness it exhausts both its equine counterpart and the charioteer himself, in order that the lover may pursue the beloved with reverence and, in awe of his beauty, achieve with him a spiritual union without sexual congress. Thus is love’s divine madness reigned by self-control.⁷² While Socrates’s metaphorical steeds do not gallop in Aschenbach’s soul in the text of the novella,⁷³ his mind is increasingly afflicted during his stay in Venice by the lofty

⁷² While the topic of Plato’s *Phaedrus* is the art of rhetoric, much of the discourse concerns the gifts of divine madness, especially that of love, a subject that in the dialogue lends itself to the application of rhetoric and logic. June McDaniel in *The Madness of the Saints: Ecstatic Religion in Bengal* identifies “the four sorts of divine madness sent by the gods” in the *Phaedrus* as “the mantic, from Apollo, which brings divination; the telestic, from Dionysus, which brings possession trance (as a result of ritual); the poetic, from the Muses, which brings enthusiasm and poetic furor; and the erotic, from Eros and Aphrodite, which brings frenzied love” (7).

⁷³ The narrator, however, does allude to Phoebus Apollo in his steed-drawn chariot in the opening sentence of chapter 4: “Now day after day the god with the burning cheeks soared naked, driving his four fire-breathing steeds through the spaces of heaven, and now, too, his yellow-gold locks fluttered wide in the outstorming east wind” (130). The chapter closes not in the Apollonian glare of the **morning sun but in the**

sentiments and wanton fancies of a divine madness, and his infatuation with Tadzio increasingly stirs unbidden feelings that his bourgeois virtue has long repressed, his intellectual (Apollonian) restraints ceding more and more to his secret (Dionysian) desires. That in his fifties the disciplined, austere principled author of “A Study in Abjection”—which treats with contempt and condemnation the vile baseness of a “semiscoundrel [*Halbschurken*]. . . motivated by his own ineptitude and depravity and ethical whimsicality” (104)—should discover within himself the depraved appetites of a voluptuary plagues Aschenbach’s soul. Yet, however he may disguise his desires, however he may seek to palliate them with literary allusion and Socratic discourse, he cannot escape them. They bring him to the abyss, and they do so with no want of irony, as in “A Study in Abjection,” the narrator states, the writer Aschenbach “proclaimed [his] renunciation of all moral skepticism, of every kind of sympathy with the abyss” (104).

Plagued though he is by his demon desires, Aschenbach does, “during the fourth week of his stay at the Lido,” begin “to notice certain uncanny developments in the outside world” (140): For one, more guests seem to be leaving than arriving at the hotel, although it is nearly the height of the season. For another, “a peculiar aroma” pervades the city air: “a sweetish, medicinal smell that suggested squalor and wounds and suspect cleanliness” (140); the *vaporetto* smells of bactericide. Public notices advise against eating local mollusks. Aschenbach’s initial queries—of the hotel barber, a shopkeeper, the hotel manager—receive elusive, unsatisfactory answers. An entertainer at the hotel—an obsequious, “thin and cadaverous” man with, again, a snub nose (147)—is no more forthcoming when Aschenbach asks him directly why Venice is being disinfected; and

shelter of Dionysian darkness, wherein Aschenbach utters his “absurd, depraved, ludicrous and sacred nevertheless” declaration of love for the boy Tadzio (140).

the fellow himself trails “the stench of [the disinfectant] carbolic” (148). In the narratorial construct of destiny the performer, the shopkeeper, and the barber might be read as further agents in the determination of Aschenbach’s fate, in that the intent of their equivocation—police regulations, precautionary measures, the oppressive heat, the sirocco—is to assure that tourists like Aschenbach will stay in Venice. What Aschenbach suspects—that the authorities are “hushing this up!” (141), this being “the sickness [*dem Übel*]” that the barber in a slip of the tongue asserted Aschenbach does not fear (140)—is confirmed by the tweed-clad clerk in the British travel agency: Plague has stricken Venice.

Straightforwardly the clerk explains: Asiatic cholera, which migrated eastward and westward from the Ganges delta, was borne by Syrian traders to Mediterranean ports; in the middle of May it reached Venice and by early June the hospital’s isolation wards were “quietly filling,” while fear of economic crisis had impelled the authorities to adopt a “policy of concealment and denial” (152). With chaos having befallen every dark quarter of the city, with death walking the streets and the imposition of quarantine being imminent, the clerk advises Aschenbach “to leave today rather than tomorrow” (153). Paradigmatically, the sober, blue-eyed Englishman is one narrative agent who might have altered the course of Aschenbach’s destiny (and have helped him revise his travel plans), had the young man’s sound counsel not been so willfully ignored.

In fact, Aschenbach more than ignores the Englishman’s admonition along with the knowledge that supports it. Equally willfully, in a moment of his own “ethical whimsicality,” he decides not to put that knowledge in the service of assuaging his own conscience by warning Tadzio’s mother and her family of the plague’s immediate peril

but rather to enter into the city authorities' conspiracy of untruth: "'They want it kept quiet!' he whispered vehemently. And: 'I shall say nothing!'" (153) Nor will he. Aschenbach's obsessive and continually more obtrusive pursuit of Tadzio allows his psyche less and less room for moral dignity, for already he has "realized with a kind of horror that he would not be able to go on living" were Tadzio to leave (141); concomitantly, his goatish humors more and more go unrationalized argumentatively or aesthetically, as "art and virtue," order and reason, lose their lure "now that he might reap the advantages of chaos" (154). With full "consciousness of his complicity" in the city's official secret and of "his share in the guilt," Aschenbach regards "the image of the stricken and disordered city" and he is "inflamed with hopes that were beyond comprehension, beyond reason and full of monstrous sweetness" (153): Call it exstasis. As Reed notes, Aschenbach "ecstatically welcomes the cholera epidemic as an aberration of the outside world to match and abet his own" (231). In the plague upon Venice is magnified and mirrored (and modeled) the plague in Aschenbach's soul. In the image of disease-ridden Venice Aschenbach has found an objective correlative for the dissolute state of his own being.

Disorder and dissolution, then, have trumped discipline in Aschenbach's psyche. In chaos he has now found his element. Dionysus has shed his half brother Apollo's clothes. Ignace Feuerlicht sees in Aschenbach that particular type of artist who has failed to realize that "art demands dissoluteness as well as discipline" so that when renegade instincts begin so forcefully to batter his middle-aged intellect he "succumbs to frantic dissolution, as if life (or death) were cruelly taking revenge for being neglected" (120). Unable to abate what he is unwilling to resist, intoxicated rather than appalled by any

twinge of guilt in his complicity and silence regarding Venice's dangerous secret, Aschenbach may embrace chaos and place this "monstrous sweetness" "beyond reason" and beyond the reach of moral judgment, but the narrator does not. In his essay "Defensive Aestheticism and Self-Dissolution: The Demise of the Artist in Mann's *Death in Venice*," J. Brooks Bouson argues that "while many of the descriptions of Aschenbach's inner life are so vividly rendered that we momentarily become immersed in his subjectivity, we also are prompted to detach ourselves and view him from the narrator's ironic and increasingly moralistic perspective. Both sympathetic and judgmental, the narrator faithfully renders the artist's experience of a world 'transmuted and gilded with mythical significance,'⁷⁴ but he also persistently criticizes and passes judgment on Aschenbach" (111).

More often than not the narrator is judgmental at the same time that he is sympathetic, i.e., his judgments are implicit in his at once compassionate yet ironic rendering of the narrative. Still, however critical of Aschenbach's decisions and choices the narrator may be, he does not assume a moral stance outside the narrative; he does not editorialize or sermonize. The morality that he espouses is inextricably woven into the ambiguity of the narrative he presents. That morality, too, informs the construct of destiny that aesthetically orders and enriches the progress of the narrative. To say that a moral construct of destiny aesthetically orders the narrative course of events that brings Aschenbach to death in Venice, however, is not to say that the construct ordains those events. The aesthetic in the narrative does not betray the psychology of the narrative.

⁷⁴ The phrase is quoted from the H. T. Lowe-Porter translation. In David Luke's translation, it appears as "strangely exalted and mythically transformed" (137). Mann's text reads: "[*Aber der Tag, der so feuringfestlich began war ihm*] genzen seltsam gehoben wnd mysisch verwandelt."

Destiny as it is constructed by the narrator allows Aschenbach the will to make his choices.

It is not destiny, then, that surrenders Aschenbach to the abyss, any more than it is the narrator, although he cannot resist the irony that the author of “A Study in Abjection”—a product of Aschenbach’s “outbreak of disgust against an age indecently undermined by psychology” (104)—has himself become a congener to the story’s contemptible “semiscoundrel” of a subject. If not by choice, then because of his choices, Aschenbach yields to his newly awakened dark desires; he releases his own demons. Significantly, though perhaps not surprisingly, he does it in a dream. Freud, whose speculation on the psychosexual origin of dreams in *The Interpretation of Dreams* intrigued Mann, held that dream interpretation is “the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind” (647); in that, dreams are a portal to the repressed memories and unresolved desires that lie hidden in the dreamer’s unconscious mind, as in a dream’s imagery, in what Freud called “manifest content,” is disguised often disturbing “latent content” that has lodged in the dark and otherwise inaccessible depths of the chaotic unconscious.⁷⁵ Aschenbach’s dream, “a terrible dream,” violently defeats what remains of his “profound, intellectual resistance” as it plummets him into the abyss of his long-repressed libidinal impulses and leaves “his whole being, the culture of a lifetime, devastated and destroyed” (154). At the center of the dream’s manifest content stands the Stranger-God whose presence is heralded in “a compendium of noise” by a swarm of humans and animals: maenadic women, half naked in hide garments, brandishing daggers and swinging torches and carrying snakes (which are both sacred and sexual in fertility

⁷⁵ The unconscious as it is characterized by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) is in large part equivalent to that division of the human psyche Freud later, in *The Ego and the Id* (1923), named the id.

myths); horned men girdled with pelts who are clanging cymbals and beating drums; “smooth-skinned boys prod[ding] goats” (154). The images of goats especially recall various figures Aschenbach has encountered in his travels, while the hairy-skinned men goatishly girdled in pelts also suggest satyrs engaged in Dionysian revelry. Goat-legged Pan may be among the “god’s enthusiasts,” too; for “mingled irresistibly” in the percussive cacophony and the wild cries trailing a “long-drawn-out final *u*” (like the cries of Tadzio’s companions calling out to him in the vocative “Tadziu” on the beach) is “deep, enticing flute music”—“enticing him with shameless insistence to the feast and frenzy of the uttermost surrender” (154–5).⁷⁶

The revelers manifest in Aschenbach’s feverish dream may derive, too, from the “beggar virtuosi” (146) who offered a musicale to the guests at the Hotel des Bains the night before, if with mostly stringed instruments. The leader of the ensemble with his “shabby felt hat,” red hair, “pallid, snub-nosed face” (like Silenus), deep furrows between his reddish brows, a “large and naked Adam’s apple”—his features remarkably resemble those of the stranger in the cemetery—as well as “his way of winking suggestively and

⁷⁶ The widely documented influence of Erwin Rohde’s *Psyche: The Cult of Souls and the Belief in Immortality among the Greeks* on Mann is especially notable in Aschenbach’s “terrible dream,” as the following segment from Book II of *Psyche* evidences: “The festival was held on the mountain top in the darkness of night amid the flickering and uncertain light of torches. The loud and troubled sound of music was heard; the clash of bronze cymbals; the dull thunderous roar of kettledrums; and through them all penetrated the ‘maddening unison’ of the deep-toned flute, whose soul Phrygian *auletai* had first waked to life. Excited by this wild music, the chorus of worshippers dance with shrill crying and jubilation. We hear nothing about singing: the violence of the dance left no breath for regular songs. These dances were something very different from the measured movement of the dance-step in which Homer’s Greeks advanced and turned about in the *Paian*. In was in frantic, whirling, headlong eddies and dance—circles that these inspired companies danced over the mountain slopes. They were mostly women who whirled round in these circular dances till the point of exhaustion was reached; they were strangely dressed; they wore *bassarai*, long flowing garments, as it seems, stitched together out of fox-skins, over their doe-skins; and they even had horns fixed to their heads. Their hair was allowed to float in the wind; they carried snakes sacred to Sabazios in their hand and brandished daggers or else thyrsus-wands, the spear points of which were concealed in ivy-leaves. In this fashion they raged wildly until every sense was wrought to the highest pitch of excitement, and in the ‘sacred frenzy’ they fell upon the beast selected as their victim and tore their captured prey limb for limb. Then with their teeth they seized the bleeding flesh and devoured it raw” (257).

lasciviously licking the corner of his mouth” (147), particularly captures the attention of Aschenbach, who is sipping from a glass of pomegranate juice and soda water (likely an allusion to Persephone’s unwitting ingestion of the six pomegranate seeds that consigned her to six months each year with Hades in the Underworld): all of which might prefigure Aschenbach’s dream descent into the Dionysian depths of his frenzied soul. The entertainer, a “suspect figure,” also “seem[s] to be carrying his own suspect atmosphere about with him” (148); Aschenbach identifies the suspect, and telltale, noxious odor as carbolic, commonly employed as a protection against the plague. Plague-related odors likewise invade Aschenbach’s dream the following night. They “besiege[]” his mind, as “the pungent reek of the goats” and “scent of panting bodies”—odors of the plague upon Aschenbach’s soul—mingle with the stench of Venice’s pestilence: “an exhalation as of staling waters” and the smell of “wounds and wandering disease” (155). The dream further weds the plague within Aschenbach to its correlative in the city of Venice with the “obscene symbol, wooden and gigantic” that is “uncovered and raised on high” (155). Possibly a mammoth thyrsus, the staff central to Dionysian rites, and undoubtedly phallic, it represents the power of the Stranger-God, perhaps of Dionysus himself, a Greek deity who comes as a stranger originally from the Ganges delta, as does the Asiatic cholera that plagues Venice. It was thought by many ancient authors—Ovid, for one, who refers to Dionysus’s Indian origins in *Metamorphoses*⁷⁷—that Dionysus came out of the East before crossing the sea from Phrygia in Asia Minor and taking up residence in Thrace. The Ganges recalls, too, the stranger in the cemetery whose unsettling gaze

⁷⁷ *Metamorphoses*, Book IV, l. 605. Among modern works that trace Dionysus’s Asiatic roots is Rohde’s *Psyche* (Book II). Also, notes *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, Dionysus’s “campaigns in the East are known to Euripides: their extension to India is modeled after Alexander the Great; they were celebrated in a voluminous epic by Nonnus at the end of antiquity” (353).

prompted Aschenbach's unexpected, sexually charged vision of "hairy palm trunks," "rank jungles of fern", and "thick fleshy plants in exuberant flower," and finally another gaze, "the glinting eyes of a crouching tiger" (97): India, Dionysus, plague, Venice—they have all been prefigured, and linked, in Aschenbach's imagination.

Ultimately, overwhelmed by the odors and drumbeats, overcome by the feast and frenzy, the dreamer surrenders his will to that of the Stranger-God, "the enemy of the composed and dignified intellect" (155). The destiny that the artist Aschenbach imagined for himself, and for decades developed with Apollonian discipline, dissolves in the manifest content of the dream, and the dreamer Aschenbach becomes the Dionysian riot he beholds. Seized by "a fury," "a blindness, a dizzying lust," the dreamer not only joins the ribald swarm in "the round-dance of the god"; he becomes both the dancers and the dance: "But the dreamer now was with them and in them" (155). Not just "with them and in them [*mit ihnen, in ihnen*]" as "in homage to the god" they "devour steaming gobbets of [animal] flesh" and engage in "limitless coupling"—omophagia and orgia are historically as well as mythically linked to the mysteries of Dionysus—he *is* them: "Yes, they were himself [*Ja, sie waren er selbst*]" (155). Like them and as them, "he belonged to the Stranger-God." Thus possessed, in "uttermost surrender" not just to the figures in the dream but also to their fury and, further, to the true content latent in the manifest imagery of the dream, the dreamer relinquishes self, and with it the intellectual consciousness by which he exercises choice and exerts control, as he yields totally to the pull of the unruly unconscious. Aschenbach's dream journey plummets him into the depths of his psyche, into "the darkest recesses of the self," says Traschen, and in this sense "the action of the story is the gradual unveiling of Aschenbach's unconscious, fully

revealed in the Dionysian orgy through the appropriately Freudian dream mechanism” (89). In and as that orgy Aschenbach loses himself—literally—to unrestrained ecstasy: “And his very soul savored the lascivious delirium of annihilation” (155).⁷⁸ The annihilation of the self, or, in Freud’s terms, the ego, here completes the liberation of the Freudian id, and of the libido. Aschenbach’s dream frees and fulfills the desires he has long repressed in the unconscious stratum of his psyche. “[A] dream,” asserts Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, “is the fulfillment of a wish” (155).⁷⁹

Mann, in his essay on the nineteenth-century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation*, observes that “Schopenhauer’s sinister domain of the will is entirely identical with what Freud calls the unconscious, the ‘id’—as, on the other hand, Schopenhauer’s intellect entirely corresponds to the Freudian ego, that part of the soul which is turned outward to the world” (*Essays of Three Decades*, 408). Parallels might be similarly drawn to Mann’s rendering of Aschenbach in *Death in Venice*, wherein the requisite qualities of intellect, or ego, that he commits to his Apollonian aspirations as an artist of esteem vie with, and in his annihilatory Dionysian dream yield to, the desires and impulses of the blind, unconscious will, or id. A primordial force—“a blind urge, a fundamental, uncaused, utterly unmotivated

⁷⁸ “Und seine Seele kostete Unzucht und Raserei des Unterganges” (127). The translation of this line by Michael Henry Heim more strictly follows the German text than does David Luke’s: “And his soul savored the debauchery and delirium of doom” (129). Luke conflates “debauchery [Unzucht]” and “delirium [Raserei]” into the phrase “lascivious delirium,” and whereas Heim translates “Unterganges” conventionally as “doom,” Luke reads it less literally, and perhaps more aptly, as “annihilation.” One wonders if Mann chose the noun “Unterganges” because of its value as a pun, in that from the geographical Ganges, from its delta, originate both the plague in Venice—“Erzeugt aus den warmen Morästen des Ganges-Deltas” (119)—and the myth of Dionysus.

⁷⁹ In response to critics’ objections in regard to distressing dreams and anxiety dreams, which cause the dreamer unwished-for pain and no pleasure, Freud argues further: “We must make a contrast between the *manifest* and the *latent* content of dreams. There is no question that there are dreams whose manifest content is of the most distressing kind. But has anyone tried to interpret such dreams? to reveal the latent thoughts behind them? If not, then the two objections raised against my theory will not hold water: it still remains possible that distressing dreams and anxiety-dreams, when they have been interpreted, may turn out to be fulfillments of wishes” (168).

impulse,” in Mann’s words⁸⁰—“the will to live [*der Wille zur Leben*],” as Schopenhauer calls and conceives it, resists the individuation that the human intellect attempts to impose upon it or upon the world, which is in reality, be it human or natural, the objectivation of the will. So it is that the everyday world as it is perceived and represented by the human mind is in fact a mere realm of appearances, an illusion bound by space and time, behind and beyond which eternally churns the will. That illusion, so artfully constructed by the intellect out of massive human knowledge, Schopenhauer, borrowing from Vedantic doctrine, names the “veil of maya.”⁸¹ Not without irony, then, Aschenbach’s literary fame rests in part upon “the great tapestry of the novel called *Maya*, so rich in characters, gathering so many human destinies together under the shadow of one idea” (100); for the Goethean destiny that this author of fictive destinies then, from his Apollonian heights, imagined for himself has since his sojourn in Venice begun to prove indeed to be mayan. Still, Aschenbach’s “constant harnessing of his energies” in the service of his art—and fortuitously, in the achievement of his public reputation as a writer—has always been rooted as much in illusion as in ambition: “something to which he had been called, but not really born” (101).

Aschenbach’s recognized talents are justly admired, by the public and by the narrator, in a novel like *Maya*, which in its “idea” tapped into the spirit of an entire generation, but, for the narrator, the talent would appear to fall short of genius. Mann, in

⁸⁰ The words appear in Mann’s introduction to a 1948 abridged edition of Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation* (viii).

⁸¹ Regarding will as it is delineated by Schopenhauer, Nietzsche notes in *The Birth of Tragedy* that “Schopenhauer was very interested in Indian religion and claimed that his view that the everyday world of illusion was just a Western version of Vedantic doctrine that the world we experience is nothing but the ‘veil of maya.’ Although the everyday world is a mere appearance, there is a reality behind it which Schopenhauer calls ‘the will’ . . . Since this ‘will’ is by definition outside the realm within which one can speak of individuation and the distinctness of one ‘thing’ from another, it has a kind of primordial unity” (17, footnote).

his introduction to *The World as Will and Representation*, considers that Schopenhauer, who experienced the world in terms of “contrasts and conflicts” between “instinct and spirit, passion and knowledge, ‘will’ and ‘idea,’” exalted art as a victory of intellect over instinct: as an “objectivation of spirit,” a phrase that is tellingly qualified by the adjective “mere” (xx).⁸² For Mann, the greater artist—Goethe, for one—would in his creative genius reconcile the sensual and the spiritual, would embrace the mind’s contemplations with regard to the convulsions of will, rather than strive toward some “halfway stage to sainthood, divorced from the will to live” (xxi). In that Aschenbach’s work stands more readily as an example of his estimable Apollonian mastery—as “a significant intellectual product” (105)—than it does as an exploration of unsettling Dionysian mysteries, as an artist he stands closer to Schopenhauer than he does to Goethe in his ambition and achievement. In that, too, may lie the narrator’s reservations concerning Aschenbach’s genius, although he does allow that Aschenbach has ventured at least intellectually—by his “profound decision as a mature artist” (104)—and at least for the length of his short story “A Study in Abjection [*Elenden*],”⁸³ into a darker territory of the mind wherein he recognized that “knowledge can paralyze the will, paralyze and discourage action and emotion and even passion, and rob all these of their dignity” (104). The “ineptitude and depravity and ethical whimsicality” that Aschenbach as the author-narrator of the story ascribes to its “semiscoundrel” of a protagonist, whose intellectual mien veils a “contemptible baseness” of character, consign him, without any sympathy or “moral skepticism” on the part of the author-narrator, to the abyss—an abyss, one suspects, that

⁸² The modifier “mere” appears in the English translation: “Suppose he had understood that . . . art is not mere objectivation of spirit . . .” Mann’s German text reads, “. . . wenn er verstanden hatte, daß . . . Kunst nicht spirituelle Objektivität bedeutet . . .”

⁸³ “*Elenden*” translates more literally as “squalor” or “miseries.” In Heim’s translation of *Death in Venice* the title of Aschenbach’s short story is “A Wretched Figure.”

for Aschenbach at this point in his career had been intellectually conceived more than it had been emotionally realized.

Nonetheless, Aschenbach's "Study" did also mark an apparent turning point in his career, according to the narrator, who applies to it a phrase from "a dialogue, written a little later" by Aschenbach: "that 'miracle of reborn naïveté [*Wunder der wiedergeborenen Unbefangenheit*]" (104). That miraculous rebirth of the naïve in the artist's imagination was signaled not only by the revaluation of the intellectual territory in his work but also by "an almost excessive resurgence" of the aesthetic sensibility that lay claim to it, as "his style took on the noble purity, simplicity and symmetry that were to set upon all his subsequent works that so evident and evidently intentional stamp of the classical master" (104). With intellectual resolve, then, and—his "great talent" (105) wanting genius—a studied aesthetic consciousness, Aschenbach, it would appear, had paradigmatically designed and constructed the destiny he would fulfill: the Goethean destiny of a "classical master." The lineaments of that destiny may well have been in part defined in his "passionate treatise" *Intellect and Art* [*Geist und Kunst*], which may be the dialogue, or a more rigorously systematic rendering of the aesthetic principles in it, to which the narrator refers. The treatise, by the narrator's account, has borne favorable comparison to Schiller's *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* "in its ordering energy and antithetical eloquence" (100), and perhaps in its substance as well. For it was the qualities of naïveté, of spontaneity and immediacy in an uncalculated response to overpowering inspiration, which typified the poetry of the ancients (as opposed to the intellectually realized emotions and critically examined premises of the more modern, morally

purposed sentimental poet), that Schiller declared were essential for genius.⁸⁴ Yet genius, unlike fame, eluded Aschenbach. The turning point, whereby he might have explored the possibilities of the naïve—might have absented his self-consciousness in the process of his work and experienced what Schiller calls the “fine frenzy” of creation; might have tapped into the force of his unconscious, the Freudian id, or Schopenhauer’s will—proved to be more apparent than real. For Aschenbach subsequently suffered the plague of respectability, the disease of success. He was granted nobility by a German prince; he was anthologized in grade-school texts. But along with magisterial dignity he acquired “an air of suffering”: “Grave visitations of fate seemed to have passed over his head” (106), inside which he had lived for fifty years. The future promised the soul-sick Aschenbach little more than “overfastidiousness, overrefinement, nervous fatigue and overstimulation” without the benefit or history of life’s “most extravagant passions and pleasures” (106). Until he arrived in Venice.

Four weeks and a dark Dionysian dream later, Aschenbach finds himself “powerlessly enslaved to the daemon-god” (155). He cedes the vestiges of his intellectual rigor and moral diligence to his obsession. Every morning by the sea he gazes “heavily, recklessly, incessantly”—and one might add willfully, if in the absence of any will to do otherwise—“on the object of his desire”; and likewise every evening, along the city streets, “he continue[s] his undignified pursuit” of the beautiful and not totally unsuspecting youth (156). Ardent in his depravity, delusional in his need to please a boy

⁸⁴ “Every true genius must be naïve, or it is not genius. Only its naivety makes for its genius, and what it is intellectually and aesthetically it cannot disavow morally,” states Schiller in *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* (96). The rhetorical question raised by Mann’s narrator in *Death in Venice* in regard to the moral indifference of genius—in that the naïve poet surrenders his intellect to his inspiration, and in his work pursues not moral truths but illuminations that originate in, and in his poetry extend, nature—might be addressed to Schiller: “. . . does this not in its turn signify a simplification, a morally simplistic view of the world and of human psychology, and thus also a resurgence of energies that are evil, forbidden, morally impossible?” (104-5)

to whom he has yet to speak, he makes of himself a parody of both age and youth: He has his hair dyed black, his eyebrows plucked and eyelids underlined; his cheeks boast a carmine blush and his lips a gloss cherry-red. (“Now the signiore can fall in love as soon as he pleases” [157], says the barber obsequiously, in the manner of his trade; the irony is unwitting, and chilling.) The barber, though, might be as much a mortician as he is a cosmetician, and his patron an unfortunate corpse (for certainly in one sense Aschenbach—the Aschenbach who thrived in Munich—is dead before he dies). Further, he now wears a scarlet tie and a straw hat with a multicolored ribbon. He has become brother to “the horrible old made-up man” (115) he distastefully beheld on the crossing to Venice; he has become a grotesque—his metamorphosis, for Isadore Traschen, “a parody of Nietzsche’s glorification of the [satyr] as ‘truth and nature in their most potent form’” (95).⁸⁵ Yet, even in parody, his cosmetic mask reveals the truth of his now dissolute nature more than it or his costume disguises his age. For his heroic venture in quest of Beauty has become an exercise in the satiation of satyric lust. It has led him to, and into, the abyss he once so forcefully repudiated.

It also leads him one afternoon, after he has lost Tadzio’s path, to the little square where “he had made that vain decision weeks ago to leave Venice” (158). He is feeling not at all well and may now be experiencing more intensely physically the ill effects of the sickness in his soul: “His head was burning, his body was covered with sticky sweat, his neck quivered, a no longer endurable thirst tormented him” (158)—effects that match the symptoms of the sickness plaguing Venice as well. To quench the fierce thirst,

⁸⁵ “Aschenbach is in effect wearing the mask of Dionysus,” posits Traschen and, in that, draws a comparison to the description in the *Symposium* of Socrates’s “‘outer mask [as] the carved head of the Silenus; but . . . what temperance there is residing within!’” In the case of the now intemperate Aschenbach, however, the exception does not hold: “[T]he outer mask reflects the inner self” (95-6).

dehydration being typical in the intestinal attack by the bacterium *Vibrio cholerae*, Aschenbach has unwisely, carelessly, eaten “overripe, soft strawberries” from a greengrocer’s shop (158). Strawberries may indeed be the fruit of Aschenbach’s temptation into love’s divine madness—traditionally, if less commonly than the red anemone, the wild strawberry is associated with the goddess Aphrodite, whose tears of grief over the mangled body of her beloved Adonis bring forth from the blood-stained earth the red, heart-shaped fruit⁸⁶—as on the very first morning that Aschenbach watched Tazio on the beach with his companions he “breakfasted on some large, fully ripe strawberries which he bought from a vendor” (122). They may also be the source of the distracted traveler’s infection by the comma-bacillus, which claimed as its first or second Venetian victim “a woman who sold greengroceries” (151). By the tainted fruit of his temptation, then, the soul-sick Aschenbach, for whom “the moral law [seemed] no longer valid” (156), may fall prey as well to the correlative plague—“the disgusting mortal malady [winding] its underground way” (156)—in Venice. The boundaries between the collaborative chaos within and chaos without begin to blur.

The narrator may intend the strawberries to be viewed as an instrument in Aschenbach’s destiny, but the point he emphatically makes at this juncture in the narrative—the feverish Aschenbach having sunk down on the steps of the well at the center of the little square and rested his head against the stone rim—is that “the master,

⁸⁶ As was Hyacinthus to Apollo, so was Adonis to Aphrodite, and in both instances the grievous death by the bloody wounds of the beloved youth—Hyacinthus is struck in the head by a wayward discus; Adonis is maimed by a wild boar—is followed by a joyful resurrection in the shape of flower or fruit. While the romantic tradition may read these “flowery resurrections” (Edith Hamilton’s phrase [90]) as commemorations of deific sorrow and divine love, they are both more vitally related to Apollonian and Aphrodisian vegetation myths, ancient tales that fabulized the sacrifice, in earlier, primitive cultures, of virginal youth so that the barren earth might be regenerated by their blood. The tale of Narcissus, to which Aschenbach also alludes in his contemplations upon the beauty of Tazio, has similar roots and similarly resurrects its hero as a flower.

the artist,” the author “whose fame was official” (158), has become what he had abhorred: a study in abjection. The perspective is judgmental, yet it tempers irony with pathos in its portrait of Aschenbach, only weeks ago an exemplar of intellectual discipline and moral dignity, as he sits, dissolute, “his eyelids closed” and “his drooping, cosmetically brightened lips shaping the occasional word of the discourse his brain was delivering” (158–9).

It is direct discourse, and although it is a product of Aschenbach’s “half-asleep brain with its tissue of strange dream-logic” (159), it is spoken by Socrates—or by Aschenbach as Socrates—again, as in chapter 4, to the beautiful youth Phaedrus. The earlier passage, however, is presented by the narrator as a kind of daydream wherein Aschenbach envisions Socrates instructing young Phaedrus on the virtues of Beauty, as if the scene and situation in Plato’s *Phaedrus* had come to life on the stage of the dreamer’s inward eye; yet the contents of the dream and its disquisition are all related as indirect discourse by the narrator. In the case of the dream in chapter 5—the last but one in a narrative punctuated with daydreams, dreams, reveries, and visions—the narrator would appear to have withdrawn or to have ceded his moral perspective at this crucial moment in the mapping of Aschenbach’s destiny. Or, rather, for this moment the at once judgmental and sympathetic narrator allows the self-descrying thoughts of his subject simply to unfold, without interruption or interpretation, as if their two voices were one, in the “tissue of strange dream-logic” that characterizes the disquisition attributed to Socrates.

As in the earlier dream, Socrates asserts that Beauty, being at once divine and visible, is the lover’s path to the spirit; only now he adds the adjective “sensuous” and

makes the “lover” an “artist” as well: “. . . and so it is indeed the sensuous lover’s path, little Phaedrus, it is the artist’s path to the spirit” (159). The sensuous complicates the passage to the spiritual, and Socrates/Aschenbach wonders, first, if a man “can ever achieve wisdom and true manly dignity” through the path of the senses, or, rather, if such “an errant and sinful path” would not “of necessity lead us astray” (159). In the senses lies danger, especially for “we artists”—and there may be more of Aschenbach than Socrates in that phrase—who “cannot tread the path of Beauty without Eros . . . appointing himself as our guide” (159). “The lesson of the second address to Phaedrus,” says Traschen, “is that man cannot endure transcendence” (95). For Eros ensures that the longing in the artist’s soul “remain[s] the longing of a lover,” which in turn ensures that “we writers” will “necessarily go astray” and “remain dissolute emotional adventurers” (159): a position that may be a writer’s self-justification—or a judgment as sternly narratorial as it is imaginably Socratic, for Socrates warns Phaedrus in Plato’s dialogue that while the dark steed of the lover’s desire may be halted and exhausted in the pursuit of the beloved, in the arduously won presence of the boy’s beauty, and Beauty, the effort of the intellect to contain the longings of the senses is herculean. The Socrates of Aschenbach’s discourse, however, allows that by the very nature of “we artists”—the adverbials “of necessity” and “necessarily” punctuate the argument—the effort to trammel the soul-borne longings for sensate beauty will inevitably, if also inexcusably, fail. For the artist’s soul is wed to a lover’s passions—“the longing of our soul must remain the longing of a lover”—and “that,” warrants the Socratic voice in Aschenbach’s waking dream, “is our joy and our shame” (159). Shame, the moral anxiety suffered by the artist in the pursuit of his desire, is neither divorced from nor deterrent of the joy that

he experiences in achieving it. The artist's Apollonian intellect allows his Dionysian impulses their appetite at the same time that it acknowledges the moral consequence; in Freud's terms, the ego, at once driven by the libidinous instincts of the id and restrained by the prohibitive tenets of the super-ego, subscribes to both.

That the reference to "we artists [*wir Dichter*]" is as particular as it is general—and particular to Aschenbach—becomes apparent in the ensuing allusions to "the magisterial poise of our style," "our fame and social position," and "the use of art to educate the nation and its youth" (159), all of which apply to the achievements of Gustav von Aschenbach in his illustrious literary career as it has been presented, not without a critical and ironic eye, by the narrator in chapter 2 of the novella. In the dream, though, the evaluation of such accomplishments is bluntly harsh: They are "a lie and a farce"; they are "ridiculous" and "reprehensible" (159). Moreover, the adoption of such writers' work for school readers "should be forbidden by law," because such writers are unfit to be educators, in that they have been "born with an incorrigible and natural tendency toward the abyss" (159). However they may strive toward dignity and wisdom by repudiating the abyss, as Aschenbach himself did notably in "A Study in Abjection," they cannot escape its allure. No matter how ardently and purely they may engage in the "pursuit of Beauty alone"—"of Beauty which is simplicity, which is grandeur and a new kind of rigor and a second naiveté, of Beauty which is Form" (159)—they cannot ensure repudiation: "For form and naiveté" says the dreamer's Socrates of the philosopher and artist both, "lead to intoxication and lust" and, further, "they may lead a noble mind into terrible criminal emotions" before leading it "to the abyss" (159). The discourse does not spare its dreamer judgment, and the adjective "criminal [*-frevel*]," which plays against

“noble [*Edlen*]” in the preceding phrase, strikes a condemnatory note that both echoes the moral observations of the narrator and reflects Aschenbach’s emotional crisis. The high-minded notions that Aschenbach brought to his initial infatuation with Tadzio as Beauty have capitulated to the intoxicant lust, which has bred his (“terrible criminal”) pederastic obsession with a beautiful youth and which has delivered him not to a supernal reality bathed in Apollonian light but to the verge of a Dionysian pit: where in orgiastic abandon and “lascivious delirium” he experienced his soul’s annihilation at the altar of the Stranger-God in his feverish dream a few nights before.

The waking dream’s interlocutor notes that the “noble mind” with its “own fine rigor condemns as infamous” the criminal emotions that may overwhelm it in the passage of “us writers” to the abyss (159). It is, then, self-condemnation, and a condemnation not for a deed but for a desire and perhaps an erotic dream. The prefix “self-” figures significantly in the close of the discourse as it is translated: “I tell you, that is where they lead us writers; for we are not capable of self-exaltation, we are capable only of self-debauchery [*Uns Dichter, sage ich, führen sie dahin, denn wir vermögen nicht, uns aufzuschwingen, wir vermögen nur auszuschiweifeln*]” (159). In Aschenbach’s case, in fact, the debauchery begins and ends in himself, as does what the narrator might call his destiny, his experience as it develops in Venice bringing him ultimately to the abyss and his development being a destiny. Aschenbach surrenders himself totally to debauchery only once: in the Dionysian dream that erupts into his own soul and ends with all the Stranger-God’s frenzied attendants in “an orgy of limitless coupling,” all of whom, the dreamer asserts, “were himself [*waren er selbst*]” (155). It would seem that even in his dreams Aschenbach is a “solitary traveler” (148).

More apparently, at the end of Aschenbach's fever dream in the little square, the Socratic figure he assumes in the dream goes his solitary way: "And now I shall go, Phaedrus, and you shall stay here; and leave this place only when you no longer see me" (159). In that valediction the speaker—the lover, artist, writer, philosopher—appears to have chosen to travel on alone, as he bids the youth not only to stay behind but also to make no attempt to follow a master whose personal path has delivered him to mindless erotic chaos, perhaps because he would not have the young boy share the destiny of a "stricken man" (155). He would perhaps spare Phaedrus the plague born of and borne in his soul, as perhaps Aschenbach would spare Tadzio—in which case Aschenbach would not have wandered so irretrievably, or irredeemably, beyond moral law as the narrator has warranted. Indeed, as overwhelmed as Aschenbach may be by his "monstrous" desires, he does not act upon them; as relentlessly as he follows Tadzio and his family through the streets and along the canals of Venice or as compulsively as he watches the boy on the beach, Aschenbach does not on any occasion accost the beautiful youth. They never speak, although the soul-sick artist can read encouragement, hope, or affirmation in a glance, a lingering look, or a fleeting smile from the object of his desire. Still, he neither seizes nor creates an opportunity to proclaim himself to the boy, not even when he has, in the narrator's view of Aschenbach after his oneiric descent into the abyss, enslaved himself to the daemon-god of his desires and cast off all restraints of moral law.

Irony deepens as reversals unfold at the close of Aschenbach's sad story. An artist who lodged his destiny in the pursuit of Beauty, he has found Beauty to be as intangible as beauty is untouchable. Tadzio—both the "model and mirror" of Beauty, of "Form as a thought of God" (133)—initially inspires in Aschenbach Platonic awe and worship, and

he is overcome by “emotional intoxication” (133). Already, in that sensuous response—for the “divine” Form of Beauty takes the “visible” shape of the beautiful youth Tadzio—Aschenbach has opened the door of his soul to Eros; and aesthetic aspiration yielding increasingly to sexual obsession, the magisterial artist’s path to the spirit becomes an enthralled lover’s road to the abyss. Finally, less by a failure of his will than by his surrender of it to his monstrous desire, “the dissolute emotional adventurer” (159) is being consumed spiritually by the sickness in his soul and physically by the pestilence he has made its collaborator. (In that, Aschenbach has struck a fatal balance of Apollonian and Dionysian principles, Apollo being the god of plague and Dionysus being the deity of his personal abyss: The morning he dies, Aschenbach is assaulted “by waves of dizziness, only half physical,” along with “an increasing sense of dread, a feeling of hopelessness and pointlessness, though he could not decide whether this referred to the external world or to his personal existence” [160]. It could of course refer to both, as Aschenbach has made of the sick, chaotic city of Venice a correlative for his personal existence.)

That same morning, in another painful reversal, Aschenbach, ill and bereft, learns that Tadzio’s family will be leaving the hotel by early afternoon—Tadzio, for whom he did not leave Venice, for whom he risked his soul and, indeed, literally, his life; Tadzio, to whom he tied his destiny—yet even in the face of death, he goes once more down to the sea. Once more he sits in his deck chair and watches the beautiful boy with twilight-gray eyes, who is playing in the sand with the friend he calls Jashu, a “sturdy boy” with “glossy black hair” (160). Their games, though, are “degenerating into roughness,” and forcing Tadzio into a wrestling match, the customarily submissive dark-haired boy demonstrates “cruel brutality, as if he were now bent on revenge for his long servitude”

(160). Kneeling on Tadzio's back and pressing his face in the sand, "his tormentor" seems to be intent on suffocating him. "Convulsive," then "twitching" beneath his dark companion, Tadzio attempts to escape the hold until finally he is released. The scene might serve as an epitome for the wish-fulfillment of the now raven-haired Aschenbach's own unrealized desire, in that Jashu, "degenerating into roughness," not only touches but also wrestles, forces, holds, and presses the paler, "less muscular beauty" beneath him; on earlier occasions, more gently, Jashu has kissed him, too. More significant, though, may be the allusive possibilities in the language that the narrator brings to his description of the two boys' wrestling match, so that the scene presents both what Aschenbach sees and what the narrator sees in what Aschenbach sees. Analogically, the tussle between blond Tadzio and dark Jashu, like the struggle between the noble white steed and the wanton black one in the *Phaedrus*, might mirror for the narrator the conflict that has defined Aschenbach's destiny since his youth, when the spiritual austerity he had been born to on his Silesian father's side wrestled with the sensual vitality on his Bohemian mother's, and as it has been played out increasingly insistently on the stage of Aschenbach's soul between his Apollonian ambitions as an artist in pursuit of Beauty and the Dionysian impulses he habitually repressed into submission and had so long held in servitude—impulses that were awakened and aroused not by the divine form but by the visible shape of beauty; impulses that erupted finally with "cruel brutality" in the erotic fury of a self-annihilating dream.

Except that the object of Aschenbach's Apollonian eye and Dionysian desires is not slain in the grip of his companion and tormentor's passion, although he is left "very pale" (161). If paler in complexion, he appears to have become more ethereal in his

beauty. Separating himself from his friends, in his striped linen bathing costume he wades from the shore to a sandbar, where—“divided from the shore by a width of water, divided from his friends by proud caprice”—he walks, less a pale boy than a ghostly figure, a shade, “a quite isolated and unrelated apparition . . . with floating hair out there in the sea, in the wind, in front of the nebulous vastness” (161). In this description of the “figure”—he is no longer identified, or identifiable, as Tadzio—as he lingers at the edge of the vast and nebulous sea, Ellis Shookman finds the echo of a line in Plato’s *Symposium*: “the great sea of beauty,” which is beheld at the end of a lover’s spiritual journey (81). T. J. Reed likewise points to the allusion “in this crucial passage” of Mann’s novella to “Plato’s image for the realms into which the spiritual initiate progresses,” as his “love of a single beautiful boy” leads “ultimately to a vision of the absolute. Beauty itself” (161). Mann’s excerption of the passage from Plato into his working notes for the novella,⁸⁷ with the germane phrase underlined, prompts Shookman to conclude, “If Aschenbach, looking out at the Adriatic is gazing at Plato’s sea of beauty, he is the philosophical lover: he has risen, not fallen, in the end” (81). That Aschenbach’s descent into dissolution as he experienced it in the thrall of his Dionysian dream and as he expressed it in the subsequent, second Platonic dialogue, wherein Aschenbach’s Socrates denies the artist-lover’s capability of “self-exaltation” through the transcendence of sensuality (for “we are capable only of self-debauchery”), is reversed in

⁸⁷ Both Shookman in *Death in Venice: A Reference Guide* and Reed in *The Uses of Tradition* cite Mann’s notebooks, which include the excerpt from a German translation of the *Symposium*, to support their assertion of the authorial intent to complete Aschenbach’s spiritual initiation with the reward of Elysian bliss. The excerpt, from the Kassner translation of the notebooks into English, is quoted by Reed in his text; it comprises Diotema’s argument to Socrates in regard to the progress of love, which reads in part: “. . . brought to the border of the great sea of beauty, here beget many noble words and thoughts with the *inexhaustible urge for wisdom*, until he then, strong and mature, has a vision of the unique knowledge which is the knowledge of beauty . . . Yes, Socrates, whoever has been able to ascend through right loving of the beloved and begins to see that eternal beauty, *he is at the end and perfect and initiated*” (Kassner, 62-4, with Mann’s underlinings; as found in Reed, 161).

the moment of his death, then, constitutes an apotheosis, by which “Mann,” avers J. Brooks Bouson, “transforms the terrifying experience of self-dissolution into grandiose myth and artistic perfection”—or, in André von Gronicka’s terms, as Bouson notes, “Aschenbach’s ‘psychophysical disintegration’ is invested with ‘the dignity and beauty of apotheosis by being linked with the ‘mythic pattern,’ the ‘mythic return’ of the demigod’s entrance into the bliss of Elysium” (114).⁸⁸ While the apotheosization of the (at best) ambiguously heroic Aschenbach’s death in the novella’s penultimate, climactic paragraph is apparent in its imagery and diction, in its allusive nods to Platonic disquisition and mythic tradition, the vision granted Aschenbach, along with its implied redemption, is as much imagined by the narrator as it is experienced by the dying emotional adventurer.

The beach, the boy, the sea. It is the narrator who visualizes them in a painterly symbiosis but also views them in a larger composition in which the solitary figure of Aschenbach sits with his head resting on the back of a deck chair. The narrator’s imagery of the apparitional shape of a boy with floating hair surveying a vastly indistinct sea fittingly conveys the failing eyesight of a dying man at the same time that it aesthetically invests the scene with a sense of otherworldliness; the narrator envisions what the “watcher” Aschenbach sees, and in that vision the narrator with profound sympathy for his subject aesthetically redeems the fallen artist from his infamy. The narrator places, or perhaps merely observes, the boy on a sandbar somewhere between Venice and the sea’s eternity, where the boy—“one hand on his hip, with an enchanting twist of the body”—turns at his waist to “look[] back over his shoulder at the beach” (161). Given the physics—the distance between the bar and shore, the heavy “autumnal, out-of-season air”

⁸⁸ Bouson’s references to von Gronicka derive from the latter’s essay “Myth Plus Psychology: A Stylistic Analysis of *Death in Venice*” (60-1).

(160), the haziness of Aschenbach's vision—the eyes of the man and the boy could not in fact meet in that “last look” (161), except by an act of the imagination. That act is the narrator's as well as Aschenbach's; for in that last look the narrator imagines that Aschenbach again sees the look “when those twilight-gray eyes, looking back at him then from that other threshold, had for the first time met his” (161): when on the very day Aschenbach arrived at the Hotel des Bains in Venice, outside the dining room, “[f]or some reason or other he [Tadzio] turned round before crossing the threshold, and . . . his strangely twilight-gray eyes met those of Aschenbach” (117). That first look prefigures the last; it presages the destiny that the last look embraces, not as Aschenbach sees it but as the narrator presents it. The narrator lends aesthetic symmetry to the construct of destiny that he perceives in Aschenbach's experience. (The narrator, after all, has the advantage of telling the subject's story after the narrative fact, as he markedly notes when speaking of Aschenbach's brief essay inspired by Tadzio's beauty which “was soon to win the admiration of many” [135], soon being sometime after the author's death in Venice.)

The narrator, too, affords Aschenbach a vision of beauty at the moment of his death: a vision by which the “bleak spectacle” of the beach—its desolation underlined by the narrator in the arresting image of the “apparently abandoned camera [standing] on its tripod at the edge of the sea,” its black cloth flapping in the breeze (106)—is aesthetically transformed into a shimmering threshold unto eternity and the distant youth is allusively transfigured into the brother of the brothers Apollo and Dionysus. It is “as if” the boy becomes “the pale and lovely soul-summoner”—Hermes Psychopompos, the youngest of the Olympians, who escorts souls across the river Styx to the Underworld and, no less

significantly, serves as the guardian of boundaries and of the travelers, solitary and otherwise, who cross them (he is also the deity of wrestlers, by the way)—and not only is the imagined summoner looking at Aschenbach but also “smiling to him, beckoning to him; as if he loosed his hand from his hip and pointed outward, hovering ahead and onward, into an immensity rich with unutterable expectation” (161). Twice the narrator qualifies the “artistic perfection” of the vision that Aschenbach might have beheld with the conjunction “as if [*als ob*],” and the most compelling gesture of the boy, now and at last “beckoning” to the dying artist, is cast in the subjunctive mood (“it was as if . . . [he] were smiling to him, beckoning . . .”). But death comes to Aschenbach in the indicative: “And as so often, he set out to follow him” (161). This time, though, he is following the boy into a rich immensity—or so the narrator allows—and not into the “stagnant and malodorous” air of a city where “the sun burned oppressively through the haze that had turned the sky to the color of slate” and not through the “murky water” of stygian canals in a “black, beaked craft” with a surly gondolier serving as his “pander” (143). Neither is he following his soul-summoner across the watery channel into the abyss. It is as if Beauty were now indeed the path to the spirit; “as if” because it is aesthetically realized by the narrator for the story’s hero, as Aschenbach assumes in his death a tragic dignity that redeems him from the pathos of his depravity. Yet he assumes it by virtue of the narrator’s artistry. It is the narrator who in Aschenbach’s last dream weds him to his destiny.

That Aschenbach’s destiny is aesthetically realized in an apotheosis envisioned, and in stately cadences summoned, by the narrator rather than Platonically accomplished by the subject himself qualifies any resolution to the novella as the entry of a “spiritual

initiate” (Reed) or “philosophical lover” (Shookman) into an eternity of beauty and bliss. Rather, it casts its already profoundly ambiguous hero and the world he dies in still further into ambiguity. As Reed notes, in Plato’s *Symposium*, the love that begins with beauty in the shape of a boy must progress first to “love of all physical things” and then to “love of all spiritual qualities, of the beauty in laws and institutions,” before it yields its vision of absolute Beauty (161). What characterizes “a man’s spiritual development,” in Reed’s phrase, hardly defines the progress of the solitary traveler Aschenbach, who in his devotion to “solitude and silence [*Einsam-Stummen*]” (115) becomes increasingly more isolated from Venice’s tourist community and the city’s alien culture as he descends into the lawless Dionysian abyss that delivers him therein to debauchery and thereafter to sick, dissolute desire. Venice proves indeed to be his Hades. The city’s plague, the cholera morbus, is his, but also his plague, the sickness Aschenbach bears in his soul, is the city’s. For what the narrator sees in the downward spiral of Aschenbach’s destiny, in what von Gronicka calls his “psychophysical disintegration,” is reflected in the cultural decline and decadence of Venice—and, by extension, the decline of the civilized world—at the outset of the twentieth century: The artistic achievements of the noble Apollonian past have been reduced to the performances of vulgar street musicians and the cosmetic wizardry of barbers; and in the camera standing abandoned but conspicuous at the edge of the sea’s immensity might be read the superseding of the grand classical plastic arts by the modern mechanical ones,⁸⁹ of art as representation by art as reproduction. A fitting emblem for the encroaching spiritual aridity of the modern

⁸⁹ Linking the camera’s tripod to the Apollonian Homer—in athletic contests, as in the funeral games for Patroclus in the *Iliad*, tripods serve as prizes—as well as to the seat of Apollo’s priestess at Delphi, which Apollo secured after slaying the python, Traschen considers that the tripod “suggests the death of plastic, Apollonian art, and the birth of the pseudo-Apollonian, mechanical art of the camera” (93-4).

world, the black-shrouded camera standing on its tripod with the blind eye of its lens trained on the empty sea signals the death of Apollonian aesthetic values in the new century in that the camera has usurped the sacred tripod of Apollo's priestess and seer, the Delphic oracle, whose absences in ancient times were signified by a branch of laurel laid upon the tripod-supported seat. Associated traditionally with poetic inspiration and spiritual purification as well as with victory and peace, the laurel along with its magical properties has been absented, too, and supplanted by the camera and a shroud in the plaguey reality of an uncertain, perhaps godless world. Apollo, the god of plague, has himself been delivered to plague.

Plague is alluded to, if obliquely, in the narrator's opening sentence of the novella as "so grave a threat" that "for months on end" seems to have been "hang[ing] over the peace of Europe" (95):⁹⁰ obliquely, in that the threat to the continent might refer as much metaphorically to the apocalyptic rumblings of cultural plague—bourgeois esurience, social unease, political foment, economic malaise, moral debasement—as literally to the possible ravagement of Europe by the cholera epidemic. So it is that Aschenbach's descent into his anarchic unconscious, in his willing surrender of Apollonian rigor to Dionysian ecstasy, as well as in the subsequent cession of his rational self to the depravity of dark desire—so it is that the plague now devouring Aschenbach's psyche—might be read as a metaphoric possibility, or prophecy, for the disease that threatens the destiny of a continent. Just before his Dionysian dream Aschenbach revels in an "image of the stricken [*heimgesuchte*] and disordered city" (154): a "chaos" that renders "art and

⁹⁰ The German text reads: "*das unserm Kontinent monatelang eine so gefahrdrohende Miene zeigte,*" which Heim's translation—"that for months had shown so ominous [*gefahrdrohende*] a countenance [*Miene*] to our continent"—follows more closely, although the adjective "ominous" may pale in the shadow of the compounded "*gefahr* [dangerous]" and "*drohende* [menacing]" (thus, "so grave a threat" in the Luke translation).

virtue” (155), aesthetic values and ethical standards, meaningless; a catastrophe in which abject self-interest—from the institutionalized deceit of city officials to the operation of “dark and antisocial forces” evidenced in “intemperance, shameless license and growing criminality” at lower levels of society (152)—thrives. Immediately after the dream, when Aschenbach awakens, he is characterized as “the stricken man [*der Heimgesuchte*]” (155). That Aschenbach is Venice and the city him is underlined by the narrator’s choice in these two instances of the German word “*heimgesuchte*” (which derives from the verb “*heimsuchen*” and the noun “*Heimsuchung*,” for a visitation, a disaster, an affliction, a plague).⁹¹ More than Aschenbach is dying in Venice, then. For Isadore Traschen, Aschenbach’s “collapse symbolizes the breakdown of the European will, of European civilization confronted by the forces of darkness” (99), its fate being “its fall into barbarism” (97), like the immergence of the artist Aschenbach in the orgiastic fury that annihilated his cultivated self in his “terrible dream” and that left “his whole being, the culture of a lifetime, devastated and destroyed” (154). The defeat that Aschenbach has personally suffered in the plague born of his intellectual restraint and emotional neglect, the loss of “the culture of a lifetime,” is the threat that haunts the nations of Europe in the year of the novella, two years before the outbreak of a devastating world war. Plague radically redefines the celebrated, respectable Gustav von Aschenbach’s destiny, and art reimagines it in a Platonic veil of shimmering light, albeit the stricken writer nonetheless dies in a deck chair on an empty beach, an abandoned camera with a blind eye nearby. The plague meanwhile continues in Venice, in Europe, and in its vast, apocalyptic

⁹¹ T. J. Reed notes that “[t]he image of *Heimsuchung* is common to *Der Tod in Venedig* and [Mann’s] war writings,” in which the First World War “itself was a *Heimsuchung*.” In a footnote Reed calls attention to Mann’s use of “*heimgesuchte*” to modify “*Stadt* [city]” and to denote Aschenbach in *Death in Venice* (406).

shadow other artists no doubt continue aesthetically to reconstruct the destinies of stricken nations and their heroes. As if art were life.

Chapter Five
The Plague

What is the novel, in fact, if not the universe where action finds its form,
where the final words are said, the human being abandoned to the other
human beings, where everything bears the mark of destiny.

—Albert Camus, *The Rebel*

John Cruickshank in *Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt* refers guardedly in the chapter titled “The Art of the Novel” to Camus’s *The Plague* (*La peste*) as a *roman-mythe*. Moreover, he notes that “the whole conception and construction of *La peste* make it one of the most impressive novels of recent times to which the term *roman-mythe* may be applied” (166). The designation is nonetheless deceptive, and Cruickshank himself qualifies the aptness of it. While it is true that in the broadest sense, in its narrative framework, Camus’s novel can be read as a *roman-mythe*, more narrowly, in its narrative detail—in that *The Plague* deals with a real event, a particular plague, ostensibly in the realistic manner of a chronicle—Cruickshank views the work as being not exclusively mythic. Rather, he places it also in the symbolist tradition, for concealed in what is present in a literal reading of the novel as realism, i.e., as a chronicle, is another, abstract and absent “mythic” reality.

Most plague texts have their genesis in fact. *The Plague* is no exception. Therefore, to study the aesthetics of plague literature—or more particularly, the aesthetic constructs of destiny in plague literature—is to examine the process by which the factual reality of plague is first perceived and then translated by an author into a literary reality.

A process that begins in perception—and indeed, the ancient Greeks defined aesthetics as perception—thus ends in representation; the plague text re-presents plague’s fact.

Set in the coastal city of Oran in Algeria in the unspecified year of 194–, the genesis of Camus’s *The Plague*, published in postwar 1947, in all likelihood lies in the outbreak of bubonic plague in Oran in the 1940s. In the composition of the novel, however, Camus, whose *Notebooks* attest to his wide reading in plague literature, is likely to have drawn on the accounts of various epidemics that darkened the history of Algeria, a principal one being the cholera epidemic that killed a large percentage of Oran’s population in 1849, following the French colonization. Oran and its environs had in fact suffered numerous epidemics in the four centuries before Camus published his novel. A research report by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention shows that Oran was decimated by bubonic plague in 1556 and in 1678 (with deaths estimated at 3,000), whereas outbreaks of plague after European colonization—185 cases in 1921, 76 in 1931, 95 in 1944—fell far short of the epidemic described in the novel. Oran’s last case of plague in a human, prior to publication of Camus’s novel, was recorded in 1946.⁹²

Although Camus locates the novel in the French colony of Algeria in North Africa, the city of Oran feels essentially European, and all of Camus’s central characters are of European descent. The geography fixes a distance between the colony and France, between North Africa and Europe, at the same time that the unexceptional cultural

⁹² Nearly six decades later, in 2003, the port of Oran again experienced an outbreak of plague, which, according to the CDC report, “is a textbook illustration of the unexpected and sudden reemergence of an infectious disease epidemic that is potentially highly lethal” (Bertherat et al., “Plague Reappearance in Algeria after 50 Years,” *EID Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 10 [October 2007]). The language in the conclusion to the report—“unexpected and sudden”—describes precisely the unpredictability, and the absurdity, of the plague’s reappearance in Camus’s “[t]reeless, glamourless, soulless” town of Oran where “you can go complacently to sleep” every night and awaken to banality every day” (7). The 2003 reemergence of plague in Oran also lends truth to the poetry in the prophecy at the end of the novel, after the plague has subsided: that the plague bacillus “never dies” and will in time rise up again (272).

disposition of the populace obliterates it. Oran and its citizenry are, in fact, so very ordinary, so much more so like people everywhere else, so extraordinary-resistant, that in the opening paragraphs, in David Richter's reading of the novel as a modern apologue in *Fable's End*, "[t]he stage is . . . set for a fable in which the effects of the bubonic plague upon the town may become emblematic of man's confrontation with the absurdity of the universe" (17). Oran is thus less significant as the city in which a plague appears than as any city in which plague may unexpectedly, absurdly, appear. And in Oran it does what in any city it might: It arrives, no one knows from where. Its cause is impossible to ascertain; its etiology remaining unclear, its course is impossible to predict or explain. Indiscriminately it kills by the hundreds, for days, weeks, months. Death tolls rise until the bacillus begins to attenuate. Until the pestilence itself seems to die. For, mysteriously, it goes away. Yet, it will no doubt return again, because in the story of the pestilence in Oran, as in any tale of plague, there can be no "final victory [*victoire definitive*]," but rather "only the record of what had to be done, and what assuredly would have to be done again" (271), as the novel's narrator and journal-writer, the physician and atheist Dr. Rieux, who knows his Lucretius and Thucydides,⁹³ notes at the close of the novel. Like the mythic dragon's teeth of Thebes, the plague is always in the earth.

Camus's *The Plague*, then, like Defoe's *Journal of a Plague Year*, to which it owes some artistic debt, offers a realistically detailed chronicle of the plague in Oran; but concealed, and revealed, in that chronicle is a tale that invests the plague with a larger,

⁹³ Thucydides in his *History of the Peloponnesian War* chronicles the progress of the plague that originated in Ethiopia and that in 430 BCE decimated Athens; Lucretius concludes his *De Rerum Natura* with a grim account of the great plague of Athens, which derives much of its detail (but not its moral attitude) from Thucydides. Early in his narrative Rieux recalls especially the image of "the plague-fires of which Lucretius tells, which the Athenians kindled on the seashore" and where after nightfall the living brought their dead (38).

more universal, mythic significance. Thus the novel can be read both literally, in concrete terms of a specific plague, and symbolically, in abstract terms of a mythic plague; and in between, the novel no doubt offers possibilities that can be read metaphorically, in the figurative terms of a political or social plague, for instance.⁹⁴ Importantly, though, for the narrator, the 194– bubonic outbreak in Oran stands in the moment of the novel as an epidemiological apogee in the long, still unfinished history of plague. In that sense, the plague narrative can perhaps be most clearly read, as Susan Sontag suggests in *AIDS as Metaphor*, as an epitome: “Camus is not protesting anything, not corruption or tyranny, not even morality. The plague is no more or less than an exemplary event, the irruption of death that gives life its seriousness. His use of plague is more epitome than metaphor, is detached, stoic, aware—it is not about bringing judgment” (59-60). And in that sense, as Germaine Brée points out in *Camus, The Plague* is very unlike Defoe’s *Journal* (and numerous other works in the library of Camus’s authorial mind), in which pestilence is deemed “to be the punishment meted out by God as a consequence of man’s collective sinfulness” (119).

The “event” as it evolves in the narrative is of course shaped by the narrator’s vision, but that does not preclude the introduction of contrary perspectives on the progress of the plague. The narrator is not about “bringing judgment” any more than is Camus. Neither is he deaf to voices that might regard the plague with less stoic detachment than he, and in the course of the narrative emerge (at least) two distinct,

⁹⁴ Lev Braun asserts in *Witness of Decline*, that “the beleaguered city of Oran is an obvious allegory of the Resistance in occupied Europe [as Camus himself confirmed in *Lyrical and Critical Essays* (339)]. . . . In a broader sense, the plague is the war, or Nazism (or any totalitarian government), or, generally speaking, any kind of social or political upheaval” (85). Certainly the novel at times and in part invites allegorical readings, although, as Cruickshank maintains, “it is not, strictly speaking, an allegorical novel” in that the metaphorical significance of the plague account, “though frequent, is of an intermittent kind,” with “stretches of narrative” meant “to be taken at a literal level only” (167).

contrary constructs by which to view the plague and its destiny: one, that of Dr. Rieux, which brings scientific observation to bear upon its depiction of plague; the other, Father Paneloux's, which seeks out a theological rationale to explain the cause for the terror that has befallen the city of Oran. More insistently than do the plague texts of Defoe and Manzoni, Camus's *The Plague* finds its argument in the dichotomy between science and religion—or as Camus put it in his *Notebooks*, “the struggle between medicine and religion; the powers of the relative . . . against those of the absolute”—out of which arise numerous corollaries of duality, like reason and faith, empiricism and metaphysics, epidemiology and dogma, humanism and Christianity.⁹⁵ More modern, and more relevant in its empirical approach to the problem at hand, though Rieux's scientific perspective may be than Paneloux's metaphysical one, both constructs will in the end prove to be contrarily aesthetic. Out of their contrariety and their conjunction—out of the intellectual conflict between the earthly, humanist practitioner of medicine and the tortured medievalist priest who would save mankind's soul—emerges the novel's aesthetic construct of destiny. Philosophically and psychologically, the linear-thinking metaphysician is pitted against the mythopoeic sensibility of an empiricist who has perceived in history the cyclical nature of plague and observed firsthand, as an epidemiologist, its effects in the world it inhabits—and who, in the end, in his role as

⁹⁵ The principle of duality characterizes Camus's work from the outset of his career, notes Cruickshank: “The Mediterranean duality at the basis of Camus's thought strikes one immediately in his earliest published work, *L'envers et l'endroit*. The title itself suggests a dualism with its reference to the right and wrong side of a piece of material. The image also emphasizes the close relatedness of the two terms of his experience . . . In each instance happiness and suffering intensify each other. The acuteness of Camus' reaction to each is due to the fact of their contrasting coexistence . . . The contrast between youth and age, life and death, pleasure and fear is maintained throughout *L'ironie*” (25-26). See also Germaine Brée's critical biography *Camus* (119).

narrator, asserts what he can now fully imagine: As inevitable as its destiny is the certainty of the plague's eternal return.⁹⁶

Ultimately in Camus's multilayered narrative the plague defines and is defined by virtually every narrative detail, every novelistic turn of event, every intellectual posture, every disposition of character, every ambiguity and every metaphor. Yet, at the same time, plague defies the constructs that would contain or explain it; its full reality lies always beyond the intelligence and imagination of its interpreters. Camus acknowledges (as does his narrator) the inadequacy of the human intellect, be its perspective scientific or metaphysical, in its attempts to make comprehensible a thing that is in itself incomprehensible or, equally frightening, a thing that in itself simply is. For Camus (and the narrator), plague assumes its own destiny. It is. And when it isn't it will be again.

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In *The Plague* Camus's Dr. Rieux serves a dual purpose. A man of science and a doctor dedicated to tending the sick and the dying, he is the protagonist of the plague narrative. He is also the narrator of the tale, however, as he discloses at the end of the novel when he prepares to turn the entries in his journal (as well as those in the diaries of his friend, the plague victim Tarrou) into a chronicle of the plague in Oran, which, of course, is essentially the eyewitness account the reader has just read. In this, Camus acknowledges his debt to Defoe, who used a similar device in *Journal of a Plague Year*, by which H. F. presents the events in London as if they were unfolding before him at the very time he is recording them, thus to heighten with immediacy the illusion of reality.

⁹⁶ Braun observes that Camus in several passages of *The Rebel* "accepts the Greek conception of a cyclical or undulatory process in history" and that "[o]ccasionally he seems to borrow Nietzsche's conception of the 'eternal recurrence of the same'" (144). Similar observations might be drawn from the Camusian narrator's views of history in *The Plague*.

Like Defoe's self-effacing H. F., too, Camus's narratorial Rieux incorporates scientific detail, like statistics in regard to day-to-day fatalities, to lend further authenticity to the horror that has been visited upon the citizens of Oran.

Apparently scientific, then—a realistic, empirical account of the plague's progress in Oran—Dr. Rieux's journal, or chronicle as it becomes, is equally, and perhaps more so, aesthetic: a construct that artfully orders what are supposedly the known facts of the plague in the face of what remains terrifyingly unknown about the plague's course—its destiny, if you will—as Rieux daily strives to prevent the spread of the epidemic, treat its victims, and seek a cure. So it is that the doctor as chronicler makes aesthetic choices; after all, he does not know everything about plague or about the plague in Oran, nor does he record everything about plague that he knows (he does not presume to be writing anything like a definitive tome).

The narrative in fact begins quite modestly by describing “this very ordinary town of Oran, which is merely a large French port on the Algerian coast, headquarters of the Prefect of a French ‘Department’” (5). The very ordinariness of Oran, however, magnifies all the more the horror to come, for the doctor-chronicler is also a skillful narrator. Recording a sequence of mostly quotidian events, he reserves his revelation of “their somewhat extraordinary character” (5) until the opening of the second chapter when the unnerving first sign of a potential bubonic catastrophe appears: “When leaving his surgery on the morning of April 16, Rieux felt something soft under his foot. It was a dead rat [*un rat mort*] lying in the middle of the landing” (7). Destiny in the very ordinary town of Oran is indeed about to take an extraordinary turn.

Bubonic plague narratives previous to the twentieth century hardly mention dead rats at all—live rats scuttle when Renzo returns to his destroyed home in the concluding pages of *The Betrothed*, but no dead ones appear either in Manzoni's text or in that of his primary source, Ripamonte's *History of Milan*; they appear neither dead nor alive in Defoe—but in *The Plague* from the outset they are conspicuous. There is the one under Rieux's foot, then two more, followed by four and five and ten, twenty . . . Eventually eight thousand dead rats will be recorded. By the 1940s the connection between dead rats and bubonic plague was a long-established matter of scientific knowledge. "Those rats died of plague," concludes Rieux's colleague, Dr. Castel. "Or of something extremely like it," he adds, and ominously predicts, "And they've loosed on the town tens of thousands of fleas [*des dizaines des milliers de puces*] which will spread the infection in geometrical progression unless it's checked in time" (58). That an individual's destiny may be altered, or determined, by a bacteria-bearing flea that has lately abandoned the dying rat it infected is a premise as distasteful as it is horrifying, to doctors as well as the townspeople of Oran. Yet the public response to a possible outbreak of plague in Oran is neither immediate nor unified. What may be but a few isolated cases is no cause for alarm, the cry of epidemic is premature, and this is the twentieth century after all: The citizens of Oran retreat into denial, as if by not speaking the word "plague"—and no one is, except for Rieux—the reality that it represents can be escaped.

Denial can only disguise fear. Rieux, a doctor and a scientist, confronts it. He cannot doubt the fearful telltale signs of plague that he clearly recognizes; and however inadequately he may be able to identify the cause of its outbreak at this particular time in this particular place, he is acutely aware of its history and its effects. First in his journal,

then in his chronicle, and ultimately as the narrator in and of the novel *La peste*, the doctor recounts the events he witnesses firsthand in Oran and ponders in an historical context their calamitous effects. By Rieux's estimate, plague has afflicted humankind "some thirty" times in centuries past and claimed the lives of "one hundred million people" (36). In light of such numbers, Rieux finds it difficult to imagine the world's history as a construct for human destiny by which the human spirit is evolving progressively toward a glorious realization of its elemental freedom. Indeed, in his rumination on plague history—or on plagues as history—and human freedom, Rieux may have in the ironic frame of his mind the Hegelian view of history as a dialectical progression out of which is continually developing an ideal of human freedom.⁹⁷ As Rieux contemplates the townsfolk who have not "given a thought to anything like plague, which rules out any future, cancels journeys, silences the exchange of views"—which truncates time, appropriates space, stifles human intercourse, obliterates individual choice—he remarks: "They fancied themselves free, and no one will ever be free so long as there are pestilences" (36).

Even before the "whole series of fantastic possibilities out of keeping with that grey-and-yellow town under his eyes" begin to unfold," the "old pictures of the plague,"

⁹⁷ In Hegel's view of history as a dialectical progression in *The Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, "world history is thus the unfolding of the Spirit in time, as nature is the unfolding of Idea in space," until the Spirit recognizes its own essential freedom (75). For Camus, however, the "approach to the problem of man's conflict with the order of things," Braun states, "is in no way dialectical; it is clearly dualistic. Camus's novelty is that his is a horizontal dualism, ruling out any higher ontological status for human aspirations or achievements. Between the two poles of the conflict there is no movement . . . since Camus insists that both incompatible aspects of the human situation be kept in mind as a precondition of genuine revolt" (132). For crucial to Camus's "logic of rebellion," according to Nathan A. Scott in his analysis of *The Rebel*, is "the idea of *mésure*, of balance, of moderation": an idea that gets lost in the social radicalism of historicists like Hegel, who, in view of "the desacralization of life in the modern period" argue "that history is, therefore, to be [in Camus's words] 'written in terms of the hazards of force'"—the result being "demonic fanaticism on behalf of . . . the dream of absolute freedom or the dream of absolute justice" (66-7).

the history of pestilence, its visitations repeated again and again—and now—unsettle Rieux’s scientific equanimity:

Athens, a charnel-house reeking to heaven and deserted even by the birds. Chinese towns cluttered up with victims silent in their agony; the convicts at Marseilles piling rotting corpses into pits; the building of the Great Wall in Provence to fend off the furious plague wind; [Jaffa and its hideous beggars;] the damp, putrefying pallets stuck to the mud floor at the Constantinople lazaret-house, where the patients were hauled up from their beds with hooks; the carnival of masked doctors at the Black Death; men and women copulating in the cemeteries of Milan; cartloads of dead bodies rumbling through London’s ghoulish darkness—nights and days filled always and everywhere with the eternal cry of human pain.
(38)⁹⁸

Far more so than the plague texts of Defoe, Manzoni, and Mann, Camus’s *The Plague* is informed by narratives of prior pestilences, both ancient and modern, from Greek myths to modern-day chronicles, from biblical tales to accounts of the actual plague of Athens, the Black Death in London and Milan and Marseilles, the great plague of China. Gleaned from Rieux’s medical texts and histories—and sourced in Camus’s *Notebooks*⁹⁹—the plagues proceed across the stage of the narrator’s mind and the pages of his narrative: from the plague of Constantinople, where ten thousand died in a single day, to the plague in Canton, where the bubonic plague bacillus was first identified—in 1894, by Alexandre

⁹⁸ “Athènes empestée et désertée par les oiseaux, les villes chinoises remplies d’agonisants silencieux, les bagnards de Marseille empilant dans des trous les corps dégoulinants, la construction en Provence du grand mur qui devait arrêter le vent furieux de la peste, Jaffa et ses hideux mendiants, les lits humides et pourris collés à la terre battue de l’hôpital de Constantinople, les malades tirés avec des crochets, le carnaval des médecins masqués pendant la Peste noire, les accouplements des vivants dans les cimetières de Milan, les charrettes de morts dans Londres épouvanté, et les nuits et les jours remplis, partout et toujours, du cri interminable des hommes”(43).

⁹⁹ Germaine Brée provides in a footnote Camus’s reading list in preparation for the composition of *The Plague*. “Camus, as he started work on his novel, listed in his *Notebooks*: Thucydides: *History of the Peloponnesian War*; Boccaccio: *The Plague of Florence* (no doubt in the *Decameron*); Manzoni: *The Betrothed*; Daniel Defoe: *Journal of the Plague Year*; H. de Manfred and Jack London, each with a note ‘The Scarlet Plague.’ And he lists innumerable others, including memoirs by Mathurin Marais; accounts by Michelet, Pushkin, Charles Nicole and others; history, statistics, and symptoms culled from the works of doctors such as Antonin Proust; passages from the Bible (particularly as he stated in his second version and admonished himself for the ‘use of the Bible’) and principally from *Deuteronomy*, *Leviticus*, *Exodus*, *Jeremiah*, and *Ezekiel*” (120). Styling and punctuation are as they appear in Brée’s text.

Yersin (thus the name bacillus *Yersinia pestis* for the pathogen)—and where forty thousand rats died before their fleas massively infected the populace, to, just seventy years later, the plague in Oran.

A bacillus, then, has been insinuating itself into the aesthetic of human destiny for hundreds upon hundreds of years. Not until the Swiss-French physician and bacteriologist Yersin's discovery late in the nineteenth century, however, was science able to isolate the pathogen for bubonic plague and classify the conditions under which it operates. So it is that Rieux as well as Dr. Castel knows that the bubonic bacillus is carried by infected fleas living on—and eventually killing—rats, which they then abandon for another warm-blooded animal: the human. In the face of bubonic plague the modern scientist has at least one advantage over his counterparts from the Middle Ages to the Industrial Age; in dead rats he has a sure signpost to catastrophe. Having made the connection between the dead rats and bubonic plague, Rieux and his colleagues know what to expect: the fevers, the buboes, the infected lymph nodes—the symptoms the same as those of the victims in Defoe's London and Manzoni's Milan. Regarding the bacillus itself, though, Rieux does perceive a notable difference, one that elicits further unease and dread: The bacillus has apparently mutated. "I am bound to add that there are specific modifications which don't quite tally with the classical description of the plague bacillus" (46), Rieux observes.

Rieux's observation casts the science regarding plague not into doubt but into flux. As the bacillus mutates, the science changes. The how of plague is not fixed, and the why of it—in 194—, in Oran—is as elusive and mysterious as was the cause of the plague of Athens to Thucydides. Famine has not befallen the land, and the country does not appear to be at war, which frequently facilitated the transmission of plague

geographically in the past. (One of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, Plague in most narratives is contingent on either War or Famine, or both.) Neither is an original carrier, a patient zero, named, as is often the case in plague literature and was the case in both Defoe's *Journal* and Manzoni's *Betrothed*; nor do other factors that commonly contribute to the outbreak and spreading of plague, like climatological extremes or urban overcrowding, assume significance in the account of the narrator. In any case, of more concern to the narrator than any speculative why or even the scientific how is the empirical what of the plague in Oran.

Empirical observation and modern epidemiology afford Rieux a construct by which to present the threat of the plague and to forecast the destiny of—and his hope for—the community. However, his empirical evidence proves to be suspect and his knowledge of epidemiology unconvincing to the town elders. Oran's prefect is likewise reluctant to come to terms with the possible reality of an epidemic when Rieux and his colleagues press him to convene a "health committee [*commission sanitaire*]" (45), although the health committee itself will be reluctant to call for drastic measures in a situation that is not yet apparently drastic. Why declare an emergency, the prefect reasons, as will the committee, when this disease has not even been proved to be contagious. In response, Rieux the empiricist would hardly cast himself as a prophet, but he would exercise, and recommend, foresight on the basis of scientific evidence: "The point isn't whether the measures provided for in the code are rigorous, but whether they are needful to prevent the death of half the population" (47).

Not a prophet, an empiricist for sure, a chronicler and a doctor, a student of history and a man of science, Rieux brings his knowledge of the historical past to bear

upon his observations of the current outbreak of disease in Oran. To that knowledge, historical and scientific, he adds imagination. Rieux imagines fully what might be—and soon proves to be—the consequence of the ignorance and denial that insulate the prefect, the health committee, and the community at large from a timely confrontation with destiny, a destiny that Rieux deems to be inevitable. The empiricist is also a fatalist; but his is a fatalism that demands not surrender to an abstract principle but action in spite of it. Rieux's foresight benefits from hindsight, as his perception of the present is prefaced by his familiarity with the past and his empiricism is wedded to his imagination. Rieux embraces all the contraries that spur him into action. All serve to define, and determine, Rieux's conception and construction of himself as, primarily, a medical practitioner actively committed to Oran's battle against a bacillus, and in that commitment he perceives and pursues his personal destiny in the face of plague. The fatalist in Rieux does not submit to fate; rather, he combats it.

However confounding in its inexplicability the why of the plague may be to Rieux's informed scientific mind, Rieux as a medical practitioner soldiers on against absurd odds. An anti-bubonic serum has been developed, but at the moment it is unavailable in Oran, apparently because no one expected the plague to return. Until serum can be transported from Paris to "the colony," Rieux can only attempt to administer to the plague's symptomatic effects: "stupor and extreme prostration, buboes, intense thirst, delirium, dark blotches on the body, internal dilatation . . . The pulse becomes fluttering, dicrotic and intermittent, and death ensues as the result of the slightest movement . . ." (37). In its medical objectivity, Rieux's description, which in its stylistic mode is not unlike that of cholera's effects as they are detailed by Mann's

narrator in *Death in Venice*, all the more conjures the bubonic horrors of the disease when its advance is unchecked by serum or cure. Still, there is no guarantee that the serum when it is delivered will prevail over the bacillus or halt the course of the contagion. In fact, it won't; but from the outset Rieux is philosophically skeptical of the efficacy of serums in that he believes plague inheres with a lifespan of its own and, with or without serum, it will fulfill its own bacillary destiny—and for a time will appropriate the destiny of Oran: “If, as was most likely, it died out, all would be well. If not, one would know it anyhow for what it was and what steps should be taken for coping with, and finally overcoming, it” (39). On empirical grounds, too, Rieux doubts the benefits of the serum, given that the bacillus, by his observation, appears to have mutated since its last invasion of Oran. The “specific modifications” to the “classical” bacillus that Rieux detects only add to the confusion of health officials and their ability confidently to predict the course the plague will take. The scientifically determined cause of bubonic plague, then, is in itself proving to be protean, incomplete, yet to be fully comprehended.

The same might be said of its history, and destiny. As Rieux presents it, the destiny of plague is played out in history. So it is that plague, for Rieux, can only be comprehended in terms of the past, which, as yet, to his scientific mind, has yielded no cause for the pestilence as history has recorded it. Destiny is thus defined historically by the plague's effects, more of which are yet to be evidenced, as they will continue to evolve in the future that history has yet to write. Beyond history, then, destiny is a blank, for like history it is always in the process of being written, which does not prevent it from being divined, however falsely, inaccurately, or prejudicially. But Rieux is not a diviner, prophet, or seer. He is a scientist; he allows the facts of the present case to speak for

themselves and the facts as he presents them are descriptive, not predictive or even prescriptive, for the facts even now, in light of a protean bacillus, fail to reveal a fixed cause. (Besides, the bacillus explains only the scientific how, not the more speculative why.) Ignorance of cause of course does not equal absence of cause. Nor do Rieux's facts preclude fiction; for his history of plague's evident effects as well as his chronicle of them in Oran is shaped by his perception of plague's apparent destiny, and as such his scientific discourse, which strives for bald objectivity, is an aesthetic construct colored inevitably by his imagination and subjectivity: none of which casts into doubt his integrity as a scientist and humanist.

The humanist embraces his personal destiny as a medical practitioner. Tellingly, in his historical survey of plague, for all the variations it may present in terms of time and place, and whatever its toll on the civilizations it has threatened, however it may have been presumed to be prevented or explained, however various its effects, in every case of plague from ancient times to modern one element has remained demonstrably the same: that of human suffering, or as Rieux states it, "the eternal cry of human pain [*(le) cri interminable des hommes*]" (38). In that cry the humanist in Rieux hears the call not for speculative scientific or metaphysical explanations, not for hows or whys, but for a what, for action. A window affords Rieux a view of everyday life in Oran, of the "certitude" that lies in the familiar and quotidian, before the city lies in the grip of the plague: "There lay certitude; there, in the daily round. All the rest hung on mere threads and trivial contingencies; you couldn't waste your time on it. The thing was to do your job as it should be done" (39). Whatever faults Rieux may find with the Oranians—their bourgeois attitudes, their materialism, their unexplored values and incurious minds (or as

Camus says of them in *Nuptials* [*Noces*], “On the boulevard in Oran one does not raise the problem of being and one is not concerned with the road to perfection” [59]—he finds in them fellow human beings as well. His job is clear to him; he will minister to their human pain. That job, for the humanist Rieux, is equivalent to a moral obligation.

Rieux can find no empirical evidence to support any argument that places human destiny—or the morality on which the religious, like Paneloux, for instance, often deem it to be contingent—in divine hands. Toward the end of his philosophical work *The Rebel* (*L’homme révolté*), Camus posits that “the rebel rejects divinity in order to share in the struggles and destiny of all men” (306). So does Rieux; as he tells God’s earthly intermediary Paneloux, who views the plague as a divine punishment visited upon the world for crimes known and unknown: “There are times when the only feeling I have is one of mad revolt” (192). Furthermore, for Camus’s rebel, as Herbert Read observes, “revolt is one of the ‘essential dimensions’ of mankind.”¹⁰⁰ Neither the Hegelian revolt of the slave against the master nor the Marxist revolt of the proletariat against the ruling class, Camus’s is a metaphysical revolt against the conditions of life defined by the idea of divine justice. Rieux’s rejection of the divine, though, does not equal a Luciferian *non serviam*, for while the atheist Dr. Rieux will not serve God, he will serve humanity—he will participate fully in “the destiny of all men.” He is in fact compelled to serve his fellow human beings. Because God won’t.

¹⁰⁰ Herbert Read, in his Introduction to Camus’s *The Rebel*, continues: “It is useless to deny its [revolt’s] historical reality—rather we must seek in it a principle of existence. But the nature of revolt has changed radically in our times. It is no longer the revolt of the slave against the master, nor even the revolt of the poor against the rich; it is a metaphysical revolt, the revolt of man against the conditions of life, against creation itself. At the same time, it is an aspiration towards clarity and unity of thought—even, paradoxically, towards order. That, at least, is what it becomes under the intellectual guidance of Camus” (viii).

In a God-absent universe humankind perforce has to take responsibility for its destiny. Cruickshank observes that “there is underlying tolerance to be felt in [Camus’s] atheism which sees human solutions as the natural answer to human problems” (38). Rieux’s friend Tarrou finds the conjunction of philosophical atheism and humanist behavior initially contradictory: “Why do you yourself show such devotion, considering you don’t believe in God?” Tarrou asks, and Rieux responds “that if he had believed in an all-powerful God he would have ceased caring for the sick and leave it to Him. But no one in the world believes in a God of that sort” (114). What Rieux believes he continually asserts in terms of his role as a humanist and physician, as when he quite simply states, and again restates, what he perceives to be his personal destiny, “There are sick people and they need curing” (114). In his genuine fellow feeling and ministrant impulses, Rieux indeed might exemplify the “heroic humanism” or at least prefigure the rebel-hero in Camus’s construction of humanitarian ethics whereby, in Braun’s words, “the sense of universal brotherhood [is] coupled with the demand for happiness through a passionate and tragic existence” (118).¹⁰¹

Like Camus’s truly absurd yet absurdly happy Sisyphus, Rieux refuses to give in to the never-ending possibility of defeat. As Rieux notes, “Everyone knows that pestilence has a way of recurring in the world” (35). Plague seems always to have been—from Homer to Lucretius to Procopius to Yersin, from Thucydides to Mann, from the Bible to Defoe to Manzoni—and always about to be again, “yet,” says Rieux, “somehow we find it hard to believe in ones that crash down on our heads from a blue sky. There

¹⁰¹ Enlarging on the “humanitarian ethics [in *The Rebel*] toward which Camus had been groping since his early works,” Lev Braun writes: “It is tragic humanism and heroic humanism too, in a world where nothing is given or explained, where every bit of happiness has to be wrenched from a harsh fate and every value created in darkness and suffering as a source of order in an absurd world. In this perspective, life becomes indeed meaningful” (118).

have been as many plagues as wars in history; yet always plagues and wars take people equally by surprise” (35). Even as the plague abates and Oran again settles into its comfortable bourgeois existence, Rieux imagines in markedly aesthetic terms the resurgence of a horror borne by some pestiferous bacillus:

And, indeed, as he listened to the cries of joy rising from the town, Rieux remembered that such joy is always imperiled. He knew what those jubilant crowds did not know but would have learned from books: that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good: that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks and book-shelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it roused up its rats again, and sent them forth to die in a happy city. (272)¹⁰²

If the poetic imagination of the man of science evidences itself in this lyrically executed coda at the end of the novel, the vision that it metaphorically and metonymically presents restates the one certainty Rieux has gleaned from his experience: Plague is. As it has been it will be again. No destiny is secure.

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Whereas Dr. Rieux offers a scientific perspective on the plague of Oran, which he presents narratively as an epitome in the long history of pestilence, Father Paneloux assumes a more exactly moral and terrifyingly metaphysical stance in his view of the contagion that God has visited upon the sinful citizens of Oran. “Calamity has come on you, my brethren,” declares the erudite Jesuit priest Paneloux from the pulpit of the Cathedral, during

¹⁰² “Écoutant, en effet, les cris d’allégresse qui montaient de la ville, Rieux se souvenait que cette allégresse était toujours menacée. Car il savait ce que cette foule en joie ignorait, et qu’on peut lire dans les livres, que le bacille de la peste ne meurt ni ne disparaît jamais, qu’il peut rester pendant des dizaines d’années endormi dans les meubles et le linge, qu’il attend patiemment dans les chambres, les caves, les malles, les mouchoirs et les paperasses, et que, peut-être, le jour viendrait où, pour le malheur et l’enseignement des hommes, la peste réveillerait ses rats et les enverrait mourir dans une cité heureuse” (279).

a Week of Prayer service organized by the ecclesiastical authorities to offer spiritual guidance to the Oranians shortly after the onslaught of the plague, “and you deserve it [(et) vous l’avez mérité]” (85). No doubt colors his assertion in this first of two soteriological sermons “that this plague came from God for the punishment of their sins” (89). The moral judgment apparent in the priest’s discomfiting declaration is lodged in a concept of destiny that he has metaphysically constructed out of the biblical tales and essentially medieval religious doctrine he brings to bear on the exhortations in his sermon.

In the sermon Paneloux draws upon the ten plagues of Egypt in the book of Exodus, by which a just and wrathful Judeo-Christian God releases the Jews from bondage to demonstrate God’s power over a prideful pharaoh who refused continually to let His people go. Further, from 2 Samuel 24, Paneloux offers as an example the plague upon Jerusalem, which exposes the moral shortfall of King David when he not so wisely distrusts God and dispatches census-takers so as to determine the potential military might of his kingdom. In both stories plague is presented as a punishment delivered by God unto man for the (original) sin of disobedience. The consequences, though, are far-reaching: “For plague is the flail of God and the world His threshing floor” (88). The same punitive Old Testament rhetoric that reproved King David is used by Paneloux to admonish the disobedient citizenry of Oran, along with rhetorical flourishes from the plague sermons of Gregory the Great during the Justinianic plague of the sixth century, as they are recorded by the medieval scholar Jacobus de Voragine in *The Golden Legend*.

All three stories hinge upon an avenging angel: the Angel of God who smote the Egyptians; the angel who threatens to destroy Jerusalem; the angel who, signaling the end of the plague, brandishes a sword over the castle of Hadrian when Gregory the Great

marches through the streets of Rome. This very same angel, “the angel of the pestilence, comely as Lucifer, shining like Evil’s very self,” preaches Paneloux, “is hovering above your roofs with his great spear in his right hand poised to strike . . .” (86-7). The plague, like the angel, is “ineluctable [*assurée*]”—and *vous l’avez mérité*. As it does for Rieux, for Paneloux too the plague redefines the destiny of the Oranians. Whereas Rieux focuses on the reality, the what, of the plague and places his hope for recovery from its effects in human hands, in the action of medical practitioners and the community, Paneloux delivers the Oranians to God’s hands. The cause of the plague, its why, is implicit in Paneloux’s construct, which relegates Oran’s destiny to God’s just deserts, and the deserts are at once punitive and redemptive. The plague not only punishes the community for its disobedience—its offenses, be they unwitting or by intent, to God—but also offers the hope that good will come of the pestilential consequences; that the citizens of Oran who survive the plague will return to God: “And thus, my brothers, at last it is revealed to you, the divine compassion which has ordained good and evil in everything, wrath and pity, the plague and your salvation [*la peste et la salud*]. This same pestilence [*Ce fléau*] which is slaying you works for your good and points your path” (88).

Paneloux’s first sermon employs the exempla of plagues that have beset mankind since ancient times, but the succeeding millennia have not appreciably altered the human condition vis-à-vis plague. To be sure, the plague goes away, but it returns again and again; so do the rhetorical constructs that attempt to rationalize plague in a God-centered world. Paneloux uses the word “*fléau*” (literally, “flail”) for “plague”—the English translation of the text generally prefers the less metaphoric word “pestilence” and thus loses some of the rhetorical flavor of the Old Testament—the flail being an instrument

associated with plague since biblical times. As Lev Braun points out, “The old French phrase *fléau de Dieu* suggests richer images than pestilence or the scourge of God, inasmuch as *fléau* is not a whip but a flail that purifies as it punishes, separating the wheat from the chaff” (87).¹⁰³ Indeed, Father Paneloux himself makes that point when he draws the analogy between the flail of God striking His threshing floor and plague afflicting the world of sinful, unrepentant Oran, as he adds, “and implacably He will thresh out His harvest until the wheat is separated from the chaff. There will be more chaff than wheat, few chosen of the many called” (86).¹⁰⁴ At least, at this juncture, Paneloux still offers the wheat of salvation as a possibility, if for only a chosen purified few among his plague-stricken parishioners.

No less significantly, Paneloux places the cause for the “calamity” of the plague in Oran not upon the will of God but upon the fallibility of man, thus making the victims of a cruel, incomprehensible disease the cause of it. By their bad choices—the human will having too long “connived at evil” and engaged in sin—they have not so much incurred the wrath of God as lost His compassion and thus brought to pass His desertion: “. . . and now He has turned His face away from us. And so, God’s light withdrawn, we walk in darkness, in the thick darkness of this plague” (86), preaches Paneloux. No matter the absence of God’s divine light, Paneloux exhorts his parishioners to rejoice in their dark fate, for in their suffering of it they—or some few of them—may be purified and redeemed. In “good and evil”; “wrath and pity”; “the plague and your salvation”—in these rhetorical dualities Paneloux constructs for them their human destiny. Humankind

¹⁰³ Braun notes further: “Throughout *The Plague* a faint whistling sound is heard above the street lamps at night, reminiscent of that of a flail at work. The *fléaux* were part of medieval life, a proof of God’s wrath and concern. The plague, the Huns, hail, and floods were *fléaux*.” (87).

¹⁰⁴ *Dans l’immense grange de l’univers, le fléau implacable battra le blé humain jusqu’à ce que la paille soit séparée du grain. Il y aura plus de paille que de grain, plus d’appelés que d’élus . . .* (92).

has lived with this rhetoric for centuries. Saint Augustine, a father of the Christian Church who preached that man be in the world but not of it, and of whom Paneloux is a student (as was Camus),¹⁰⁵ posits that in the postlapsarian world, evil, being noncreative, is not a thing in itself but rather the absence of good, as darkness is the absence of light. Analogically, for Paneloux, plague, like darkness and evil, exists not as a thing visited upon man by the whim or will of an angry God but as an absence of God's beneficence, whereby man might have access to divine grace and salvation. Plague, then, is not an end in itself—a divine punishment by a black death—but a means, a last resort, by which God out of love and pity for His creation will bring man back from the ways of sin and onto path of redemption. Even in “the dark core of human suffering,” says Paneloux, still glows faintly God's “radiant eternal light,” which “reveals the will of God in action, unflinching, transforming evil into good” (89).¹⁰⁶ For suffering presses the sinner to repent and return to God's divine embrace.

Bombarding his parishioners with the hollow rhetoric of contraries and doctrinaire paradoxes, Paneloux presumes to offer them “vast consolation” in a message that beyond its “words of wrath” holds “comfort for [their] hearts” (89). Yet he evidences no compassion or concern on the part of the church or God for the immensity of human suffering—not the abstract anguish of wayward souls but the actual agony of raging fevers and rampant infections and swelling vital organs and frothing mouths produced by

¹⁰⁵ Cruickshank remarks: “Having obtained his *licence* he [Camus] went on, in 1936, to complete a dissertation, a *diplôme d'études supérieures*, on the relations between Greek and Christian thought in Plotinus and Saint Augustine. In 1937 a renewed attack of tuberculosis prevented him from taking the *agrégation* and his university career ended at that point” (13). Camus was thus intimately familiar with the psychological effects and social reaches of a serious communicable disease, and he no doubt brought that experience to the novel, just as he did, as Braun observes, “his own experience of the war years: fear, claustrophobia, separation, the tyranny of material life, the endless waiting, the torture of unending time” (85).

¹⁰⁶ In the *Enchiridion* (XXVII), Saint Augustine instructs: “God judged it better to bring good out of evil than to suffer no evil to exist.”

the plague. The Old Testament God of Paneloux's first sermon rains down wrath in one homiletic breath and tenders feeble pity in the next. Yet the divine wrath that might display in plague God's righteous indignation at humankind's fallen state appears to be far more evident in Oran than any pity for victims of the disease. Paneloux exhibits little of Rieux's concern for "the eternal cry of human pain." The French word "*pitié*" is etymologically related to the word "*piété*" (as are the English words "pity" and "piety"), in that they both derive from the Latin noun *pietas*: While Paneloux demonstrates considerable piety in his sermon, he offers no pity. Instead, he, or the God he represents, condemns when he might condole.

Furthermore, the alignment of human evil and divine wrath with the punitive plague fails to acknowledge any empirical evidence in regard to the nature of its contagion. Contracting plague is akin to a *coup de dés*: Not everyone gets it and not everyone who does get it dies from it. Many will survive, and while the science may not yet know why, it is unlikely the survivors and the immune will believe for very long after the fact of the plague that what they have escaped is God's wrath; indeed, once the plague has passed, the Oranians will enjoy a return to normalcy, their primary interest being, as the narrator observes with an ironic glance at the foibles of bourgeois Oran at the beginning of the novel, making money.

No irony tinctures either Paneloux's view of the spiritually derelict Oranians in his congregation or the paradox he offers them as consolation: that the very pestilence which is daily slaying them is operating on their spiritual behalf. While it is true that biblical sources attribute the salvation of the ancient Hebrews to plague, as God deployed it against their Egyptian enemies, this hardly seems a just parallel to the pestilence in Oran, unless the

Oranians need to be saved from themselves—by a plague that is claiming their bodies for the good of their Christian souls; by a pestilence that “points your path,” albeit the path leads probably to the grave—and, possibly (for a few), to heaven. In that logic may lie another temptation for the plague-weary citizens of Oran, and Paneloux is quick to join the consolation to a final admonition. The Oranians must not, Paneloux warns them, model themselves on the Christian Abyssinians who embraced plague as a pathway to heaven by wrapping themselves in the sheets of the dead victims. Paneloux disallows any suicidal shortcuts to paradise because “no man should seek to force God’s hand” by “speeding up the order of events, which God has ordained unalterably from all time” (88). To engage in such practice like that of the Abyssinians—essentially, to take one’s destiny out of God’s hands and place it in one’s own—is barely a step away from heresy. Not that there is any evidence the Oranians have been stealing sheets from deathbeds.

Conor Cruise O’Brien, in *Camus*, asserts that in its entirety *The Plague* might be read as a sermon (43). Camus himself, in his *Notebooks*, describes the novel as a tract. Certainly the work has the qualities of both, and in either case the work itself and the elements in it—from the theologically didactic to the morally absurdist—stand in a dialogical arena. While a sermon in its traditionally uninterrupted delivery by a clergyman is apparently monologic, it is also, more significantly, a rhetorical response to a topical stimulus, and as a public address it is meant to be heard by, and to stir, its audience. In large part *The Plague* implicitly comprises a dialogue, in that Father Paneloux, the man of faith, in ordinary discourse as well as in his pulpit oratory, is counterpoised to the atheist Dr. Rieux, as are the providential views of the metaphysically

minded medievalist to the empirical data of the scientifically disposed doctor, the latter attributing to bacilli what the former ascribes to God.

More immediately in the narrative moment of Paneloux's plague sermon (in which Paneloux conducts a sort of dialogue with, for one, Jacobus de Voragine, the author of *The Golden Legend*), while the situation does not allow for a verbal response from the surely uncomforted citizenry in the congregation, it does afford comment by the narrator—indirect though it may be. On the occasion of both the sermon early on in the progress of the plague and a second sermon some six months later, when pestilence has significantly ravaged the precincts of Oran, a storm is raging outside the Cathedral: “A wet wind [*Un vent humide*] was sweeping up the nave, making the candle-flame bend and flicker” during the first sermon (88). And on the second occasion: “The preacher paused, and Rieux heard more clearly the whistling of the wind [*les plaints du vent*] outside; judging by the sounds that came in below the closed door, it had risen to storm-pitch” (198). “A violent gust [*un vent violent*] swept up the nave through the half-open doors and buffeted the faces of the departing congregation” (201). “The wind brought with it a smell of rain, a tang of drenched pavements, warning them of the weather they would encounter outside” (202). The divine forces that Paneloux exalts in his sermons are momentarily overshoot by the natural ones at work in the world outside. Nature's clamor, its details selected and juxtaposed by the narrator to the preachments of Paneloux, might be read as a narratorial comment on the pious noise of a priest who increasingly is being overwhelmed by his own metaphysical and moral desperation. (Alternatively, as if to affirm the doomful message in Paneloux's homilies, the gusts and whistling of the wind—like the whistling sound at night, above the street lamps [Braun 87]—might

suggest the increasingly sonorous sweep of the *fléau de Dieu* at work in the world of Oran.)

A more conciliatory, more sympathetic Paneloux delivers the second sermon, as the narrator notes: “He spoke in a gentler, more thoughtful tone than on the previous occasion and several times was noticed to be stumbling over his words. A yet more noteworthy change was that instead of saying ‘You’ he now said ‘We’ [*il ne disait plus « vous », mais « nous »*]” (196), thus including himself in those affected by plague. Also, whereas the first sermon summoned the admonitions of the just but wrathful God of the Old Testament, the second sermon focuses on the more merciful godhead of the New Testament and particularly on Christ’s crucifixion. Yet even as he conjures with awe and pity the vision of Christ’s tortured body on the cross, Paneloux’s message is harsh, his challenge hard: “[M]y brothers, a time of testing has come for us all. We must believe everything or deny everything. And who, I ask, amongst you would dare to deny everything?” (197-8). The rhetoric—its reduction of human alternatives in a time of plague to a mutually exclusive two, “the All or Nothing [*(le) Tout ou Rien*]”—gives Rieux momentary pause, as he considers that Paneloux might be “dallying with heresy in speaking thus” (198). It is a thought that has evidently crossed the priest’s mind as well—he offers as an example a “profane writer” who claimed, on the basis of “secret” church authority, that “Purgatory did not exist,” so that man was therefore disallowed any “half-measures” and had available to him “only the alternative between [salvation in] Heaven and [damnation in] Hell”—for Paneloux makes strong the exceptionalist proposition that “religion in a time of plague could not be the religion of every day” (198). Guilty of heresy though that profane writer may have been, calamitous times, in which “[e]very sin

[is] deadly, and any indifference criminal” (198), may indeed nullify any hope of purgatory. And any possibility of heavenly salvation lies in total commitment to the holy faith—in believing in God in everything, including massive human suffering and an innocent child’s agony.

Extreme times require extreme measures. Among the extremes that Paneloux himself has witnessed—one that indeed seems to have brought him to a metaphysical crisis—is the long and agonizing death of a child, the son of the local magistrate M. Othon. (A dispenser of justice and a supporter of religious order, M. Othon declared Paneloux’s first sermon “absolutely irrefutable” [90]. While he may share Paneloux’s view of the plague as a divine and just punishment upon the world’s wicked, from whom he might justly exempt himself, M. Othon too shall fall before God’s flail. By implication, the state no more than the church, law no more than religion, can withstand the chaos wreaked by pestilence: “Plague abolishes all systems,” Camus writes in his *Notebooks* [III, 193].) Though identified in the text as Othon’s son, Philippe, the boy is more often referred to simply as the child (*l’enfant*), for he also and more abstractly epitomizes the quality of innocence, which ensures neither him nor, by extension, any blameless child immunity to a plague divinely designed to punish the sinful, reprobate, greedy, guileful, dissolute, and criminal. Whereas the profoundly saddened Rieux sees in the dead boy’s “racked” and “wasted” body “a grotesque parody of crucifixion [*une pose de crucifié grotesque*]” (189)—grotesquely parodic because of this sinless child’s painful death will come no miracle of resurrection, no holy redemption of the human community, no scapegoat’s purification of the people or the land, no surcease to the plague—Paneloux sees in the agony of the innocent child a necessary iteration of Christ’s

suffering on the cross. Necessarily, too, the boy's death must be accepted on faith, as must "All," because it comes of God's will, and it is by God's will alone that we live, or die, so on faith we feed.

Paneloux's exhortation of "All or Nothing" demands that his congregation place its faith and fate completely in God's hands. "The Christian should yield himself wholly to divine will, even though it passe[s] his understanding" (199)—as indeed the plague deaths of innocent children might, albeit that in death the child will supposedly find eternal bliss. In the divine scheme of things, then, for Paneloux, "[t]he sufferings of children [are] our bread of affliction, but without this bread our souls would die of spiritual hunger" (199). Paneloux takes the point further: The very death of children, he says, enables the true Christian to better understand God, His will, and one's own place in His universe, as it enables the true believer to appreciate the value of one of God's sacred mysteries. For it is in and through the suffering of innocent children—a condition that must on faith be accepted even when it cannot be understood—that the true believer turns, or returns, to God and embraces as his will what is God's will. Plague thus offers the Oranians the opportunity to affirm their faith. Lest it appear, however, that plague is also the divine instrument of fate by which the faithful necessarily embrace God and accept in Him their destiny, Paneloux sweetens the pill of fatalism with free will: Paneloux "would not boggle at the word ['fatalism'], providing he were allowed to qualify it with the adjective 'active'" (199). While God has designed the destiny of his creation, his creatures "know not the day, nor the hour" (Matthew 25:13) that they will be called to Him. Until that hour they are free to exercise their will, free to act. They are not free, however, to negate the value of a creative life by willfully ending or shortening

it, in the manner of the Christian Abyssinians, for instance. Rieux, too, admits to fatalism in his view of the plague in Oran as well as of the human condition; and he, too, would qualify fatalism with the adjective “active”—a qualification that would also invalidate suicide, if in the absence of Paneloux’s absolutist theological premises. For Rieux, man does because God doesn’t; at his best man acts morally, but morality is relative to the human condition rather than absolute by divine ordinance.

Paneloux’s espousal of metaphysical absolutes on the basis of blind faith stands at odds with Rieux’s “moral relativism,” which, as John Krapp notes in *The Aesthetics of Morality*, would reject the possibility of the priest’s unquestioning belief, for “to love what we do not fully understand is to love abstraction” (92). Furthermore, “Paneloux’s ethic of ‘All or Nothing’ for the sake of metaphysical redemption” is, for Krapp, “essentially an ideological buffer between beings and unhappiness, since heaven awaits those who live justly even in misery. Heaven, the goal of Paneloux’s ethic, is the apotheosis of the aesthetic—a purely formal being-present” (92). At the same time that Paneloux’s ethic, then, places the Oranians in a God-centered moral universe wherein they maintain freedom of choice, it circumscribes them with absolutes, for in a time so extreme in human suffering as that of plague, they have only “All or Nothing” from which to choose and by which to redeem, or not, the possibility of their heavenly salvation. The matter of choice thus becomes oxymoronic relative only to an absolute, and the activity of the human will in a relativist world is yoked not to moral consciousness or even conscience but utterly to faith. Krapp finds Paneloux’s ethic “fundamentally hostile to the development of a contingent moral consciousness” (92).

Indeed, Paneloux's absolutism essentially obviates any role for a contingent moral consciousness.

Moreover, Paneloux's absolutist ethic and its concomitant aesthetic of destiny, whereby the path to heaven is paved by unquestioning faith even—or especially—in the face of extreme misery, are not wholly consonant with Roman Catholic doctrine. Not only would Paneloux deny his congregation and himself any consolation of the soul they may find in the doctrine of purgatory—"All or Nothing" allows for no contingencies, no halfway measures or houses—but also he would appear therefore to deny their souls, should they fail to accept God's "All," the possibility of heavenly redemption through divine grace. Certainly, he does not present to the Oranians the channels to grace available to them in the face of their possible death by plague. In neither sermon, for instance, does Father Paneloux make mention of the church sacraments, which might provide his listeners grace, nor does he on either occasion serve mass, although his first sermon, at the end of the Week of Prayer, accompanies a Holy Sacrifice of the Mass "celebrated under the auspices of St Roch, the plague-stricken saint" (83). Mostly, what Paneloux offers is admonition and exhortation—and in such an extreme (as, debatably, extreme times may demand) that the narrator suggests Paneloux is verging on heresy. So does a young deacon, who confides to an older priest after the second sermon that Paneloux's plague pamphlet, "Is a Priest Justified in Consulting a Doctor?" (« *Un prêtre peut-il consulter un médecin?* »)—no, because if God wants the priest to be spared, He will divinely interfere¹⁰⁷—may not receive the imprimatur of the Vatican. In the

¹⁰⁷ Paneloux's pamphlet, contrary to the tacit denial of grace in his sermon, would appear, then, to retain the doctrine of grace, at least in admitting the possibility of divine interference in the destiny of a stricken priest—on the condition, presumably, that he has evidenced before God an all-accepting faith. In the text of the narrative, the deacon reveals only "the main idea" of Paneloux's essay: "That it's illogical for a priest to

pamphlet Paneloux argues, and he argues as he believes, that for a priest, ordained in the divine presence of God, to call upon a secular man of science is “illogical” (202), which might be to say it is “absurd.” It is not an absurdity, patently, that Paneloux would embrace; yet, he does accept, without question (as a Jesuit must), the absurd (in a Camusian universe) and absolutist premise on which his argument is based: that “the love of God is a hard love,” demanding that in all, no matter how gravely the pestilential horrors exceed human understanding, “we can only make God’s will ours.” (201). Were Paneloux able to acknowledge as absurdity the absurdity of such abstraction and absolutism, he might evoke the theologian Tertullian, who early in the third century declared, on the basis of faith (in reference to Christ’s resurrection), “*Credo quia absurdum est*” (“I believe because it is absurd”).¹⁰⁸ It is a semantic step Paneloux does not take. For him, still, what is absurd is not to believe and what he believes, in his mind, is not absurd.

Ironically, or absurdly, for all of Paneloux’s doctrinaire emphasis on accepting and believing what cannot be understood, in practice he does a lot of denying, as in the matters of purgatory and grace. He denies knowledge, too. He knows as well as any informed member of the community that the bubonic bacillus is transmitted by fleas (although the serum developed to combat it proves to be no more effective than prayer). Paneloux, however, prefers the authority of medieval texts and biblical fables which support a construct of destiny that teleologically lodges pestilence in some grand,

call in a doctor” (202). A few days earlier, Paneloux himself has told Rieux that “his sermon would convey some at least of his considered opinions on the question” stated in the essay’s title (194).

¹⁰⁸ Quoting Tertullian, Steven G. Kellman in *Plague: Fiction and Resistance* draws a comparison between the early Christian theologian’s statement and Paneloux’s “affirm[ing] the need to love God as an irresolvable mystery and to embrace His creation without understanding it,” thereby suggesting, to Kellman, that Paneloux, who, according to the young deacon, may be verging on heresy, has assumed “a position closer to Camus’s own absurdist vision” (58).

unknowable, divine scheme. Ultimately, though, the aesthetic that he has designed to explain and justify, to rationalize, the fact of the plague, cannot bear the weight of the plague's reality.

However aesthetic the elements in Paneloux's construct may be, Camus, of course, would "not put much stock in" declarations like Paneloux's *vous l'avez mérité* or *Tout ou Rien*, Robert C. Solomon notes in *Dark Feelings, Grim Thoughts*, for Camus's "atheism and his philosophy of the Absurd preclude it. If there is no divine, there is no divine retribution" (124). Similarly, Emily Zants points out in "Relationship of Judge and Priest in *La Peste*": "If Camus equates the temporal judge and the religion that proclaims an eternal one it is because the difference between the eternal and the temporal has no significance for him" (425). Nonetheless, as Solomon indicates, "there is guilt and, one might argue, if we acknowledge Nietzsche's 'shadows of God,'¹⁰⁹ sin" (124).

In Camus's terms, Paneloux is perhaps guilty of "philosophical suicide,"¹¹⁰ but he may also unmetaphorically commit suicide. He cuts himself off from the succor of both God and man, by denying himself both the channels of grace through holy sacraments and the recourse of medicine. When he falls ill, he refuses the attendance of a doctor, no doubt in accordance with the argument in his pamphlet; yet, when he is clearly dying, he requests no priest to administer to him the sacrament of extreme unction, which might be read, in church terms, as a spiritual suicide. Such refusals suggest that Paneloux chooses—or at least allows himself—to die, not unlike the Christian Abyssinians he condemned. Camus, in his treatise on the absurd, *The Rebel*, rejects the proposition that

¹⁰⁹ Having declared God's death in *The Gay Science* (§108), Nietzsche asks in the next section (§109): "When will all these shadows of God cease to darken our minds? When will we complete our deification of nature?"

¹¹⁰ The phrase appears in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (515).

in an absurdist reality suicide as an absurd act is justifiable on the grounds that, if life in all its vicissitudes and varieties is absurd, it is to be embraced in its absurdity and lived in its reality. To deny the absurdity, to attempt to rationalize it in terms of an essentially medieval religion or to forgo its reality for that of a mythical afterlife in an act of self-annihilation, is to deny the myriad possibilities of being human. In an absurdist world, as Camus writes in “Encounters with André Gide,” “Those deprived of grace simply have to practice generosity amongst themselves” (*Lyrical and Critical Writings*, 253). It is Rieux, the physician, who daily, month after month, extends himself in attending to the sick in the Oranian community. It is Rieux who can exult in the “gently heaving expanse of deep-piled velvet [ocean], supple and sleek as a creature of the wild” and be by “a strange happiness possessed” (227), and Rieux who experiences a moment of true communion, “of being perfectly at one” (228), with Jean Tarrou when one moonlit night, “for friendship’s sake” (226), they swim together in the sea.

It is Tarrou who recalls the case of another priest and another innocent youth—a case in which the priest utterly lost, or revolted against, his faith rather than alternatively suffer the same senseless fate as the youth, who was blinded in the war: “When an innocent youth can have his eyes destroyed, a Christian should either lose faith or consent to having his eyes destroyed” (207). Implicit in the either-or posed by Tarrou is the “All or Nothing” preached by Paneloux. As Thomas Merton points out in regard to Paneloux in his study of Camus’s *Plague*, “Either one must deny God entirely and reject him entirely or one must accept everything. Love him in everything, including the death of the innocent child. Including one’s own death. Including (he [Paneloux] hints at this) a sacrifice and death which are apparently without justification, without meaning” (35).

Merton notes that the death of the magistrate's child has made Paneloux, who "has faced the question of revolt," to at least "hesitate" in any blind commitment to his faith and at the same time to find a way by which to practice what he has preached.

"The rebel," says Camus in the work so named, "is a man who is on the point of accepting or rejecting the sacred [world] and determined on laying claims to a human situation in which all the answers are human—in other words, formulated in reasonable terms," and once he does so, his "every question, every word, is an act of rebellion while in the sacred world every word is an act of grace. It would be possible to demonstrate in this manner that only two possible worlds can exist for the human mind: the sacred (or, to speak in Christian terms, the world of grace) and the world of rebellion. The disappearance of one is the equivalent of the appearance of the other . . ." (21). On his deathbed Paneloux may appear to be lying between two worlds, for neither does he abandon entirely the sacred world nor does he fully embrace the world of rebellion. But he "does not conclude," as Merton asserts, "that the only solution is not to rebel" (35): which is not to say without equivocation that he does rebel. What he does do is make a choice that may indeed constitute in Camusian if not doctrinaire Catholic terms an act of grace. Whether or not his faith may have been shaken, as the young deacon and old priest speculate after his second sermon, Paneloux's death, posits Merton, "is definitely consecrated by an act of stubborn, personal choice" (35).

In acting upon that choice, Paneloux refuses any medical attention not only out of a homiletic preference for biblical texts and church doctrine but also, and more significantly in terms of his "stubborn, personal choice"—his own active fatalism—because he would not have any benefit of current epidemiology vitiate the purity of his

human surrender to divine will. Paneloux would, on the one hand, have God visit upon him a punishment equal to that suffered by the innocent child Othon, who failed to respond to any ministrations by doctors, including prescription of the anti-bubonic serum. Paneloux would endure unto death, in Merton's words, "all the unrelieved suffering of the worst kind of death by pestilence" (35-6). On the other hand, Paneloux takes upon himself the plague's punishment—essentially wills his own death—so that he might share with an innocent boy the same terrible fate. That Paneloux would submit totally to divine will (if one could so submit in an absurdist universe) apparently secures his place in the sacred world, yet in his determination to act upon his own human will he is not unlike Camus's rebel: "The rebel himself wants to be 'all'—to identify himself completely with this good of which he has suddenly become aware and by which he wants to be personally recognized and acknowledged—or 'nothing'; in other words, to be completely destroyed by the force that dominates him" (15).

"Paradoxically," states Merton, "in blindly submitting to God he [Paneloux] manages at the same time to impose his will on God" (35-6). The narrator of *The Plague* might, on Camusian premises, enlarge that paradox regarding Paneloux, in that his priestly impulse to submit is wedded to a rebel's will to impose, or that a cause lodged in the world of grace yields an effect that signals the world of rebellion. Certainly Paneloux's destiny in the end lies as much in him as it does beyond him, and his awakening to the personal command of his destiny is concomitant to the prodding of his will to choose and (perhaps) rebelliously act. Rebellion, says Camus, "can be caused by the mere spectacle of oppression of which someone else is the victim. In such cases there is a feeling of identification with another individual" (16). In that process of

identification—a process that Paneloux has experienced in his responses to the spectacle of the Othon child's dying and death—a man “surpasses himself” to achieve a sense of what Camus calls “human solidarity.” Nonetheless, for all such humanist stirrings and sympathy on Paneloux's part, the priest dies in quarantine, cut off and alone, ironically solitary in his recently realized solidarity—at once *solitaire* and *solidaire*.

The cause of Paneloux's death remains undetermined. He appears to have died of the plague—“a fever latent in his blood for several days past” (203)—yet he has borne no symptoms characteristic of bubonic or pneumonic plagues, as Rieux's examination has confirmed (205). Paneloux's disease, then, would seem only to have imitated plague, although in its end it brought Paneloux to the death that he desired and willed upon himself (by God) when he redesigned his destiny. “[H]e gets precisely what he asks for,” says Merton, when he “asked God to lay upon him the punishment of all” (35-6).

(Notably, when Paneloux is discovered “more dead than alive” by the pious old lady at his residence, “he look[s] as if he'd been severely thrashed [*battu*] all night long” [205]: as if perhaps he had fallen under the flail of God.) Possibly, too, the apparent act of rebellion that brought Paneloux to his fatal pass—the choice that led to his mysterious, plague-like death—merely imitated or only momentarily reflected rebellious behavior. For in a moment the Camusian rebel's “all”—the “good” with which, through the agency of the Othon boy, Paneloux identifies himself—proves to be the “nothing,” as he is consumed and “destroyed by the force that dominates him.” The rebel's *tout ou rien* proves to be *tout est rien*. In that, Paneloux may indeed die a martyr's death; however, the martyr in this case is not also a Camusian rebel, not if he acts in the conviction that in proof of his faith he is iterating the senseless fate of an innocent boy or if in his mind he

is sacrificially scapegoating himself for the “punishment of all” by plague. Merton notes that Paneloux acts upon his choice “in heroic Christian fashion” (35); and therein would lie the Camusian fallacy vis-à-vis Paneloux’s destiny: Whereas Paneloux may question the divine dicta of the sacred world, he does not in fact abandon them for a reality in which “all the answers are human” and “formulated in reasonable terms.” The metaphysical context in which Paneloux so willfully dies, at once submitting his will to God and imposing his will upon God, remains sacred; its terms are divine, and therefore, in a Camusian world, unreasonable.

Initially, Paneloux’s response to the Othon boy’s death appears to place him at least on the threshold to the world of rebellion as he strives to come to terms with a patently and painfully “human situation.” Yet the sense of solidarity that it seems at first to evoke in Paneloux does not draw him further into an identification with the larger human community. Instead, in pursuit of his priestly purpose and personal resolve, he grows increasingly more solitary. “Priests can have no friends,” the quarantined Jesuit asserts on his sickbed, when Rieux, extending genuine human sympathy, offers to sit with him; Paneloux also tells Rieux the reason why: “[T]hey have given their all to God” (206). Whereas Rieux, continually in the face of the plague’s ravages in Oran, fully “acknowledge[s] the relativity of life which permits love and happiness,” as Emily Zants remarks, Paneloux embraces “the absolute which is silence, injustice, isolation and death” (425). Paneloux rejects the possibility of human community and communion for isolation in the divine; in his solitariness he forgoes solidarity. That he also clutches a crucifix would seem to indicate he continues to cling to his blind faith in what Camus might consider to be a Nietzschean shadow of God. With the comfort of only that shadow he

dies, and the “blank serenity [*regard indifférent*]” in his eyes “betrayed nothing [*n’exprimait rien*]” (206).

By Paneloux’s own measure, without guaranty of grace, and by his own choice, with neither doctor nor priest, without succor or sacrament, he may indeed have begun to see the limits of the doctrines that bred his faith, but, crucifix in hand, he is not ready or able to acknowledge a salvation by way of Camusian revolt or rebellion. Rieux may feel restored by a swim in the sea with a friend, as together they may enjoy a sense of human communion, of solidarity, just as in ministering to the plague-stricken ill he engages himself in community, but Paneloux dies friendless and alone. In death, his eyes, serenely blank even at his fever’s height, are for the attendant Rieux still more inscrutably blank, their indifferent regard either betraying nothing with certainty, be it a dying priest’s resignation to fate or a willing scapegoat’s fulfillment of his destiny, or with certainty betraying only nothing: an existentialist *rien*. If so, that is the only certainty in regard to the case of Father Paneloux, who, in the absurdist reality of Rieux’s narrative, maroons himself between the absolutist world of a medieval faith and a modern universe of relativist morality. For weeks Paneloux’s disease “confound[ed] diagnoses” and baffled Rieux, and his death confirms only the uncertainty of his case: “Against his name the index-card recorded: Doubtful case [*Cas douteux*]” (206). For Rieux, not only is Paneloux’s case, vis-à-vis the cause of death being plague, in doubt, but also, at the time of his death, the ecclesiological disposition of the Jesuit priest who authored his own destiny as an instrument of God is also a matter of doubt. Further, in his priestly determination and Jesuitical altruism to assume, as a scapegoat, his just God’s punishment on all, thereby to redeem all, Paneloux retreats from the very community he

would save into a realm of moral abstraction and divine will; thus disengaging himself from the Camusian world of “generosity,” of fellow feeling and solidarity, he fails or refuses to participate in the human adventure of being. Of neither this world nor a next, Father Paneloux consigns himself to limbo, to an absurdist metaphor, which is like being nowhere. A *cas douteux*, indeed.

Essentially a medievalist adrift in the twentieth century, Paneloux clings to a construct of destiny that has little relevance to the absurdist world of 194– Oran, where, unreasonably, without divine cause or historical determination, a bacillus strikes the populace. In the narrative course of Oran’s plague Paneloux’s construct begins and continues to break down until, in the end, he can live neither with it nor without it. Firm in his assertions in regard to divine justice as a divine justification for the plague in the first of his sermons early on in the plague, Paneloux struggles with his convictions even as he brandishes them in the second sermon, which he delivers after months of ravaging contagion. His faith shaken notably by the intimately observed death of a blameless child, he strives as much to convince himself of the validity of his metaphysical construct as he does to sway his congregation. Ambiguity has begun to feed on his faith. And on his fate, for his death is ambiguous not only in terms of Paneloux’s aesthetically constructed reality but also in the context of the novel’s narrative reality. On the one hand, Paneloux may have embraced the fatalism implicit in the “All or Nothing” of his second sermon and died in the belief that he had surrendered his will to God’s: that God would save him should He want him to live or that He would take his life as a sacrifice for the salvation of the plague-threatened sinners of Oran. In which case he may also have deluded himself into suicide, as if in the skin of a scapegoat he could bear the blame for a plague that,

supposedly (and fancifully absurdly in the absurdist world of the novel), has been visited purposely, as punishment, by God upon His wayward human creatures in a divinely, if incomprehensibly just cosmos. On the other hand, Paneloux may in fact have contracted plague when the bacterium *Yersinia pestis* inexplicably and unexpectedly reemerged in the city six months earlier. At the beginning of the novel Father Paneloux helps an ailing porter, M. Michel, to cross the street. As it turns out, Michel is the plague's first known victim; he dies on April 30 of that unsettling year in 1940s Oran.

*

On November 2, 194–, and in the chapter immediately subsequent to Paneloux's death, comes All Souls' Day, one of the holiest days in the Roman Catholic Church calendar and long celebrated as the Day of the Dead. But, then, as the narratorial Rieux not without irony points out, since the arrival of the plague in Oran every day has become a day of the dead. Rieux, however, makes no mention of the equally holy All Saints' Day, which falls on November 1 and which figures equally significantly in Jacobus de Voragine's *The Golden Legend*. In this celebrated medieval text, from which Paneloux quotes extravagantly in his first sermon, Voragine clarifies the Church's rationale for the institution of the feast of All Saints: as an occasion for "rest from labor"; as a celebration of "joy in newness"; as an acknowledgment of "certainty about eternal life"; and, most importantly, as a show of gratitude for the saints' intercession "for us by their merits and by their good will" as "they desire the fulfillment of our wishes, but this only when they know that what we wish for is in accordance with God's will" (279).

The feast of All Saints, then, commemorates those who, on behalf of the dead, appeal to God in his abundant capacity for mercy, a quality of the divine that Paneloux in

his sermons for the most part overlooks. The mutually exclusive alternatives of his “All or Nothing” fully acknowledge God’s will, but they allow for no divine dispatch regarding any moral measure in between. By Paneloux’s dictum, his All Souls’ Day would be bereft of the benefits of All Saints. For by his absolutist view, any among the faithful who fail to meet a true but virtually impossible moral standard—to willingly surrender all to God’s will—would be denied the divine gift of grace. Paneloux removes purgatory from the Church’s paradigm of human destiny, and with it, for myriad souls, the possibility of grace and thus salvation. It is as if the plague saint Odilio, who figures notably both in *The Plague* and in Voragine’s “Commemoration for All Souls,” had never pled his case for the souls of the dead that they might be redeemed from the grasp of demons (in a purgatorial volcano in Sicily) and be restored to grace by the power of alms and prayer. Odilio’s pleas eventually prompted the establishment of All Souls’ Day: Saint Odilio, the abbot of Cluny “ordered that after the feast of All Saints a commemoration of the dead be made in his monasteries. Later this practice was approved throughout the Church” (Voragine 280). The absence of All Saints’ Day in the narrative assumes its own significance.

As if All Saints’ Day, along with the benefit of intercession on behalf of the dead, had been expunged from the 194– church calendar, All Souls’ Day evinces no signs of grace for Oran in that plague-ridden year. The French word “*grâce*” derives from “*gratia*,” the Latin word for “charm,” and a charm might be an incantation by which to summon magical prowess or an amulet by which to magically ward off evil spirits. Not only is there no apparent grace for the Oranian dead on this All Souls’ Day, there is also no charm for the living. Neither has there been. For months since the outbreak of the

plague, as the narrator recounts, “the cream of Oran’s society” in a display of elegance and personal vanity has been gathering on Friday nights at the Municipal Opera House, where: “In the soft hum of well-mannered conversation they regained the confidence denied them when they walked the dark streets of the town; evening dress was a sure charm against plague (176).¹¹¹ As if plague could be charmed. And when their evening is brought abruptly to an end and in dismay the operagoers stampede to the exits, the talismans of their urbanity, their “toys of luxury,” shall attest to a vanity of another sort: “so futile now, forgotten fans and lace shawls derelict on the red plush seats” (177).

Months before, in a stroke of ill fortune, the quarantine laws had confined a touring company’s production of Christof Gluck’s *Orfeo ed Euridice* in Oran. During this particular Friday-night performance of *Orfeo*, at the height of the epidemic, just as the tenor playing the demigod Orfeo was about to bring Euridice out of Hades, he collapsed from plague. He did not survive. The death of the tenor resonates with irony as Orfeo, the role he was playing, is the son of Apollo, himself the god of both plague and medicine as well as of music, by which the silver-throated Orfeo charms the world—and the Underworld, for that matter. But this Orfeo, who in the opera may charm Hades, cannot charm plague. Nor in this ill-fated performance will Gluck’s hero be reunited with his beloved Euridice by virtue of the intercession of Amore, who has also been charmed by Orfeo’s musical gift and grace. Halted by plague, the performance offers no redemption by love, no resurrection of the dead beloved, no restoration of eternal bliss, no aesthetic resolution. The reality of the plague trumps the aesthetics of destiny not only in the

¹¹¹ Kellman comments on Rieux’s narratorial presentation of “the fatuous insouciance of the social elite” at this gathering as one of the rare instances of humor-tinged irony in *The Plague*, albeit Camus asserted, “‘My whole work is ironic’ . . . in his notebook on 4 March 1950” (84).

streets of Oran but also on the stage of the opera house. It alters destiny no less in art than in life.

Neither as narrator nor as protagonist does Rieux place any stock in divine grace any more than he does in the metaphysical premises that shape Paneloux's homiletic exhortations. Like "a bewildered existentialist," as Lev Braun says of Camus in another context,¹¹² Rieux "tries desperately to preserve a human essence [while] hanging in a metaphysical void" (133). For it is Rieux—the atheist doctor who devotes so fully his talents and energies to the stricken community—who in community, in "a dialogue between man and man" (256),¹¹³ lodges man's fighting chance against the plague, against absurdity. It is Rieux, too, who by words and example affords the novel its moral potency. In a letter to Roland Barthes, who had criticized the novel, Camus writes, "Compared with *The Stranger*, *The Plague* does, beyond any possible discussion, represent the transition from an attitude of solitary revolt to the recognition of a community whose struggles must be shared. If there is an evolution from *The Stranger* to *The Plague*, it is in the direction of solidarity and participation" (*Lyrical and Critical Essays* 339). Further, the principles of solidarity and participation compass Rieux's course in the face of overwhelming circumstances—and in spite of them. Paneloux essentially denies the reality that Rieux confronts, for Rieux knows, as Kellman asserts, "Neither medicine nor theology nor any other human science proves successful in explaining and taming the plague in Oran" (51). Without benefit of faith and assurance of

¹¹² Braun is speaking of Camus's philosophical disposition as the author of *The Rebel*.

¹¹³ The phrase is Lev Braun's. Citing Camus's *Notebooks* (II: 126)—"What balances the absurd is the community of men fighting against it. And if we choose to serve that community, we choose to serve the dialogue carried to the absurd against any policy of falsehood or of silence"—Braun finds "[t]his theme is central in Camus's work," wherein damnation stems "from the impossibility of entering into dialogue. Salvation, from *The Plague* onwards, comes from the ability to establish contact" (256-7)

an afterlife, without the prescribed dicta of a doctrinaire Church, without the comfort of metaphysics or even a confidence in serum, Rieux believes ardently that during times of catastrophe, be it war or plague, be the enemy fifth columns or totalitarians or bacilli, people come together to help each other. They share the struggle. "We learn in a time of pestilence," remarks Rieux, "there are more things to admire in men than to despise" (271). For Rieux, and Camus, therein lies perhaps at its best the destiny of being human.

Chapter 6
Angels in America

Influenza was the last of the classical pestilences; AIDS, both unpredicted and unpredictable within the framework of the old nosology, is the first of the postmodern plagues.—Mirko Grmek, *The History of AIDS*

“Nor am I so obstinate and foolish as to imagine that because I am master of my own will, I can control fortune of which I am not master.”
—A Syracuse Leader (Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, 4.64)

“It’s 1986 and there’s a *plague*, half my friends are dead and I’m only thirty-one . . .”—Walter Prior, in *Angels in America*

Early in 1981 a lot of young, previously healthy men were dying of mysterious causes, especially in New York and San Francisco. For the most part they were homosexual men, and before it was named AIDS, the unexpected, new, and swiftly fatal affliction that visited America in the latter twentieth century became known as the gay plague.¹¹⁴ By 1985 AIDS had reached two Off-Broadway theaters. Larry Kramer’s *The Normal Heart* opened at the Public Theater in April, and in May William S. Hoffman’s *As Is*, which the Circle Repertory Company had staged in March, would transfer to the Lyceum Theatre on Broadway. Numerous more AIDS texts would follow, even as the plague continued increasingly to devastate primarily, but hardly exclusively, the gay

¹¹⁴ Thirty years later, in January 2011, calling a plague a plague—“numerically, statistically and by any definition known to modern public health, though no one in authority has the guts to call it one”—gay rights activist, co-founder of Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC) and founder of ACT UP, Larry Kramer declared further, in a special report for the “Anderson Cooper 360” blog at CNN, that AIDS, because it affects mostly “gay people and people of color,” is a plague that “was allowed to happen” (1/14/2011 ac360.blogs.cnn.com).

community. While the cause of AIDS, the retrovirus HIV, had been determined in 1983, no hope for effective treatment appeared until 1987 with the Federal Drug Administration's approval of AZT, a drug that in time would prove to be neither an effective deterrent nor a cure. In 1986, however, news of the drug, which had been placed in highly selective placebo-controlled trials, held for thousands upon thousands of men with AIDS the promise of life. Possibility sits in the phrase "[o]ne-hundred-proof elixir vitae" (189), as AZT is dubbed in the "Gay Fantasia" that made theater history when, after two years of development and performance in Los Angeles and San Francisco as well as London, in two parts and seven hours it arrived at the Walter Kerr Theatre on Broadway in 1993: Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*.¹¹⁵

Set in New York's autumn of 1985 and winter of 1986 (with an epilogue dated February 1990), Kushner's epic postmodern play explores the pathology of plague as it parses the destinies of two men afflicted by AIDS: one the WASP heritor of a family history riddled with pestilence, the fictive Prior Walter; the other the real-life Roy Cohn, a political careerist instrumental in shaping America's social history in the red-baiting McCarthy era, most notably as the assistant United States attorney in the trial that won the conviction and execution of the Rosenbergs on grounds of treason. Although Prior and Cohn never actually meet each other in the course of the play's eight acts in two parts (the first, in three acts, *Millennium Approaches*; the second, in five, *Perestroika*), at one

¹¹⁵ *Millennium Approaches*, part one of the play, was workshopped at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles in May 1990 before its world premiere a year later in San Francisco by the Eureka Theatre Company; it opened at the Royal National Theatre of Great Britain in January 1992. *Perestroika* was presented as a stage reading by the Eureka Theatre Company in May 1991 before being workshopped in May 1992 at the Mark Taper Forum, where it premiered the following November; in November 1993 the Royal National Theatre staged its production of the play in London. In April 1993 *Millennium Approaches* opened in New York at the Walter Kerr Theatre; that same month *Perestroika* was presented by the New York University/Tisch School of the Arts, and in November 1993 it too opened on Broadway, where it played in repertory with *Millennium Approaches*.

point near the end of the play that Kushner has subtitled *A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*—Prior is escaping the godless heaven, and death, that he has envisioned in delirium, while Cohn, in the feverish and hallucinatory final stage of his disease, is racing toward death and eternity—the two men’s dreams, more like meteors than ships, pass each other in the night.

Throughout the play, however, in the juxtaposition of the drag artist Prior Walter’s and power monger Roy Cohn’s stories lies a dialogue, as each in his own way confronts his destiny and deals with its effects—Prior embracing his homosexuality and coping openly with the gay plague, Cohn braying homophobia and denying his doctor’s unequivocal diagnosis. Both men half create what they perceive,¹¹⁶ and pursue, in that they themselves construct the destiny that they confront. The Angel, who at the end of part one appears to Prior in a doomful fever dream (she bears a remarkable resemblance to the nurse in the emergency room), will give Prior’s destiny, or destination, a name: Zion. “There is No Zion Save Where You Are” (179), she will declare with what proves to be characteristic ambiguity, for her statement implies he has already found what he would seek or is where he would be (when in the messy real world of sex and politics and plague he clearly hasn’t and isn’t). Zion, of course, has always been more than a place. In the Bible it not only refers to Jerusalem but also to God’s “holy hill” (Psalms 2:6), “the holy habitation of the Most High” (Psalms 46:4), and a “sanctuary like the high heavens” (Psalms 78:67); it is an idea, a metaphor for a state of being—it affords its aspirant protection, security, peace. Zion, too, is the idea of America, a new world where the

¹¹⁶The language here is borrowed from William Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” wherein the poet speaks of “all that we behold / . . . the mighty world / Of eye, and ear—both what they half create, / And what perceive . . .” (ll. 104–8).

brave and adventurous can begin materially and spiritually anew, as Prior Walter's forebears claimed to do. Three centuries later, gay and sick and maybe dying, the last of their long genealogical line continues their quest, their Zion becoming his Bethesda, not just in the face of death but in the fact of a be-Reaganited nation as well.

"You come with me to room 1013 over at the hospital, I'll show you America. Terminal, crazy and mean" (228), says Belize, the dying Roy Cohn's (gay, black, male) nurse. For the right-wing conservative power broker Roy Cohn is at once the victim and epitome of the terminally ill political culture he represents. Facing disbarment and death, to his last breath and hallucination, Roy Cohn will continue to blackmail, spasm, scream, endure immeasurable pain, and strive to reverse decades-old New Deal policies, not to mention banish the avenging ghost of Ethel Rosenberg. Whereas Prior's delirium produces an angel whom he meets with mordant wit and satiric eye, Roy Cohn finds himself dealing with a demon of his worst imaginings.¹¹⁷ Convicted of treason and, largely through Cohn's efforts, sentenced to death by electrocution, Cohn's Ethel denies him any hope of redemption by reputation or by history; she would sentence him to no less than hell (and he would perhaps find himself aptly in his element).¹¹⁸ The agent of

¹¹⁷ That an angel and a demon appear in the hallucinatory dreams of Prior and Cohn as agents of destiny owes something to the ancient tradition of dream literature in which a dreamer is visited by figures acting often as instruments of fate. It recalls, for one, the early Middle Ages Roman philosopher Boethius (*ca.* 480–525), whose *The Consolation of Philosophy*—a contemplation on the vicissitudes of Dame Fortune (it was written in prison where Boethius was awaiting execution) presented in the form of a dream dialogue with Dame Philosophy—enjoyed especial revival ten centuries later in medieval England, in the translation by Geoffrey Chaucer. Steven F. Kruger notes in *Dreaming in the Middle Ages* that "in an autobiography like that of Guibert de Nogent (c. 1115) dreams and visions appear especially at pivotal points in the history of the self, when the whole course of life comes under reexamination" (151). In the cases of both Prior and Cohn, AIDS indeed alters the course of their lives and prompts the sort of reexamination that extends into their dream life as well; their fever dreams (dramatically staged) further reshape the elements of their concerns in the face of plague, as Prior, confronting an uncertain future, ventures into prophecy and Cohn, obsessed with political legacy, revisits history.

¹¹⁸ As Roy Cohn's dream fades with him into death, his hospital room hosts a momentarily slightly less unforgiving Ethel who assists Louis Ironson (Prior's former partner) in reciting the Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the soul of the dead. Nor is Louis in a forgiving mood; he is merely stalling for time while Belize

his unwanted yet ineluctable destiny, Ethel waits primly by his hospital bed while he, pathologically in denial even as he brokers deals to obtain the antiretroviral drug azidothymidine (AZT), suffers the death pangs of plague and rants against his thwarted political ambitions. He will be disbarred; and he will die, no less by the disease he defies than by the sexuality he as vehemently denies. His sexuality delivered him to the moral panic that for forty years has increasingly steeled the political opportunist's persona and eroded his personal identity.¹¹⁹ At once encrypted and unrepressed, as commanding as it is repellant to him, and very inopportune, Cohn's sexuality has made of him a monster in a three-piece suit. Or a hospital gown.

The monster rails in nightmares of his own devising. A man of power, the self-determined Cohn has carved out a career in right-wing conservative politics by imposing his will upon his political and, more fundamentally, his sexual destiny. He may lack vision, but he does not want for stratagems, angles, or gambits. Having learnt, when his dream passed Prior's in the night, of the angels' intent to "[s]ue the bastard" (264), i.e., God, for abandoning them, as Prior advised, the readily opportunistic Cohn applies to the "King of the Universe" (274) for the job. That Cohn's demon, Ethel, acts out of vengeful self-interest in meting out punishment upon him merely reflects Cohn's selfsame disposition. He constructs his destiny out of his own criminally psychological DNA. Yet he, for all

locates Cohn's stash of AZT. The irony should not be lost in the apparent sentiment of the theatrical moment—Kushner himself considers it to be the play's "most moving scene" (*Tony Kushner in Conversation*, 228). In Menippean satire the language can change from comic to serious in a word, or can be both at the same moment. Ethel and Louis end their prayer with the epithet "You sonofabitch" (257).

¹¹⁹ Jeffrey Weeks asserts in *Sexuality and its discontents*: "Sexuality is a fertile source of moral panic, arousing intimate questions about personal identity, and touching on crucial boundaries. The erotic acts as a crossover point for a number of tensions whose origins are elsewhere: of class, gender and racial location, of intergenerational conflict, moral acceptability and medical definition. This is what makes sex a particular site of ethical and political concern—and of fear and loathing." (44). Gayle Rubin discusses more fully the subject of moral panic in her essay "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," particularly pp. 297-300.

his monstrous power, fails in his attempts to subvert his demon's mission, whereas the man of genius,¹²⁰ Prior—a drag artist who thus willingly surrenders his own identity to that of another; a pliable, sympathetic man who acts in rather than upon his political and sexual destiny—resists the doom the Angel in his vision would visit unto him. She may speak metaphysics and issue dicta as old as the Judeo-Christian hills, but Prior is quite up to arguing them. For Prior, centuries-old metaphysical constructs of destiny—whatever comfort they may have afforded Defoe's H. F., Manzoni's Don Ferrante, or Camus's Fr. Paneloux in facing plague—have by 1985 become timeworn if not entirely absurd. Certainly they afford Prior Walter no reason to die. Resignation is not in his repertoire.

Hope, on the other hand, is. In the epilogue to the play, set in Central Park at the Bethesda Fountain with its statuesque angel, Prior will assume the role he assigned to the Angel in his delirium. His personal destiny redefined, he will become a prophet for an age of AIDS, and his message will supplant her doom with his hope. So, too, will his vision extend hope to the possibilities, in a time of plague, of reconceiving and constructing anew the destiny of the politically and socially, religiously and racially, multifariously complex, frequently benighted, and continually changing nation that is postmodern America.¹²¹ For plague takes politics beyond the self-interests of Jews or

¹²⁰ In a letter to Benjamin Bailey dated November 22, 1817, the Romantic poet John Keats speaks of "Genius and the Heart," noting that "Men of Genius are great as certain ethereal Chemicals operating on the Mass of neutral intellect—[but] they have not any individuality, any determined Character." Such men of genius and sympathy are distinguished from "the top and head of those who have a proper self [,] Men of Power."

¹²¹ Kushner remarks that he has "a kind of dangerously romantic reading of American history," which "has been, in a way, an improvisation of hastily assembled groups that certainly have never been together before and certainly have a lot of trouble being together, but who recognize that our destiny is not going to be a racial destiny. Anyone who thinks that completely self-interested politics is going to get you anywhere in America is making a terrible mistake." Decrying a politics of hate, be its source Louis Farrakhan's Nation of Islam, anti-Semitism, or ACT UP, he avers, "People who don't recognize common cause are going to fail politically in this country. Movements that capture the imagination of people are movements that deny racism and exclusion. The country is too mongrel to do otherwise." (*Tony Kushner in Conversation*, 16).

WASPs or Mormons or Muslims or blacks or gays (no doubt significantly, in the epilogue, the WASP Prior is standing in communion with his leftist, Jewish erstwhile partner Louis Ironson, the black male nurse and drag queen Belize, and the ministrant Mormon Hannah Pitt). Plague gives to all common cause, which could one day deliver a divided nation to community.

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Angels in America: Millennium Approaches comes to a striking close, when, in a true coup de théâtre, the previously announced Angel crashes noisily through the ceiling of the feverish Prior Walter's bedroom. The wreckage is only apparent, however, as she is but the product of a plague-ridden man's imagination and she's actually crashing into Prior's delirium. Therein she will deliver to him, with considerable swagger and blunderbuss, what amounts essentially to a death sentence. Sententious and stentorian, as blustery in style as she is scant in substance, the Angel will in due course prove herself to be not just a questionable messenger but also something of a joke. For Prior Walter does not want for a sense of humor, or of destiny.

Indeed, the destiny of the Walter family has been played out repeatedly in history, at least since the eleventh century when the Walters migrated from France to England, and from plague to plague, and more plague, down to the eighteenth century when they fled the Old World for the New. If the family lost many a Prior to pestilence on both sides of the Atlantic, many another Walter also survived the epidemics, obviously, to produce more Walters, with more than a few Priors among them, until the 1980s. Nine centuries have now reduced the long-wandering Walter family to a lone Prior in New York City: a gay man, himself without progeny; the heritor and survivor of his family's

plague history—that survival seriously threatened by the specter of AIDS. With the HIV retrovirus daily reducing all medical measures to inefficacy, and with the success story of the medical cocktails enlisted in the combat against AIDS yet to be written, Prior Walter hardly needs an Angel to pronounce his doom. For months he has been living under a death sentence. It is what Prior Walters do, apparently.

Before the Angel makes her spectacular entrance at the end of *Millennium*, Prior's delirium is invaded by two heralds. Otherworldly emissaries who will announce to him the Angel's imminent, purposed visitation—"We've been sent to declare her fabulous incipience" (93)—they take the shape of two ancestral Prior Walters, identified in the text simply as Prior 1 and Prior 2. The former a thirteenth-century British squire in Northumbria and the latter an elegantly attired Londoner well born in the seventeenth century, they chart in their twentieth-century descendant's dream dialogue the destinies of the Prior Walters through the millennium, from 1066, at least. Louis has remarked earlier that the name Prior Walter appears in the Bayeux Tapestry, which depicts the events that produced the Norman Conquest; and Prior confirms the lineage with Prior 1, who states that he is the Norman's "great-great-grandson."¹²² The fifth of the name" (92).¹²³ (Prior notes that he himself is the thirty-fourth, if they're counting two bastards.)

In light of the family history Prior appears less to be distinguished by the fact of being stricken by plague than to be destined to it. By comparison, too, he might even consider himself fortunate, if one considers historically the degree of affliction: "The

¹²² Of course Prior 1's claim is sound only in the dream. Furthermore, the given that the name Prior Walter appears in the Bayeux tapestry is but a fictive component of the play's literary reality, as is the historical "fact" that a Prior Walter arrived in America on the *Mayflower*. Kushner's fantasia freely makes fact of fiction; it also extends to Prior in his fever dreams a similar if more extravagant freedom of invention. In that, Kushner may be reflecting the spirit of invention that typifies much of America's actual history.

¹²³ For a more in-depth discussion of the Prior Walters and their lineage, see Allen J. Frantzen's excellent essay "Prior to the Normans: The Anglo-Saxons in *Angels in America*."

pestilence in my time,” says Prior 1, not entirely without fancy, “was much worse than now. Whole villages of empty houses. You could look outdoors and see Death walking in the morning, dew dampening the ragged hem of his black robe. Plain as I see you now” (92). The plague that decimated thirteenth-century England and claimed his life Prior 1 calls “the spotty monster” and Prior 2 notes that it was caused by fleas, whereas “Black Jack,” which carried off half the city of London in the seventeenth century and with it Prior 2, “came from a water pump . . . can you imagine?” (93). Prior 2 observes further, referring to the dream’s host, “Yours, I understand, is the lamentable consequence of venery . . .” (93) That it is, however, is a simple matter of fact, not a judgment; for both ancestral Priors—both of them being the invention of the dreamer Prior—the cause of plague bears no moral stigma, nor do its effects evidence retribution, divine or otherwise. A virus has no morals, and while its potential victims may in time, as advances are made in the science of its contagion, take preventive measures and practice caution, chance can still make of any sexual or social act a lamentable consequence. “In a family as long descended as the Walters there are bound to be a few carried off by plague” (93), notes the plainspoken Prior 2, hinging chance to inevitability and destiny to a microbe.

A deadly viral or bacterial microbe can no doubt alter what its sufferer perceives as a personal destiny, said destiny often being redefined in terms of the disease and the death immanent in it (although the disease and death together may be—but are not, by the three Priors—variously viewed as the punitive consequence of divine displeasure or moral anomie or inordinate venery). Prior’s ancestors, however, are no more fatalistic in regard to his destiny than they are moralistic; and Prior himself, while admittedly “afraid” of dying, hardly considers the prospect of it with resignation. This is his dream, after all,

and the figures conjured by his feverish imagination come not to torment but to encourage him. “There’s good news before there’s bad” (93), says Prior 2, and near jubilantly addresses the thirty-fourth to bear their name as “Prophet. Seer. Revelator” (94). That moment redefines Prior’s destiny; it’s almost biblical, for he’s certainly not the first wanderer to discover the gift of prophecy in a dream.¹²⁴

As they vanish, Priors 1 and 2 admonish the ailing Prophet to prepare for the appearance of the angelic Messenger—“Prepare, prepare, / The Infinite Descent, / A breath, a feather, / Glory to . . .” (95)—which will end part one of *Angels in America*. In part two of the play, *Perestroika*, Prior will relate to Belize the substance of his dream encounter with the Angel, which is recreated on stage in Act II, Scene 2, as a dynamic, wide-ranging, half absurdist, satirically ideational, humorous, and often very loud (for angels evidently are) dialogue.

As it happens, Prior is not prepared for the Angel when she so boisterously intrudes upon his dream. “I have lots to do” (170), he protests, as might any man being called unto death at a moment he considers to be inopportune, and he pleads with her to leave. Ill-prepared though he may be, Prior has been expecting at least a metaphorical version of her for four months, since October, when the first sign of Kaposi’s sarcoma appeared like a love bite on his arm, only in this instance the mark of the kiss, the K.S.,

¹²⁴ The Old Testament of course hosts the awakening of more than a few prophets—for instance, Samuel, whose mother was named Hannah, as is Prior’s surrogate mother, Hannah Pitt—but for a more latterly dreamer-prophet and wanderer there is the American-bred Joseph Smith, the father of Mormonism. Moreover, Prior shares not only in the tradition of Latter-Day American and Old Testament prophets but also that of at least one ancient Greek seer, Tiresias, who figures prominently in the first great plague drama, *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Like Tiresias, Prior is “going blind, as prophets do” (109), as David Savran points out in his essay “Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism.” More significantly, like Tiresias who for seven years was changed into a woman, Prior aspires on occasion to the attributes of the female sex, albeit in drag. It is during one of his drag moments that he is able to reveal to Harper that her husband, Joe Pitt (who betrays her with Prior’s ex, Louis) “is a homo” (39).

prefigured death: “K.S., baby,” Prior tells Louis, who will in few weeks later desert his afflicted partner: “Lesion number one. Lookit. The wine-dark kiss of the angel of death” (27). The figurative angel of death that haunts Prior in the unbearably real world of plague, then, assumes the shape of the bodily Angel in the dream world he frequently inhabits in the course of the play. She is, too, an angel as well as a messenger of death, death being a matter of some ambiguity in the pronouncements she offers Prior, whom she greets and insistently addresses as “Prophet”—insistently enough that he will begin to believe he is a prophet indeed. And not just in the dream: Three weeks later, when he recounts the dream¹²⁵ to Belize, Prior will say to him, without flippancy or irony, “I’m a prophet,” and by way of explanation add, “I’ve been given a prophecy. A book. Not a *physical* book, or there was one but they took it back, but somehow there’s still this book. In me. A prophecy. It . . . really happened” (169). Prior will have wed himself to the destiny his ancestral Priors foretold.

In the dream itself Prior becomes, as the Angel proclaims in a parting epithet, “Vessel of the BOOK” (180), the instrument of prophecy. “On you in you in your blood we have written: / STASIS! / The END” (180). So it would appear that the end of Prior’s mission is to help the heavens effect the apocalyptic “END” of humankind, for in stasis awaits decay and death. The Angel thus would enlist him in the devices of his own destruction; in her arrival and in his submission to the will of heaven “The Great Work Begins” (170), as she announces at the outset of the dream. For sure, in the Angel’s

¹²⁵ Significantly, ecstatically, it is a wet dream, and in it Prior “hump[s] the Book,” which comprises the Sacred Prophetic Implements—an act that metonymically constitutes his sexual intercourse with the Angel: They conjoin in “Plasma Orgasmata” (174). It puts Joseph Smith’s vision in a whole new “LUMEN PHOSPHOR FLUOR CANDLE!” (170), as the Angel describes her emanative light; she lapses into Latin frequently, and appropriately, it being a dead language.

construct of destiny, the end is in the beginning, and there is little hope, a lot of casuistry, and some nonsense in between.

The Angel is especially fond of speaking in the upper case, as if she can make up in rhetorical emphasis what she lacks in divine intelligence. But, then, she is only a messenger, not an author; she is merely repeating the words that she delivers—words that she herself has not imagined and formulated into grandiose ideas. Furthermore, in the absence of the divine author—God, “The Aleph Glyph from Which all Words Descend” (177), has abandoned the heavens¹²⁶—the message has long wanted emendation. Set in stone, so to speak (actually, the Sacred Prophetic Implements are set in steel), and unaltered since God decamped on April 18, 1906, the day of the great San Francisco earthquake, the message stands as the relic of an authoritarian nineteenth-century deity. And its medium, the clamorous antediluvian Angel, is often wont to fracture its already questionable relevance into incoherence. (Then, too, this is the language of a dream, a dream probably enhanced by the drug pentamidine, at that.) Inflated by her Old Testament rhetorical style, the message is at the same time deflated by her angelically mindless regard for its authority and for what, in the shifting ground of Kushner’s Menippean satire, proves to be meager substance. Angels, like “incredibly powerful bureaucrats,” have “no imagination,” Prior explains to Belize, “they can *do* anything but they can’t invent, create, they’re sort of fabulous and dull all at once” (175). For all the awe and fear the Angel in Prior’s dream may inspire, in the play’s literary reality hers are mock-heroics.

¹²⁶ Aleph, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, also signifies the number 1000; thus it appears commonly in millennialist texts to mark the end of days. That the Aleph Glyph, the Word and origin of all words, has abandoned heaven does not bode well for the angels, now brinking on apocalypse and maybe facing incipient aphasia.

Abandoned by a God who, for her, existed to be adored,¹²⁷ the Angel conflates the language of the absent and lost “King of the Universe” (171) with that of her own emotional distress as she projects angelic discontent into a cry for apocalypse: not by fire or famine or war or plague, but by stasis. Indeed, rather than announcing to the dreamer-prophet a divine purpose to punish an immoral world with plague, she puts forth a proposal by which plague would be obliterated from the earth, with barely a nod at the fact that so too would any of its potential victims along with everyone and -thing else. The Angel’s rationale for stasis both as an end (for Prior as prophet) and “The END” (for Prior as humankind) is lodged casuistically in her presumption that the human race—not just the genus *Homo sapiens* but also humanity’s ceaselessly aspirant race forward (“YOU *Think*. And You *IMAGINE!*” [176]) in and against a world defined by time—is responsible for God’s desertion from the heavens and disappearance on earth. “In YOU the Virus of TIME began!” she declares, or accuses, and with time came, in the words of Prior’s gloss for Belize, “a potential in the design for change, for random event, for movement forward” (175). Time, then, for the Angel, is the virus that must be expunged, and with it the accompanying plague of progress—“Migration. Science. Forward Motion” (176)—that, like an earthquake, has seismically unsettled the once perfect, eternal design of the angels’ celestial San Francisco. Inverting the divine order of things, God became “Bored with His Angels, Bewitched by Humanity” and began imitating man, “his least creation,” by “sail[ing] off on Voyages, no knowing where” (176-7), until that fateful day of the earthly San Francisco’s earthquake when he never again returned.

¹²⁷ The dream does not want for psychology in its origin, for just as the Angel has been abandoned by God so has Prior been abandoned by Louis, whom he adored and whose intellect he found staggering. Belize, in fact, makes the analogical connection when the subject of God’s flight from heaven and desertion of the Angel is explored: “I smell a motif. The man that got away” (177).

So it is that God's absence is the fault of man, of whom he became enamored and for whom he abandoned heaven. The Angel emphatically, in caps *and* italics, voices her accusation against humanity—"YOU HAVE DRIVEN HIM AWAY!"—before presenting the imperative whereby the untenable situation in heaven and the condition of plague on earth would be remedied and reversed: "YOU MUST STOP MOVING!" (178)

More softly, the Angel elaborates: "Forsake the Open Road: / Neither Mix Nor Intermarry: Let Deep Roots Grow: / If you do not MINGLE you will Cease to Progress" (178). While her admonishments may be applicable to forestalling the progress of plague, her concerns have more to do with the plague of progress. For centuries, as Prior imagined in the dream discourse with Priors 1 and 2, thirty-four generations of Prior Walters have been wandering across continents and across oceans; for centuries they have been carrying with them the very disease, be it bubonic or politic, they were attempting to flee. For as long and longer so have countless other families been willy-nilly doing the same thing, and so will they continue to do, as if in progress and progeny lay destiny. Indeed, in the nineteenth century American politicians made a platform of Manifest Destiny to justify expansionism in the West, which, by presumed divine sanction, effected the massive displacement of one people, native Americans, and the relocation of mostly white, generically Anglo-Saxon others. Migration, whether to cries of "Westward ho!" in America's 1840s or in hopes of religious freedom on a *Mayflower* bound for a New World in 1620, can hardly be divorced from human history.¹²⁸ Nor can

¹²⁸ The expedition of the *Mayflower* from England to Plymouth in Massachusetts Bay Colony realized for the Puritan Separatists who made the voyage their dream of religious freedom: God had delivered them to the New World, a Promised Land, as had, in a biblical parallel, Joshua and the Israelites been delivered safely to Canaan after their flight from Egypt. Then, too, just as Israel by divine dispensation seized the "promised" land from the Canaanites, so did the American colonists encroach by God's will upon the territories of the indigenous peoples. Indeed, in 1783, after the destruction of an Indian village by troops under the command of George Washington, the theologian Dr. Ezra Stiles, describing the general as the

motion from the condition of being human. Nor can emotion, although the Angel would also have humans stop being moved to procreate or to mingle, mix, or intermarry. Certainly the elimination of sexual congress would do much to halt the progress of AIDS, which is commonly transmitted by the exchange of bodily fluids; it would also halt reproduction. Terminating the long, bacterial- and viral-infected course of plague's history, then, is merely and absurdly, worthlessly, collateral to the Angel's true purpose, which is to reverse the destiny conceived by humans to lie in progress and progeny. She would have her absent God's creation be rid of a plague perpetrated by humans being, in which was born the virus time. She would return the world to eternity. The Angel's solution vis-à-vis humans is final.

Her patience has been expended. Again addressing the wanderlust and rootlessness that have checkered the Prior Walters' family history and that have figured mythically in the stories of America's explorers and pioneers, she commands, "HOBBLE YOURSELVES!" and adds, as rationale, "There is No Zion Save Where You Are!" (179). In the idea of Zion as a sanctuary for God's blessed peoples was engendered the myth of the second chance that set many a Pilgrim and adventurer on a quest for a realization of that idea in a New Jerusalem or New Eden, or the New World. It lent a

"American Joshua," declared that "never was the possession of arms used with more glory or for a better cause since the days of Joshua." Stiles's metaphor of America as the "modern Israel" was not uncommon in the pulpits and pamphlets of the young republic, and the white settlers by God's entitlement seized the lands of the native Indians. The same reasoning justified the westward expansion in the 1800s; it was called Manifest Destiny. See Ezra Stiles, "The United States Elevated to Glory and Honour," (88).

The West attracted founder of the Latter Day Saints Joseph Smith as well. In the 1830s he moved his church from Kirtland, Ohio, to Jackson, Missouri, where he set out to build a New Jerusalem. In her biography of the Prophet of Mormon, Fawn M. Brodie notes: "With the mercantile firms bankrupt, the steam mills silent, and land values sinking to an appalling low, Kirtland was fast disintegrating. Those Saints who had means were moving to Missouri, not only because it spelled Zion, but also because it was west, in which direction hope in America was always bent" (205). As well as David Savran's essay, "Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism: How *Angels in America* Reconstructs the Nation," especially his section titled The American Religion, see Klaus J. Hansen's *Mormonism and the American Experience*.

spiritual dimension to the material measure of apparently unstoppable human progress. Thus would the Angel have humans hobbled, literally and figuratively; to stop the unstoppable, she would have their spiritual impetus physically crippled—she would stifle the human impulse to move, to reproduce, to think, to imagine, to create, and she would obliterate all its earthly manifestations. Yet her declaration that Zion is wherever you are, by which premise she would argue her case for hobblement, initially sounds cogent, in its assertion that Zion is not so much a place as it is a state of being: the destination of an inward quest rather than an outward journey. The premise would appear to lend logic to admonitions like “Forsake the Open Road” and “Let Deep Roots Grow”; ultimately, though, she would have the road closed and the roots bound. For stasis is a state neither of growing nor of being; rather, it is a state of paralysis, stagnation, decay—and “STASIS!” unquestionably is the Angel’s aim. Even before she so vehemently announces it, Prior perceives the speciousness, intentional or not, in the argument of this “mixed-up, reactionary angel”: “Stop moving. That’s what you want,” he says. “You want me dead” (179). Certainly, but not malevolently—the stage directions indicate that “she touches him, tenderly,” “cradl[es] him with one arm,” “gently, lovingly lowers [him] to the ground” (180)—she wants him, as humanity, as good as dead, his spirit crippled, paralytic. As if he may already be, before her ascent out of Prior’s dream she addresses him with a final, Latinate epithet, “Oh Exemplum Paralyticum” (180).¹²⁹

¹²⁹ Facing her audience on stage and in the theater, the Angel, her wings extended, exits Prior’s dream in backward flight. Regarding the conception of the Angel in the play, Kushner acknowledges his debt to a drawing by Paul Klee titled “Angelus Novus,” which Walter Benjamin in “Theses on the Philosophy of History” views as “the angel of history”: “His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread . . . His face is turned toward the past,” writes Benjamin, and in that past, in the “chain of events” that “we perceive” as history, the angel, aghast, “sees one single catastrophe.” So does Kushner’s Angel, and so would she obliterate the history of the human race and return angelic being to a heavenly, preparadisiacal state. “But,” as Benjamin asserts in the Ninth of his Theses, “a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly

It is a destiny Prior cannot live with. No matter that the Angel may try, perhaps unwittingly, to sweeten her death sentence for mankind in Zion with an allusion to the film version of *The Wizard of Oz*, which gave gay America Judy Garland as Dorothy:¹³⁰ “If you Cannot find your Heart’s desire . . .” the Angel begins, quoting Dorothy, and the Garland aficionado and friend of Dorothy, Prior, continues, “In your own backyard . . .” then, with his fellow drag artist Belize as well as the Angel joining in, finishes, “You never lost it to begin with” (179). But any comfort the line may hold for Prior is cold, for by the Angel’s rationale the epiphany obviates the necessity of the trip—it reduces the adventure in Oz to an apothegm: It plants man in his own backyard. Contrary, then, to the Angel’s peremptory behest that Prior, the Prophet, pass on to “THIS AGE OF ANOMIE: A NEW LAW!” (182), Prior the prophet resists. “I believe,” he tells Belize, “I’ve seen the end of things. And having seen, I’m going blind, as prophets do” (182), if, in the thirty-one-year-old Prior’s case, like that of many young men dying in the plague in 1986 (arguably, an age of anomie), blind from AIDS-related cytomegalovirus. Heroically, as his resistance to the disease that would deliver him to death is daily depleted, he resists. “I hate heaven,” Prior asserts in the final line of *Perestroika*’s Act II, Scene 2. “I’ve got no resistance left. Except to run” (182). The prophet born of the plague will not stop moving.

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propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of [historical] debris grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress” (*Illuminations*, 257).

¹³⁰ Allusions to Judy Garland, a particular favorite among gay drag artists (no less because her funeral coincided with the Stonewall riots in September 1969), are subsumed throughout the text. Belize, for instance, in the discussion of God’s abandonment alludes to the Harold Arlen song “The Man That Got Away,” famously sung by Garland in the film *A Star Is Born*. Equally famous is her Carnegie Hall concert rendition of “San Francisco,” originally sung by Jeanette MacDonald in the movie of the same name, which treats the Great San Francisco Earthquake of April 18, 1906.

Contemplating “what the angels think,” especially in view of God’s abandonment, not without some nostalgia of his own Prior explains to Belize, “It’s all gone too far, too much loss is what they think, we should stop somehow, go back” (178). Belize objects: “But that’s not the way the world works, Prior. It only spins forward” (178). Belize’s assertion will become key to Prior’s prophecy, which will be delivered in the play’s epilogue, titled “Bethesda” and dated February 1990,¹³¹ by when Prior has been not dying of but “living with AIDS for five years” (278).

With his one-time partner and once-again friend, Louis, and Belize, and a “noticeably different” (277) Hannah Pitt—she has shed her Utah Mormon manner and now looks every bit a New Yorker—Prior, heavily layered against the winter and using a cane, is visiting his “favorite place in New York City. No, in the whole universe” (278): the Bethesda Fountain in Central Park. Not unusually, Louis and Belize are arguing international politics, particularly the global implications of Mikhail Gorbachev’s Perestroika—“It’s the end of the Cold War! The whole world is changing!” enthuses Louis (277)—while the very much changed Hannah assumes the role of conciliator; but Prior is more interested in the eight-foot bronze angel who rises out of the fountain’s upper basin, it upon a pedestal with elaborately carved cherubim. It’s the way Prior has come to favor angels: “I like them best when they’re statuary,” he tells the audience, and here, as in most of the epilogue, he is addressing the audience in the theater, not his audience on stage. “They commemorate death but they suggest a world without dying. They are made of the heaviest things on earth, stone and iron, they weigh tons but they’re winged, they are engines and instruments of flight” (279). Winged and weighted in bronze, the Bethesda angel is at once earthbound and sky-borne. She stands colossally

¹³¹ In the text, however, Prior says, “It’s January 1990” (278).

silent in her story and her paradoxes; though frozen in motion she is forever in motion, her foot having always just touched the ground from which a fountain will spring. And in the dead of a New York winter, when the fountain is turned off because ice would burst the pipes, she holds the promise of summer, when the waters will flow again.

She graces a fountain that takes its name from ancient Jerusalem's healing waters of Bethesda, which in Hebrew means "house of mercy." It was at Bethesda, in the Gospel according to St. John 5:2-9, that Jesus "made whole" again a man who had borne an infirmity for thirty-eight years,¹³² although Louis and Belize do not include this biblical detail when called upon by Prior to relate to the play's audience the ancient fountain's history: how the angel descended and, where her foot struck the earth, brought forth the fountain; how the waters of the fountain healed the spiritual anguish or physical suffering of anyone who walked through them; how the fountain ran dry when the Romans destroyed the Second Temple. Hannah then casts her eye upon the future, upon the Millennium—"Not the year two thousand, but the Capital M Millennium" (279), Prior clarifies—when "[t]he fountain of Bethesda will flow again. And I told him [Prior]," the ministrant, maternal, Mormon Hannah tells the audience, "I would personally take him there to bathe. We will all bathe ourselves clean" (279). What they do not do, not Hannah or Louis or even the flamboyant Belize, as they join Prior in the delivery of his prophecy is lade their words with ambiguity or shrink from epiphany in camp allusion to a Judy Garland movie or song or disguise hope in banter and hide conviction in wit.

Louis does qualify Hannah's promise of a pilgrimage to Bethesda, saying, "Not literally in Jerusalem, I mean we don't want this to have sort of Zionist implications"

¹³² "Jesus saith unto him, Rise, take up thy bed, and walk. / And immediately the man was made whole, and took up his bed, and walked . . ." (John 5: 8-9)

(279). The comment reflects Louis's asserted support of Palestinian rights, but more importantly to the play's aesthetic construct of destiny, neither would Prior want his prophecy to have any sort of Zionist implications. He has finished with Zion, and with all its implications of paralysis, immobility, stasis, death; it is not where he or his destiny is. In Bethesda he has found an angel he does not have to wrestle with.

At the beginning of *Perestroika*'s Act V, set four years before the epilogue, in thunder and flame, "dressed in black and look[ing] terrifying" (249), the Angel invades another of Prior's fever dreams and his hospital room, where Hannah has fallen asleep in a bedside chair. Immediately Prior, who had been designated "the Vessel of the BOOK" (180) by the Angel at the end of her visit three weeks before, attempts to return the Book to her: "The Book, whatever you left in me, I won't be its repository, I reject it" (250). She replies with thunderclap, and an alarmed Prior pleads with Hannah for help, Hannah having told him earlier that evening, before the hospital-room dream, that by "scriptural precedent" (239/250) he needed only to reject the vision and the mission the Angel had visited upon him in his previous dream. Of course, as Hannah has also pointed out earlier, a prophet's rejection of his vision may have consequences: He might be fed to a whale, for instance.¹³³ In her advice to Prior in the present dream Hannah draws upon the story of the patriarch Jacob for her biblical example. She tells Prior he must wrestle with the Angel: "Grab her, say 'I will not let thee go except thou bless me!' Then wrestle with her till she gives in"¹³⁴ (250). As Prior wrestles the Angel, he demands as a blessing that the

¹³³ Hannah does not mention Jonah by name in her hospital-room conversation with Prior, in *Perestroika*, Act IV, Scene 6. The Angel, however, does in Act II, Scene 2, when Prior objects to her proposal that he stop moving: "You Can't Outrun your Occupation, Jonah" (179), she says; Prior cannot hide from her any more than Jonah could from God, she avers.

¹³⁴ See Genesis 32: 24-32. Jacob wrestles "a man" until daybreak and even then refuses to let go unless he be blessed. Asked his name, he replies Jacob. "And he [the man] said, Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed. / . . . And he

Angel “Take back your Book. Anti-Migration, that’s so feeble, I can’t believe you couldn’t do better than that, free me, unfetter me, bless me or whatever but I will be let go” (251). As it happens, it is not so simple as that; Prior must “Return the Text to Heaven” (251), the Angel informs him.

He enters the heavenly precincts in drag, or as the stage directions indicate, “in prophet robes reminiscent of Charlton Heston’s Moses drag in *The Ten Commandments*” (252). In his arms he carries the Book of the Anti-Migratory Epistle. More significant perhaps, if less camp, is the picture Prior’s dream presents of heaven, which remains a celestial version of San Francisco, but a San Francisco after the Great Earthquake of 1906. Heaven appears to have only barely survived the “Seismic Catastrophe” that eternally threatens it; it evidences everywhere the disastrous effects of the human progress that lured away the Aleph Glyph, the heavenscape being now riddled with “the Fault Lines of Creation” (176), of which the Angel spoke in the first dream. In the antechamber to the Hall of the Upper Orders, which “looks remarkably like the San Francisco City Hall, with much cracked plaster” (254), Prior is greeted as Prophet by the Angel—now identified as the Angel of America—and escorted to the Council Room of the Continental Principalities, where the Permanent Emergency Council is in session. Again Prior attempts to return the Book and to gain angelic blessing, but the angel Europa would have him, instead, find the blessing in the Book—in “the Tome of Immobility, of respite, of cessation”—albeit the blessing is itself death: “Drink of its bitter water once, Prophet, and never thirst again” (265). Prior, however, holds out for the blessing of life, even in the face of “Apocalypse Descending” (266): “the grim Unfolding

blessed him there. / And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: For I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved” (32: 28-30).

of these Latter Days,” which the Angel of America describes further as the “slow dissolving of the Great Design” and “spiraling apart of the Work of Eternity” (265) until “that last dreadful daybreak” when “morning blisters crimson” and in a “tidal wave of Protean Fire” will the Earth be bared and all life borne away (266). Still Prior insists; “I want more life,” he says, twice (266/267). “*More Life*” (280), too, is the penultimate line of the epilogue; it is the blessing that Prior four years on bestows upon the theater audience at the end of the play.¹³⁵

In the two dreams in which Prior contends with the Angel of America, then, he harbingers his own destiny. He not only rejects the death implicit in the Angel’s vision and mission for him; unblinkingly, in the face of his real world’s own permanent emergency, the AIDS epidemic, he embraces hope and chooses life. He will not before time give to death what death will in time take away. However he may suffer the terrible days of plague at the end of the twentieth century, he will not freely cease to be. He takes example from others who have borne horrors worse than his: “When they’re more spirit than body, more sores than skin, when they’re burned and in agony, when flies lay eggs in the corners of the eyes of their children, they live” (266). Prior’s images of plague here may bear an apocalyptic chill, but they cannot daunt his will to live. His personal vision supersedes that of the Angel, and the mission he designs for his newly realized prophetic self trumps hers for the mortal she calls Prophet. In the Council Room of the Continental Principalities Prior has already laid the Book on the conference table, disowned it, and has divested himself of his prophet’s robes. Shedding the costume of his dream, he

¹³⁵ In his Playwright’s Notes Kushner acknowledges Harold Bloom’s reading of the story of Jacob and the angel (in his introduction to Olivier Revault D’Allonnes’s *Musical Variations on Jewish Thought* as well as his interpretation in *The Book of J*), in which Bloom translates the Hebrew word for “blessing” as “more life” (144).

prepares to meet a destiny he is constructing for the world he shares outside the dream with Louis and Belize, and Hannah, with the many who like him have been stricken by plague and the many who minister to them, and with all the brave, yet-to-be-commemorated dead.

Immobility, respite, cessation—with this lure would the angel Europa have wooed Prior out of life. Likewise, the Angel of America, despite, or deaf to, Prior's life-affirming assertions, would have him count himself among Fortune's darlings: "Let any Being on whom Fortune smiles / Creep away to Death" (266)—and thus be spared the horrors of the impending apocalypse, although, of course, he would actually, in the logic of his dream, be sparing the angels the horrors of apocalyptic collapse in their godless heaven's age of anomie. Unable to imagine, create, change, and grow in the precincts of their godforsaken realm, the hosts of heavenly angels appear to have fallen victim to the very stasis—and consequent apocalypse—that the Angel of America would prescribe, through Prior as Prophet, for humankind. In the convoluted ironies of Prior's dream world, then, the destiny that the angels would visit upon humanity—its message spelled out in the Book of the Anti-Migratory Epistle, also known as the Tome of Immobility—is the destiny that has been, is being, visited upon the angels themselves: Stasis yields apocalypse; the latter days begin to diminish into the end of days. So it is that the dreamer Prior imagines for the angels in heaven the destiny that he himself as the prophet Prior rejects for man on earth. Prior's dream constructs for him a destiny that is essentially a ruse, but by the ruse he is not seduced.

He has, however, in the real world of creature discomforts and disease been spooked by it. He's lost eight pounds, he has difficulty breathing, he's running himself

into the ground. The nurse in the emergency room, not incidentally played by the same actress who plays the Angel, with an authority and words that echo her angelic counterpart in Prior's first dream, prescribes that he "Keep breathing. Stop moving. STAY PUT" (234). Ironically, in his attempt to escape the deadly consequences implicit in the Angel's prescriptive "YOU MUST STOP MOVING!" (178), Prior has been trying compulsively to keep moving and thus endangering, possibly fatally, the already fragile state of his being: "I have been consumed by this ice-cold, razor-blade terror that just shouts and shouts 'Keep moving! Run!' And I've run myself. . . . Into the ground. Right where She said I'd eventually be" (235), he tells Hannah in the emergency room. If in the wake of the first dream the Angel has become something of a demon to Prior, Hannah has become his spiritual guide and something of an exorcist. "An angel is just a belief, with wings and arms that can carry you," Hannah comforts Prior as he prepares himself for the pain and drugs and delirium in another bout of the AIDS-related and often fatal *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia. "It's naught to be afraid of. If it lets you down, reject it. Seek for something new" (237). Which is what he does do in his subsequent dream encounter with the Angel and her cohort Europa. He rejects what the angels would have him believe—and what they would have him believe in: Death.

By the promise in that single, fatal draught from the Tome of Immobility's "bitter water" Prior is not even tempted. And by the time the epilogue brings him to the fountain in Central Park, four years later, he has found far sweeter waters in Bethesda. The statue's bronze wings spread, her arm extended, she is called the Angel of the Waters, as with her hand she is blessing the fountain at her foot, thereby, like the biblical angel of Bethesda, bestowing upon its waters healing powers. That her waters do not flow in

winter does not belie the promise of hope in summer, nor does it therefore deter Prior in his prophetic purpose, in which the statuary serves as a symbol of that hope and the waters as metaphor for hope's instrument. While the site of the fountain takes its name from Bethesda in ancient Jerusalem, it gains its larger significance in Kushner's play from another Bethesda, the city in Maryland where the National Institutes of Health conducts its research and develops resources in the prevention and treatment of human disease. Although by 1990, in its response to the AIDS crisis, the NIH had not produced a cure for the disease or vaccine for the retrovirus—nor has it yet, twenty years later—it had begun to develop drugs that with varying degrees of efficacy halted or inhibited the numerous opportunistic infections AIDS patients then would seemingly endlessly contract. (The cocktail therapy that more effectively treats the disease and diminishes infections did not appear until the end of the decade.) Those drugs are the waters of Prior's Bethesda, and the angel is an institute. She may not offer her supplicants an elixir but she is not without the occasional small miracle, albeit the much coveted (notably, in the play, by Cohn) AZT would prove not to be one. More the elixir to Prior, however, is the perdurable human spirit with which he has indeed been blessed and by which he has been at his pith restored.

By 1990 Hannah has “noticeably” changed; if less noticeably, so has the repentant, now supportive Louis, and Belize, formerly Norman Arriaga, the registered nurse who used to be a drag queen, has long been a master of cosmetics and reinvention (aptly, the actor playing Belize also plays the dream figure Mr. Lies). Prior, though, has been transformed. The stage directions indicate “he has thick glasses on” (277), and he indeed sees the world through new eyes. Whereas the liberal intellectual Louis ardently

asserts, or preaches, that, particularly with Gorbachev's policy of Perestroika, the whole world is changing, "moving ahead"—"That's what politics is," Louis posits: "And only in politics does the miraculous occur" (278)—Prior at once more abstractly and more poignantly perceives the politics of change. While he might readily agree with Louis that politics is change, for Prior the truly significant "moving ahead" lies essentially not in the arena of national experience or international events but in the evolution of the human spirit. Prior's is a vision as profoundly personal in his realization of it as it is universal in its application. A prophet born of a turbulent time, miraculously a survivor of—and with—the plague that has been and "will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all" (280), Prior envisions a future that has already begun to alter the past: "[T]he dead will be commemorated¹³⁶ and will struggle on with the living, and we are not going away. We won't die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come" (280). The new millennium approaches, and its prophet, a Prior transformed, has embraced his destiny. He also embraces destiny.

Human destiny, in Prior's vision, is premised on change, and implicit in the principle of change, as Prior argues it, is progress. "The world only spins forward," in fact and figuratively, for all the attempts of crazy reactionary angels to "go back" (178): in their fervid if futile efforts to reverse the forward course of history and return the world to a prelapsarian stasis. However zealously the angels may vaunt their political platform of immobility, respite, and cessation, Prior resists their persuasion, and his message in the

¹³⁶ Although the Bethesda Fountain was erected to celebrate the purifying of New York City's water supply when the Croton Aqueduct was opened in 1842 (the Angel of the Waters, by the sculptor Emma Stebbins, was completed in 1868 and unveiled in 1873), it is commonly, if erroneously, believed that the monument serves to commemorate the soldiers who died to preserve the Union in the Civil War—a popular notion that would explain Prior's allusion here. Louis more explicitly states earlier in the play, when, on "a stormy cold late-February day" (225) in 1986, he meets Belize at the fountain, that the angel commemorates the "[n]aval dead of the Civil War" (226).

epilogue reflects the contraries of forward movement, labor, and continuance in order to effect change, progress. “The Great Work Begins” (280), Prior announces in the last line of *Perestroika*, which echoes the Angel’s greeting to him on her first appearance at the end of *Millennium Approaches* (125). Prior is by no means speaking ironically, but his quotation is charged with the irony of contrary purpose, for his “Great Work” would continue what the Angel’s would undo. She would fetter man to an antediluvian construct of destiny that fixes humans, and all beings else in God’s created universe, in their predetermined time and designated place, whereas Prior would wed man not to an unalterable design but to a force borne in the continually evolving human spirit. Creative, fluid, destiny is without respite or cessation generating—and thus changing—human history, while at the same time that story is continually giving shape to—and changing the shape of—human destiny. Barring apocalypse, history can no more be finished than destiny can be fixed; they are collaborators in change. Reality is always something about to be. Contemplating the “Great Work” in terms of that proposition, Prior might opine that reality is always something about to be better. For Prior is as much an American prophet as he is a prophet for America, and the spirit of affirmation he demonstrates in the epilogue bears kinship to that of the American transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose essay “On Art” provides the epigraph that precedes *Perestroika*: “Because the soul is progressive, it never quite repeats itself, but in every act attempts the production of a new and fairer whole” (145).

Certainly, not all change is progress, but without change progress is not. In change Prior places his hope not just for medical and political advances in the battle with AIDS but also for relief and recovery from the policies that for six long Reaganite years

have afflicted America. In his own salvation, or reprieve, in a world defined by plague, in his return from the depths of delirium if not from the dead, Prior has realized a “new and fairer,” profoundly sympathetic, even visionary (he can “*Think*,” he can “IMAGINE” [176]), and life-affirming self. He has found cause for hope, and in the Angel of the Waters he gives symbol to that hope. To the theater audience—“fabulous creatures, each and every one” (280)—he gives the blessing and the lesson that he has in Kushner’s gay fantasia so arduously won: “*More Life.*”

*

Roy Cohn has no want of the desire for more life. On the other hand, he has virtually no capacity for change. In fact, not even death can change him. Disbarred on his deathbed, the wheeling-dealing D.C. attorney is of no mind to surrender his license to practice law: “Paternity suit? Abandonment? Family court is my particular *métier*, I’m an absolute fucking demon with Family Law. Just tell me who the judge is, and what kind of jewelry does he like?” (274) So it is that Cohn pitches himself, at this particular moment from “a smoldering pit” somewhere “in Heaven, or Hell or Purgatory” (274), to the King of the Universe; apparently the angels have taken Prior’s advice that they “[s]ue the bastard for walking out” (264). Inveterately litigious beyond the end, “an absolutely fucking demon” indeed (and not only in matters of law), Cohn levels with his potential client—“you ain’t got a case here, you’re guilty as hell, no question”—but the hopelessness of the case is no deterrent: “not to worry, darling, I will make something up” (274). Thus Cohn exits *Perestroika* in Act V’s (optional) Scene 9, the truth still barely incidental to reality as he perceives it.

On the stage of Kushner's play, from Cohn's first appearance in Act I, Scene 2, of *Millennium* to his final deathbed utterance at the end of *Perestroika*'s Act IV, Cohn seems to subsist primarily in a state of frothful discontent, as he can accept neither the political nor personal realities that daily confront him. If he finds himself increasingly ineffectual in countering his enemies in the public arena as well as in banishing his own private demons, from first to last in the play he is no less energetically aggressive in his responses to them. In fact, Cohn does not so much confront the ugly, discomfiting, intolerable, or galling political and personal truths that daily plague him; he defies or denies them. Cohn's impulse always is to put reality on hold. "Hold" is the first word he speaks in *Millennium*—his "impressive desk [is] bare except for a very elaborate phone system" and "with sensual abandon" Cohn is "playing the phone, receiver and hold button with virtuosity and love" (17)—and "Hold" is his final, deathbed utterance in *Perestroika*, with Cohn "[p]unching an imaginary button with his finger" (247).¹³⁷ In the end Cohn can no more put death on hold, thereby to gainsay his personal destiny, than he can halt the course of America's history or alter its apparent, in 1986, national destiny.

Cohn's destiny, like America's, has been compromised radically by disease. For centuries plague may have functioned in the historical and literary imagination as an agent of destiny, but in *Angels in America*, as the play evolves on stage, it is destiny that cannot withstand the effects of a disease—the AIDS plague, which metaphorically signals tragic policy failures in the nation's history at the end of the twentieth century.

They are, many of them, failures that Cohn would neither lament nor abhor; for as plainly

¹³⁷ "Indeed, the last words he speaks while alive in the play exactly echo his first," notes Steven F. Kruger in his essay "Identity and Conversion in *Angels in America*" (158). Allan J. Frantzen points out in his essay "Prior to the Walters" that all the good characters in the play are continually on the go, whereas Cohn in his impulse to put reality on hold resists movement, unless it be backward into a nostalgically politically conservative past (145).

as Cohn is a victim of the plague that is efficiently decimating segments of America's homosexual population in the 1980s, he is also party to—and active promulgator of—the political plague that, for Cohn's left-wing opponents, defines Reaganite America. Cohn's chronic discontent in the latter case lies more in degree than in kind, because, for Cohn, a deep-dyed reactionary, the right-wing extremes in conservative policy are not extreme enough.¹³⁸ Indeed, Cohn is Prior's nightmare with a telephone: "Hold" rises from a conservative impulse not unlike that of the "mixed-up, reactionary" Angel of America in her exhortation that humankind stop moving so as to effect "STASIS!" (180)

Cohn does not want merely to halt, hobble, stay, or stop the course of America's national destiny as it has evolved by the penultimate decade of the twentieth century; he wants to reverse it and, like Prior's angel, "go back" (178). "[I]f you want to look at the heart of modern conservatism, you look at me," Cohn tells his protégé Joe Pitt, the young, gay, married, and Mormon Republican lawyer whom he has contrived to seduce sexually as well as professionally with power and patronage. "Everyone else has abandoned the struggle, everything nowadays is just sipping tea with Nixon and Mao, that was *disgusting* . . ." (213) "Everyone else" would include even Cohn's political ally and personal "darling" (70), Martin Heller, who has the ear of President Reagan's

¹³⁸ Born into a Jewish family of liberal sympathies and the son of a judge who embraced progressive policy and supported Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal, Roy Marcus Cohn proved to be the political black sheep in his commitment to the conservative principles and right-wing causes of the Republican Party, according to Nicholas von Hoffman in Part Two ("Mama's Boy") of *Citizen Cohn* (41-111). He allied himself with the red-baiting Senator McCarthy and with the like-minded G. David Schine, with whom he traveled to Europe to ferret out Communists, to the effect that, writes Hoffman: "Roy, the only child, son of Dora, who forgave him everything—no, Dora, who did not believe Roy could do anything needing forgiveness—had gone out in the world and done things to men, non-Communists, non criminal men, which would never be forgiven. The trip had changed the course of his life; this was not a question of a Democrat boy going to work for a Republican senator; this was welding himself to a political faction that people from his background despised. Publicly, there was no way back for Roy; privately, in the backroom, out of sight, he could be a deal maker and an operator in Democratic New York, but no serious candidate or office in his party would ever be seen with him again. Yet Roy remained a Democrat until the end of his life. He died one" (175).

attorney general, Ed Meese, albeit Heller heralds “a revolution in Washington” by which the Supreme Court will soon be “block-solid” with Republican appointees and “we’ll get our way on just about everything: abortion, defense, Central America, family values, a live investment climate” (69). Heller further envisions a Republican lock on the White House at least until 2000, if not permanently, along with Republican control of the Senate by 1992 and of the House by 1996: “It’s really the end of Liberalism. The end of New Deal Socialism. The end of ipso facto secular humanism” (69). What Heller envisions Roy Cohn would welcome; for three decades, since his glory days as attorney to Senator Joseph McCarthy in his 1953-4 investigations into the activities of alleged Communist Party card-carrying members employed by government agencies,¹³⁹ Cohn has been waiting for the moment that would set the nation back on its conservative political track: that would rid the nation of the socialist plague—the economic programs of the New Deal in Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s response to the Great Depression of the 1930s which paved the way for the liberal Democrats’ domestic agenda in Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society in the 1960s—and that would restore to America its manifest destiny. The moment, Heller avers, has arrived: “The dawning of a genuinely American political personality. Modeled on Ronald Wilson Reagan” (69). To Reagan’s savior, in Heller’s political fantasy, Cohn plays saint: “This man,” Heller presses upon Joe, “is a Saint of the Right” (70).

Should Joe want to look, too, at the heart of the modern world as Cohn sees it, at the “miasma” there, the ethical, if politically naïve lawyer need look no further than his would-be mentor. “[W]hat a pit, what a nightmare is there—I have looked, I have

¹³⁹ As Hoffman notes in *Citizen Cohn*, “Beginning in January 1953, Roy worked for Joe McCarthy a total of eighteen months. When the short wild ride was over, few people were better known across the globe, and in the United States none was more revered or reviled” (176).

searched all my life for absolute bottom, and I found it, *believe me: Stygian*” (213-4), declares Cohn, and with that darkly allusive nod to the murky depths of the mythic underworld he typifies in a word his vision of benighted human existence: “How tragic, how brutal and short life is. How sinful people are” (214). For Cohn, the dark, “immutable heart of what we are that bleeds through whatever we may become” (214) defines the hopelessness of any faith that Prior, or Louis or Belize or Hannah or anyone else, may place in the “fabulous” possibilities of the human spirit. No less vain, by Cohn’s terms, would be the faith that Joe places in the nation’s destiny under President Reagan—“America has rediscovered itself. Its sacred position among nations. . . . This is a great thing. The truth restored. Law restored. We become better. More good,” Joe tells his dubious, agoraphobic wife, Harper, and avows, “I need to be a part of that” (32)—because, as Cohn concludes his unblinking look at what we immutably are no matter what we may aspire to become, “All else is vanity” (214).

Without irony, Cohn prefaces his stygian vision with a boast: “My generation, we had *clarity*” (213). While *Angels in America* in Menippean fashion swathes the figure of the secretive, duplicitous Cohn in ambiguity—an anti-Semitic Jewish lawyer, whose liberties with the law are propelling the case for his disbarment, and a homophobic closeted gay man with AIDS—he himself in the play speaks with little regard for irony or ambiguity, or truth. Rather, he prides himself on his clarity of vision, to which he would give equally unambiguous expression, as if, by the power of his conviction and rhetoric, what he believes to be true or just or imperative or disgusting or stygian necessarily is. Ironically, in the very clarity of his convictions, at whatever crucial moment in his latter-day career the political right’s designated saint may find himself, Cohn is able willfully to

disregard the oxymoron in which he as a Jewish lawyer and a gay man exists.¹⁴⁰ More, it is by the strength of his convictions, by his presumption of their reality, that Cohn survives, and has erstwhile triumphed, in an arena where personal power shapes national politics: “It’s the moxie that counts,” not the money or fame (214), the dying Cohn tells Joe, for it’s the moxie that has enabled Cohn to determine his own destiny by being stridently who he would presume to be. (“Like a father to a son,” Cohn advises Joe a few months earlier: “Learn at least this: What you are capable of. Let nothing stand in your way” [64].) And with moxie Cohn has gained “clout,” to the extent that he can, as he informs his doctor, “pick up this phone, punch fifteen numbers,” and “in under five minutes” have on the line not the President but, “[e]ven better,” his wife (51). A man of moxie, clout, and power, Cohn acts not in but upon situations, and he acts by what he alone deems to be the truth of the situation, by making the truth fit the situation: “Half the time I just make it up,” he boasts to Heller (in this instance in regard to Ollie North and the Iran-Contra affair), “and it *still* turns out to be true! We learned that trick in the fifties” (161). Cohn plays no game by other people’s rules. “Because I know no rules,” he says, appertaining to the reason for his disbarment hearing; then, rationalizing his contempt, he elaborates: “Because I don’t see the Law as a dead and arbitrary collection of antiquated dictums . . . because I know the Law’s a pliable, breathing, sweating . . . *organ*” (72)—a debatable proposition. More pointedly, though, the organ that with the vigor of conviction Cohn would make of the law is in fact a blind; the disbarment proceedings relate to a breach in ethics—negligible territory, for Cohn—and the matter of

¹⁴⁰ Frank Rich on the Op-Ed page in the Week in Review section of the *New York Times* (October 15, 2006), commenting upon the Republican Party’s penchant for playing the anti-gay card when many of its own administrators and supporters are gay, states: “The split between the Republicans’ outward homophobia and inner gayness isn’t just hypocrisy; it’s pathology.”

a half million dollars he misappropriated from a client. The irony lies outside Cohn's intent. For, in the decades since his courtroom victories and backroom battles against the communist threat in 1950s America, first in the Rosenberg trial, then in the McCarthy hearings, and in his current determination to continue to be "a goddam motherfucking legally licensed member of the bar lawyer . . . until the day I die" (75)—which is why he has set out to enlist Joe Pitt in his cause, by planting him, through Martin Heller's connections, in the U.S. Justice Department—he has repeatedly, often recklessly, flouted the standards of his profession so that in the autumn of 1985 and of his career he finds himself isolated from the legal community in which he has wheeled and dealt for forty years. He has also diminished his image in the eyes of Joe Pitt, whose admiration of Cohn and long loyalty to him now vie with the Mormon counselor's legal ethics and personal scruples.

Cohn does not deign to argue ethics with his protégé. Dismissing the topic and Joe's qualms with a rhetorical fillip—"What the fuck do you think this is, Sunday School?" (74)—he argues politics instead: "this is gastric juices churning, this is enzymes and acids, this is intestinal is what this is, bowel movement and blood-red meat—this stinks, this is *politics*, Joe, the game of being alive" (74). The physiology metaphorically places politics, and Cohn's battle for professional survival, not in the heady region of conscience (which "does make cowards of us all"¹⁴¹; or sissies), but in the gut, in the stomach and intestines and bowel, and in proximity perhaps to that other "pliable, sweating, breathing" organ, in which Cohn has minutes earlier metaphorized the law. While the language invests Cohn's argument with rhetorical power, it also evinces his preoccupation with vital bodily functions, which are commonly distressed at the

¹⁴¹ *Hamlet* III, i, 83. Neither Cohn nor Kushner alludes to Shakespeare's play.

onslaught of AIDS, and with a more fundamental “game of being alive” as he faces further complications—he is already being treated for Kaposi’s sarcoma, a throat problem, lymphadenopathy, and oral candidiasis—of the *Human immunodeficiency virus*. As much as Cohn, whose personal destiny in both his political and sexual careers has lodged always in his self-determination, may deny and defy his doctor’s diagnosis of AIDS at the end of November—“No, Henry, no. AIDS is what homosexuals have. I have liver cancer” (52)—he cannot escape the disease.¹⁴² Roy’s assertion that “*what* I am is defined entirely by *who* I am” (52) lacks no clarity of conviction, and even as reality increasingly challenges his conviction—the disease taking him by February to the AIDS ward in a city hospital, where, wasting, weakened, scared, he suffers its retroviral ravages—Cohn resists the surrender of his destiny to plague, unlike Prior who no less ardently combats an angel demanding he “SUBMIT TO THE WILL OF HEAVEN” (171) but, ultimately, embraces fully his personal destiny as a gay man with AIDS. Implacably, Cohn will not be what he is: a Person With AIDS; a homosexual PWA, at that. Nonetheless, Cohn’s language, insinuating with its allusions to physiological function and the pathology of AIDS, and especially to blood and excrement, betrays what his words would deny. Until his diagnosis, Cohn indeed might have been able validly in postmodern America to view destiny as he does the law, as a vital and “pliable” organ to be shaped and manipulated by one’s individual will in its conjunction with circumstance,

¹⁴² George Shea, Professor of Classics at Fordham University, who was on the committee to disbar Cohn, in an e-mail, recalls Cohn’s refusal, or inability, to admit to the “scientific” fact of AIDS, which he translated into a “poetic” fiction: “I was struck by this tension [between the scientific and poetic] in none other than Roy Cohn himself, whom I saw frequently in his last days, when I was sitting on the panel that disbarred him. It was quite clear that he refused to acknowledge his own illness because he saw it as poetic, theological and in ethical terms not medical ones. He insisted again and again that his disability was caused only by a small infection on his left ear and when pressed (by me) to send the panel a medical letter certifying that he was mortally ill sent a tortured piece of prose that refused to admit what exactly he was suffering from.”

and not as some pre-Enlightenment, “dead and arbitrary” set of dictums imposed by a higher power upon the course of one’s earthly existence. By the mid 1980s in America, however, at least in San Francisco and New York, the fact of plague has usurped the poetry of destiny, be its construct divinely ordained or humanly determined, for plague is continually and dramatically, and catastrophically, altering the shape of destiny not only as AIDS ravages the bodies of its victims but also as the Reagan administration’s right-wing agenda infests the body politic.

Cohn, the saint of the Republican right, epitomizes the state of the American body politic in the 1980s. AIDS-stricken, he sustains not only the painful complications of the plague but also the vast potential of contagion. In effect and as cause—at once suffering “a whole horror house of infections” (48) and carrying the pathogens of near-certain (in 1986) fatality—Cohn is stygian, indeed. While Joe’s body may have escaped the danger of infection by his mentor—at least, by transmission of HIV in sexual fluids, since the “Royboy” (70), as Cohn tags Joe, is not also “Cohn’s buttboy” (226), as Belize supposes—his mind has not. For Cohn has unquestionably “penetrated” his boy’s “spiritual sphincter,” as Belize contends, then warns Louis, who has recently been sharing his bed with Joe, that he “better hope there’s no GOP germ” because “if there is” Louis has “got it” (226). That Joe’s political disposition has been infected, and his ethical discretion threatened, by the paternal and paternalistic Cohn is made theatrically apparent when Joe, stunned, stands before Cohn in the hospital room with his shirt front drenched in his outraged mentor’s tainted blood,¹⁴³ by which not just the GOP germ but the deadly retrovirus itself could be more than metaphorically transmitted. Cohn might consider

¹⁴³ Roy has risen from his hospital bed, and having extended the IV tube to its full length, he has pulled it from his arm, which is, as the stage directions indicate, “bleeding profusely” (218) when he “grabs Joe by the shirt, smearing it with blood” (219).

disease or even death to be just deserts for the presumed “one hundred percent” (70) Royboy who has betrayed his master’s always qualified trust, Joe having confessed that he has left his wife for a man and thus, though hardly by intent, making a mockery of the blessing of “Life” (214) that Cohn, a dying man, like a father upon a son,¹⁴⁴ has just bestowed upon him. Joe sullies the political destiny, the Life, that Roy has designed for him at the same time that he is sullied manifestly by the contaminated blood of Cohn’s—and a Reaganite nation’s—right-wing policies and politics.

When Joe, kneeling at the bedside in the silent moment of the patriarchal blessing, first attempts to speak, Cohn, his hand still pressed to his acolyte’s forehead, shushes him with the Yiddish word “Schmendrick” (214). While the epithet is not in itself flattering—it diminishes its referent to an idiot or a fool; or, more patronizingly, a boy, in the sense of one who is out of his depth or not quite up to doing a man’s job—Cohn is apparently employing the term affectionately, as he adds, “Don’t fuck up the magic” (214). Which is exactly what Joe unwittingly does when, in his persuasion that truth is a virtue and honesty an imperative in personal as well as in political and legal concerns, he essentially declares his homosexuality in confessing to Cohn “his need to be with” Louis (who remains unnamed). In that, in Cohn’s eyes, Joe becomes a schmendrick in every sense: and a disappointment; a political player who has fallen short of his party’s expectations for him; a confused, indecisive man to be bullied and browbeat into conformity by the powerful, conservative likes of Cohn. “Gravity, decency, smarts!” (70)—thus has Cohn months earlier advertised the strengths of his fair-haired boy and appeals court law clerk to Martin Heller, and it is by the integrity Joe brings to his strengths, by his refusal to

¹⁴⁴ Roy himself alludes to the Old Testament tale of Isaac and his “ruthless motherfucker” of a son, Jacob, who tricked his dying father into bestowing birthright upon him rather than his brother Esau (Genesis 27). “You don’t even have to trick it [the blessing] out of me, like what’s-his-name in the Bible” (214).

compromise with legal principles in the service of political favors and moral expedience, that he fails and falls on his sojourn in Cohn's sick, stygian world. Joe hasn't the gut for the destiny Cohn has scripted for him.

What Joe does have, in addition to his ethical qualms and failing marriage, is a stomach ulcer. For a bleeding ulcer or, as Cohn would have it, "a little moral nosebleed" (112), Joe gains no sympathy when he visits the ailing power broker at his Upper East Side brownstone in January, three weeks before their confrontation in the hospital.

"[Y]ou're a sissy," says Cohn in response to Joe's plea that he simply cannot break laws to protect Roy: "I believe in you so much, in what you stand for, at heart, the order, the decency" (113), attests Joe, still reluctant, despite Roy's political puppeteering to hustle him into the Justice Department, to accept that his idol may be clay-footed. Nor does Cohn hesitate to disabuse Joe of his romantic notion. Shamelessly the political pragmatist, the man who "helped make Presidents and unmake them and mayors and more goddam judges than anyone in NYC ever—AND several million dollars, tax-free" (113), Cohn swaggers before the nice-guy ethicist; nice and therefore, in Cohn's lexicon, ineffectual. "You want to be Nice, or you want to be Effective? Make the law, or subject to it" (114), Cohn argues in defense of his legal résumé and what he holds to be his "greatest accomplishment" (113): the execution of Ethel Rosenberg, for which he as an assistant U.S. attorney argued before "that timid Yid nebbish" of a judge¹⁴⁵ (114) both in the courtroom and on the telephone. That ex-parte communication by Cohn with the judge would, at the very least, be "censurable," as an incredulous Joe Pitt points out, and

¹⁴⁵ The Honorable Judge Irving Kaufman sentenced Julius and Ethel Rosenberg to death by electrocution on April 5, 1951. Charged with espionage for transmitting to a foreign government information relating to national defense, the Rosenbergs had been convicted on March 29, 1951. They were executed on June 19, 1953. See "Verdict and Sentence" in *The Murder of the Rosenbergs* by Stanley Yalkowsky (424-429); also "I'll be Judge, I'll be Jury" in *The Judgment of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg* by John Wexley (603).

the execution tantamount to “murder”—Cohn says the word that Joe can’t—pricks Roy’s legal conscience not at all: “I would have fucking pulled the switch if they’d have let me. Why? Because I fucking hate traitors. Because I fucking hate communists. Was it legal? Fuck legal” (114). With a four-letter word Cohn disposes of ethics. Not so easily will he rid himself of Ethel.

Conjured in the fever of his own imagination, a figure only as fiercely real as his delirium when Roy collapses in pain on the floor of his townhouse study,¹⁴⁶ Ethel—“A small Jewish woman dressed modestly in a fifties hat and coat” (116)—appears in the doorway. As traitor and communist, Ethel has long figured large in Cohn’s personal history, or his virulent version of her has, since the Rosenbergs’ widely reported trial and Ethel’s subsequent death sentence secured for the assistant U.S. attorney the national reputation that gained him his much-valued (and oft-abused) political clout. Now, as an avenging if modestly dressed demon as well as a kind of guardian angel with a hat for a halo, Ethel reappears, again as a creature of Roy’s own creation, on the stage of his AIDS-impaired consciousness. So it is that in his hallucinatory state Cohn believes it is Ethel, and not his houseman Andy, who phones 911 for an ambulance.¹⁴⁷ The Ethel who visits Cohn’s study near the end of *Millennium* and who, in *Perestroika*, sits at his hospital bedside exists by virtue of Roy’s feverish imaginings. The self-determined Roy is his own torturer, and he himself casts Ethel as the agent of his destiny, a destiny that he at the same time defines and defies: “From the throne of God in heaven to the belly of hell, you can all fuck yourselves and then go jump in the lake because I’M NOT

¹⁴⁶ Act III, Scene 5, of *Millennium* comprises, first, Joe Pitt’s visit in January to Cohn’s townhouse, in which Roy denies he has the “cancer” that doubles him over in pain as soon as Joe leaves, and then the appearance and ministrations of Ethel Rosenberg.

¹⁴⁷ On stage, too, it is Ethel who makes the call, as the play takes the audience into reality as it is perceived by Cohn in his delirium.

AFRAID OF YOU OR DEATH OR HELL OR ANYTHING!” (117). With unfailing bravado, it appears, Cohn in delirium confronts his mortality, perhaps because with as much conviction he can agree with his unwelcome visitor that he is immortal.

“You’re immortal” (118), Ethel tells Roy, in what appears to be a neutral statement, delivered without barb or irony, the ambiguity throughout Cohn’s encounter with this demon of his own imagining lying not in Ethel’s for the most part politely conversational, matter-of-fact observations—“You don’t look good, Roy” (117); “Julius sends his regards” (117); “We should call the ambulance” (118)—but in the incongruity of her affect: “Her manner is friendly,” indicates the stage direction, whereas “her voice is ice-cold” (117). In the tension between the amicable manner and the implacable voice, in the fever reality’s fact that the small, modestly dressed Jewish woman is also a “Fucking SUCCUBUS!” (191), as Cohn addresses her in February when she appears at the hospital, lies Ethel’s nightmarish scariness, which Roy would deny: “I’m scarier than you any day of the week! So beat it, Ethel! BOOO! BETTER DEAD THAN RED!” (117), as if being red, or gay, or any other intolerable in Cohn’s portfolio, were at this juncture an alternative. On the other hand, at least by dint of metaphysical argument, being immortal might indeed be considered an alternative to mortal being, but Ethel’s statement presents neither an alternative to nor an effect of being dead. Rather, she states that Roy is immortal—by implication, already immortal—although she does not specify in what way. Cohn, however, does: “I’m immortal . . . I have *forced* my way into history. I ain’t never gonna die” (118). By force of his own self-determined destiny Roy, according to Roy, has imposed himself indelibly upon the nation’s history; and he did it mostly by seizing the political opportunity afforded him first by the Rosenberg trial in

1951 and then, for a relatively brief historical moment of eighteen months, by the McCarthy hearings,¹⁴⁸ which wed Cohn's reputation to the battle against the Red Scare of the 1950s and, not without irony, linked his destiny in history books to that of Ethel Rosenberg, whose execution continues to stir controversy six decades later.¹⁴⁹ Roy's comment elicits from Ethel not a vindictive cackle but a noncommittal "little laugh," followed by a dispassionate reply that might nonetheless crimp any intimations of immortality Roy imagines for himself in history: "History is about to crack wide open," she says, then speaks the line that gives part one of *Angels in America* its title, "Millennium approaches" (118).

Approaching, too, is Perestroika; indeed, it is imminent, although Roy, who dies in February 1986 in the play,¹⁵⁰ will not live to see the changes initiated that same year in the Soviet Union by Mikhail Gorbachev, whom Louis extols as "the greatest political thinker since Lenin" (277) in the play's epilogue as he celebrates Perestroika, the Thaw, the New Internationalism, the end of the Cold War, and the fall of the Berlin Wall. By

¹⁴⁸ "By the summer of 1953 the investigators and exposers of infiltration and subversion were running out of communists. Congressional committees had been at work exposing reds sine 1946 and there weren't any big sensations left. The principal officers of the communist party had been convicted and put in jail, the Rosenbergs had been executed that spring, the Alger Hiss and Whittaker Chambers drama had already run its historical course, the movie industry Marxists had been hung out to dry some years before and Richard Nixon had long since discovered the Pumpkin Papers. Communists were not an inexhaustible resource; there never more than twenty-five thousand of them in the country, and of that number only a fraction worked for the government, did war research, or were connected to anything concerned with public policy or national defense" (Hoffman, 193).

¹⁴⁹ On October 24, 2010, the *New York Times Book Review* published two letters in response to a review of Walter Schneir's *Final Verdict* by Sam Roberts ("The Rosenbergs Revisited," October 10), who found the book's absolution of the Rosenbergs "not completely implausible." In one letter, Mark Kramer, director of the cold war studies department at Harvard, finds the evidence against Julius Rosenberg in the notebooks of former Soviet intelligence officer Alexander Vassiliev overwhelmingly conclusive of Julius's guilt of espionage, so as to make Schneir's argument in the book "completely implausible." The other letter states that Roberts "misrepresent[ed] the book's central aim," which was "not . . . to exculpate Julius of all guilt, but to indict the government for executing two people for a crime they did not commit." The letter was written by Michael Meeropol and Robert Meeropol, the sons of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg.

¹⁵⁰ "The real Roy died in August of 1986. For purposes of the play my Roy dies in February," Kushner states in "a disclaimer," which also notes that "for the most part the acts attributed to the character Roy are to be found in the historical record . . . [but] his words are my invention, and liberties have been taken with his story" (144).

1990 history has indeed cracked open, but Roy will not have witnessed the demise of communism as he knew it, and with it the loss of the increasingly shadowy enemy that for forty years gave the change-resistant, red-baiting Cohn his political *raison d'être*. By 1990 history will have begun to marginalize Roy Cohn and rob him of his self-constructed destiny. In 1986, though, in the dying Roy's final bout of delirium, Ethel Rosenberg will have already, in effect, consigned her executioner to the dustbin of history. She who "came to forgive" her past, rabid adversary but can now only "take pleasure in [his] misery" (246) delivers to the political heritor of "powerful, powerful men"—Cohn counts J. Edgar Hoover, Walter Winchell, and Joseph McCarthy among his "fathers" (62)—a cold, unsparing epitaph: "And when you die all anyone will say is: Better he had never lived at all" (246).

He will die powerless, too. Having taken the 7:05 a.m. train to Yonkers two days before, to attend the disbarment committee hearings on the matter of Cohn, Ethel also comes to gloat, for not only has the panel ruled against Roy but "one two three" the Executive has accepted the recommendation to disbar as well, with "[o]ne of the main guys on the Executive" commenting, so Ethel reports, "Finally. I've hated that little faggot for thirty-six years" (245). The slur may be less significant than the verb, for while the epithet evinces homophobia it does not necessarily, and certainly not exclusively, denote cause; for there are many more substantial reasons to hate Roy Cohn than the stripe of his sexuality, as Ethel can attest. And the vessel for her hatred far exceeds a stock epithet. Out of her hatred for Cohn, which she has "borne . . . up into the heavens," she has fashioned, she says, "a needle-sharp little star in the sky," which she identifies as "the star of Ethel Rosenberg's Hatred, and it burns every year for one night

only, June Nineteen” (245-6), the anniversary of Ethel’s electrocution. That she would memorialize, or immortalize, not herself or Roy Cohn but rather her hatred of Roy Cohn with a “needle-sharp” star alludes to her family’s trade—they were tailors—while the fact that “[i]t burns acid green” (246) points to Ethel’s family name: Greenglass. The emblematic star serves as what Angus Fletcher in *Allegory: the Theory of a Symbolic Mode* calls (in another context) “a kind of frozen agency,” by which Ethel has allegorized the *idée fixe* of her hatred, thus displacing “the daemonic impulse” to translate obsessional fantasy into irrational act (Fletcher, 289). To her hatred of Roy, Ethel, in her thirty-three-year and timeless postmortem existence as it is disclosed in the feverish reality of Cohn’s delirium, has yoked the hope that she would at least witness what she herself could not implement: the ambitious, perfervid former assistant U.S. attorney’s death.

In Ethel’s hope that she would “get to see [Roy] die more terrible” than she did, she is not disappointed: “‘cause you’re dying in shit, Roy, defeated” (246)—literally, in the excrement discharged by his diseased body, and figuratively, in that of his abasement both professionally as a disbarred lawyer and personally as a “little faggot,” not to mention the wages of his four decades in dirty, backroom politics. Yet Ethel—who has just asserted to Roy that “you could kill me, but you couldn’t ever defeat me” and declared, decisively, “You never won,” before delivering him to the ignominy of an unmourned death in her cold epitaph (246)—wavers in the very moment of her vaunt. Addressing Ethel as “Ma” and, in Yiddish, “Muddy,” a childlike Roy, in his apparent delirium scared and even repentant, begs of her a song; and, possibly out of residual maternal sympathy for the two sons she left behind her on June 19, 1953, Ethel obliges.

She sings, “very soft” (246), the Yiddish song “Balalaika,” in which a young man ponders whom he might without offense take in marriage, although Ethel does not render the refrain’s last line, “Freilich zol zein” (“It will be joyful”), joy perhaps not being a sentiment she would care to proffer or share with Roy, even at the moment of his death. Except that it isn’t: “Sitting up violently,” Roy not only announces “No I’m NOT [dead]!” but exults in his final bit of chicanery, in making Ethel, who has enshrined her hatred of him in an acid green star, “[a]ll for that ma stuff” when “I just wanted to see if I could finally, finally make Ethel Rosenberg sing!” (247)—a pleasure, apparently, that Ethel, the one-time aspiring singer and actress, has denied him, but his reference is more likely to Ethel’s refusal to sing in the courtroom by repeatedly pleading the Fifth Amendment on the grounds of self-incrimination. Thus, in triumphant response to Ethel’s assertion that in her trial he “never won,” Roy, always a man who would have the last word, speaks the last two words he has for her: “I WIN!” It is the power monger Roy Cohn’s fever dream, after all.

Roy’s final encounter with Ethel, whom in his delirium he imagines as the agent of his destiny at the same time that he challenges—or so that he can challenge—every affect of her agency, also opens with a song, and the HIV-infected, now heavily medicated Cohn is singing it: “John Brown’s Body,” the stirring marching song that was inspired by the death of the abolitionist John Brown, whose body, state the lyrics, “lies a-moulderin’ in the grave,” while he, or his soul, has become “a soldier in the army of the Lord,” and that was adopted by the Union army in the Civil War.¹⁵¹ America’s most

¹⁵¹ The lyrics of “John Brown’s Body,” in which the lead line is repeated twice in each four-line stanza, were not so stirring as the tune, which had been borrowed from a campfire spiritual. The words were variously rewritten, most famously by Julia Ward Howe for “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” In it John

tragic war on native soil figures allusively in the text of the play—as in Cohn’s presumption of John Brown’s body and in Prior’s assertion at the Bethesda Fountain, which is commonly assumed to be a Civil War monument, that the AIDS dead, like the war dead, shall be commemorated—and also, more generally, in the subtext of the play, for the Civil War, like AIDS, came as a plague upon the land to claim the lives of hundreds of thousands of mostly young men. As would AIDS one century later in the 1980s, the war rent the fabric of the destiny that America had deemed manifest even as it had ignored the viral capability of institutionalized slavery. That Roy Cohn, the former assistant U.S. attorney so instrumental in the conviction and execution of the traitorous Rosenbergs, should be singing a Civil War anthem dedicated to the memory of the controversial figure whose abolitionist fervor drove him to acts of insurrection against the state and eventually to charges of treason, and to his execution, might be attributed to a sense of irony, but the irony, again, lies outside the character. For Cohn identifies not with the traitor whose raid at Harpers Ferry fired the anti-slavery sentiment that would erupt a year later in the Civil War or, for that matter, with the man celebrated as a hero of the abolitionist cause in the North; rather, Cohn identifies with John Brown the survivor even of death. Though “a-moulderin’ in the grave” Brown’s body may be, “his soul”—as the song would have it¹⁵²—“is marching on,” for, as the next stanza proclaims, “He’s gone to be a soldier in the army of the Lord.” Cohn does not sing the second stanza; instead, with a “big smile” he announces to Ethel that “done with this world,” he’s crossing over to the next, where: “All mine enemies will be standing on the other shore,

Brown and his deeds—the 1859 raid he led on the armory at Harpers Ferry in protest of slavery, for which he was hanged by the State of Virginia for treason—go unsung.

¹⁵² Cohn ends the first stanza of “John Brown’s Body” not with “His soul is marching on” but with “His truth is marching on,” which concludes the first stanza as it was rewritten by Julia Ward Howe in “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.”

mouths gaping open like stupid fish, while the Almighty parts the Sea of Death and lets his Royboy cross over to Jordan. On dry land and still a lawyer” (245). For a man who has let nothing and no one stand in the way of his every conservative whim and overweening political ambition Roy in his dying man’s fantasy can no doubt imagine a mighty crowd of enemies to witness his transition from this world to the next.

Conspicuously absent in both worlds are friends, albeit mentors, protégés, surrogate fathers and surrogate sons, toyboys, political allies, tools, partisans, patsies, informants, and influential connections—one of them just fifteen digits away, in the East Wing of the White House—abound. Nonetheless, for all his well-placed contacts and however confidently Roy may envision himself not as a soldier but as a lawyer in the ranks of the Lord, by a committee of “genteel gentleman Brahmin lawyers, country-club men” (72-3), he—in his own self-loathing words, “some sort of filthy little Jewish troll” (73)—is disbarred: ousted from “The Law: the only club I ever wanted to belong to,” to which Cohn adds, “And before they take that away from me, I’m going to die” (221). Thus, and in vain, would Cohn define his destiny, for even as he is depicting for Ethel his passage to Jordan and eternal attorneyship she is sitting on the news of his disbarment: “Don’t count your chickens, Roy. . . . The panel ruled against you” (245), she advises him. A committee in Yonkers has thwarted the destiny that Cohn aesthetically, abetted by morphine and delirium, has conceived and constructed for himself. The consummate political insider is out.

*

Not by choice but by his choices—by a personal history of arrogation and legal knavery—is Cohn disbarred from the community and practice of the law. Entirely by

choice, however, is Roy isolated from the gay community. From the premise that homosexuals are men who wield no political influence—men who in fifteen years have not been able to “get a pissant antidiscrimination bill through City Council”; “men who know nobody and who nobody knows”; men “[w]ho have zero clout” (51)—the lawyerly Roy argues his case, before his doctor, that “Roy Cohn is not a homosexual. Roy Cohn is a heterosexual man, Henry, who fucks around with guys” (52). By the same token, and contrary to Henry’s diagnosis, Cohn syllogizes that he could not possibly have AIDS, it being a disease that homosexuals get; Cohn calls it liver cancer, and should Henry document it otherwise, he knows that he would realize in full the effects of the political bully Cohn’s threat to “proceed, systematically, to destroy your reputation and your practice and your career in New York State” (50). As adamant in the denial of his homosexuality as he is venomous in his homophobia, Roy dissociates himself not just from the telltale syndrome but also from the sodality among gay men that was born of what was called their plague—and for Cohn, “their” would without question mean “not his”—and thus from any commonality of cause or social empathy in the face of AIDS. So it is that Belize’s sardonic riposte to Cohn, who, in his distrust of Belize’s information regarding AZT, has just addressed him in terms both racist and homophobic as “a butterfingers spook faggot nurse” (160), comes heavy with irony in light of Cohn’s denials: “Consider it solidarity. One faggot to another” (161). Nonetheless, Cohn does not allow his denials of AIDS and faggotry to get in the way of his will to battle his “cancer” with the new, largely inaccessible—except for “maybe thirty people in the whole country” (189)—antiretroviral drug from the National Institutes of Health, azidothymidine (AZT). Cohn makes it thirty-one. By strong-arming Martin Heller with

threats of political scandal (Ollie North's secret Iran-Contra slush fund), just as he did Henry with professional disgrace, he has landed his "own private stash" of "serious Honest-Abe medicine," i.e., "[n]o placebos" (161) but rather the "[o]ne hundred proof elixir vitae" (189); Cohn is, in Belize's metaphor, "[t]he dragon atop the golden horde" comprising the "hundred thousand people who need it [AZT]" no less than Roy (189). Whereas Cohn readily agrees with Belize that "[i]t's not fair"—him with a supply of pills he would not deplete even if he'd live fifty more years, while a hundred thousand other men sick with AIDS have none—the staunch conservative defender of the American capitalist way is "not moved by the unequal distribution of goods on this earth" (189). And to Belize's plea that he has friends who need the drug that the dragon can easily spare, the unwilling Cohn replies no: "Because you repulse me. . . . Because I hate your guts, and your friends' guts" (190). What Cohn objects to, he says with not a hint of ironic self-reference, is that they consider themselves "[s]o goddamned entitled" (190), but his repulsion and hatred of them are more likely lodged in their AIDS-afflicted relation to him. In plague Cohn finds no common cause either with the gay men being wasted by the disease or with those striving daily to live with it in the hope that one day will bring the obliteration of it. By denial and dissociation, he shares with them neither the pathogenesis of their plague nor the destiny it shapes. They are not him.

Nor would Cohn, dead by 1990, have shared with Prior his vision of human destiny in the Angel of the Waters at Bethesda Fountain or with Louis his dream of a political destiny that embraces America and the rapidly changing communist world. Louis remembers "back four years ago," in 1986, when "we were feeling everything everywhere was stuck" (277): back before the world started moving forward again and

America stopped trying, as Roy Cohn and much of the right-wing Reaganite nation would have had it, to put itself on hold and “go back.” Hannah puts a word to the political idea that seeds Louis’s faith in Russia’s future and that would define Prior’s hope for a “new and fairer” America as well: “Interconnectedness” (278). It is a word that lies outside the rhetoric of Cohn’s politics.

Cohn does value connections, however. With wits and wile he has cultivated them in the White House, the Justice Department, and the New York Bar—or, more exaltedly, in “The Law,” whereby he stands, so he imagines, well-connected among “the high Priests of America” in the “only club” worth belonging to because: “We alone know the words that made America. . . . We alone know how to use The Words” (221). A document and an instrument, “The Words” (of the Constitution) are as likely to be abused as used by the red-baiting, anti-Semitic, racist, homophobic Cohn, for whom political exigency trumps legal ethics and defines presumed Constitutional rights. Scornful of inclusion and diversity, Cohn operates not on the principle of community, let alone of global interconnectedness, but on a prescript of exclusivity that disallows the rights and interests of not only his decades-old bugaboo, the communists, but also liberals (especially Jewish ones), blacks, and homosexuals. The deathbed news, then, that by his disbarment Cohn himself has been excluded from what he considers the nation’s most exclusive club delivers its dose of poetic justice with an ironic sting (although in the fantasia of the Great Hereafter Cohn hardly allows death or disbarment to hinder his career). Ironically, too, at the moment of his death, Cohn is punching the imaginary button of a telephone, when in fact he has been disconnected, not just from the imaginary phone but from the reality it represents as the power broker’s indispensable tool. Indeed,

medications and morphine having given free rein to Cohn's psychosis of hate, he rails and writhes in room 1013, finally, in a state of utter disconnectedness from the world of partisan power politics that he can no longer—like “the polestar of human evil” (227) in Louis's simile—guide and control with his words or *The Words* to shape and determine a nation's destiny.

Neither can Cohn, for all his pretense to indominability, determine his personal destiny any more than he can control his bowels or forestall his seizures. Plague renders him powerless in the end; it reconstrues the significance of his destiny as dramatically as it does Prior's, and both their views of America's. AIDS comes not as an agent of divine destiny or a punitive visitation upon man by a wrathful God in *Angels in America*; rather, the plague itself defines, or redefines, destiny even as it shapes and reshapes history. Plague becomes the prism through which Cohn and Prior (and Louis, Belize, and Hannah) regard and recast their perceptions of human destiny.

The moment that alters the course of Cohn's personal history and self-determined destiny comes early in the play, at the end of Act I in *Millennium*, when he visits his doctor, Henry, and it comes in three words: “You have AIDS” (51). Thereafter, however he may deny and defy the fact of AIDS, Cohn's vision of himself is refractive, and he grows increasingly refractory in his responses to a disease he cannot defeat or even diminish at the same time that the disease diminishes not just him but, more intolerably, his influence in the corridors of right-wing power. Isolated in a hospital room, alone with a vengeful ghost of his own imagining, afflicted beyond hope, Cohn continues to exhibit abundant moxie, but he has lost his clout. He has been “booted out of the parade,” which, he tells Ethel, is “[t]he worst thing about being sick in America . . . It's just no country

for the infirm” (192). Indeed, it is a country that, by 1986, had for five years been suffering an epidemic which had gone largely and willfully ignored by the Reagan administration, and by the likes of Roy Cohn, although the numbers of the “infirm” were by then mounting by the thousands, primarily among homosexual men.¹⁵³ Just as Cohn, from the moment of his doctor’s diagnosis to his deathbed rants three months later, repudiates the determination that he has AIDS, as if by naming a supposedly gay disease something else he can will its reality out of existence, so have the right-wing Reaganites disclaimed or ignored the reality of a twentieth-century plague, in no small part because “AIDS is what homosexuals have” (52). Nonetheless, it is “very bad news,” both for Roy—“you can call it any damn thing you want, Roy, but what it boils down to is very bad news” (52), chides Henry—and for the nation whose attitudes Roy reflects and, in the grip of drugs and delirium, refracts. So, too, does Roy’s personal crisis typify the national health crisis, disease and death being indifferent to denial both in his case and America’s.

AIDS, though, comprises not only a crisis in itself; in the subtext of the play, it also signifies other crises—political, social, economic, fiscal—that, from the perspective of critics to the liberal left of Reagan’s staunch conservative base, threaten the nation’s well-being with a right-wing political agenda touted by reactionaries, Cohn among them, who, in their horror of progressive policy and fear of insidious socialism, have not only failed to move America forward but have striven to set it on a backward track. Like his political ilk, resistant to the politics of change, Cohn stands on the side of the stasis-

¹⁵³ President Reagan did not publicly mention AIDS until September 17, 1985, in response to a question regarding AIDS funding posed to him in a press conference. Not until the death of the popular film actor Rock Hudson sixteen days later, on October 3, 1985, put the face of a major public figure on AIDS did the general public and the government begin to respond to pleas for assistance from gay activists, AIDS victims, and the medical profession. The Surgeon General’s Report on AIDS, the first publication by the U.S. Government on the syndrome, appeared in October 1986 (www.avert.org).

promoting Angel of America in Prior's fever dreams. Unlike Prior, for whom the world, in his vision of hope for America, "only spins forward" (280), Cohn places the nation's destiny not in the moment of the ever-unfolding future but in the past—at that, a past historicized in terms of his own conservative, hidebound political persuasions. In that, Cohn makes of America's destiny death, or as Prior's end-of-days angels would more euphemistically have it, a quaff "of Immobility, of respite, of cessation" (265). And in Cohn, Belize finds an epitome for the state of the plague-ridden (literally and figuratively) Reaganite nation in 1986: Like the man half mad, splenetic, and dying in room 1013, America is "[t]erminal, crazy and mean" (228). Or as good as dead. Cohn himself acknowledges his own end of days, when he recovers lucidity after an especially violent spasm, which wins him no pity from his bedside demon Ethel or his "spade faggot lackey" nurse: "I'm a goddam dead man" (190), Cohn says, which may be as close as he gets to the bald truth of a plague-driven destiny he can only endure. Four years later, by all appearances to the newly resolute Prior and his citizens in hope, Cohn's America will have at least begun to cease to be and Cohn himself will have been, perhaps to become a footnote in an inglorious chapter of his nation's history.

Chapter 7 Conclusion

When the mode of the music changes, the walls of the city tremble.
—Plato, *The Republic*

Plague changes everything. It menaces the narrative realities of Defoe's London in 1665, Manzoni's Milan three decades earlier, Mann's Venice in the early twentieth century, and Camus's Oran of 194–; it convulses both the real and dream worlds of Kushner's New York, and Reaganite America, still in the throes of the AIDS epidemic when *Angels in America* was staged on Broadway in 1993 and restaged off Broadway by the Signature Theater Company in 2011. Even after the fact of the pestilence in London, Milan, Venice, and Oran, plague dismays the narrators of its contagion, as they recount its effects on the life of the city and the lives of their characters. The relationship between the characters' reportorial or artistic, religious or scientific, social or political selves and destiny, whether personally or providentially conceived, before the introduction of plague into their biographies, is fundamentally, momentously, changed by the introduction of plague into their biographies. It strikes like a wayward comet coursing through the night sky; it cracks nature's mirror. It is an encounter with chance. Or a judgment by God. What was accepted as "truth" is questioned, doubted, challenged, shattered, by the arrival of plague; what had been conceived (in relative metaphysical comfort) as destiny must (in spiritual distress and scientific uncertainty) be reconfigured in the face of plague. In the wake of London's plague as H. F. has related it in *A Journal of the Plague Year*, H. F. may continue to believe in divine providence but he cannot ignore the evidence of natural

philosophy. Plague sweeps away the vestiges of fiefdom in the seventeenth-century Lombardy of *The Betrothed*, even as it ushers Lucia and Lorenzo into a new, premodern world that places one's destiny as much in the wishes of men as in the will of God. In *Death in Venice*, it plunges Aschenbach, along with his Apollonian ambitions, into a Dionysian abyss of desire, and casts his destiny more into the vast realm of modernist ambiguity than into an "immensity rich" with Platonic possibilities. In ambiguity, too, it maroons Camus's resolutely Jesuit Father Paneloux during the fact of pestilence in *The Plague*; after the fact, it confirms for the even-tempered Dr. Rieux both the absurdity, in an absurdist universe, of churchly faith in divine necessity and, concomitantly, the need for human community, for solidarity, for what Hannah Pitt names "interconnectedness." It is the word that Hannah might lend to Prior Walter's vision in the epilogue to *Angels in America*, wherein plague has indeed made of Prior a prophet for his times, not to mention that it has transformed Hannah, a Mormon from Utah, head to toe into a New Yorker. In all five texts, for the characters as well as for the authors of their destinies, plague alters perception, so that formerly accepted or established (philosophical, religious, scientific, social, political, or personal) concepts regarding man's relationship to and in the cosmos must be reconceived. Constructs of destiny must be aesthetically reconstructed to accommodate or account for or explain away or justify or mythologize or disguise or rationalize or deny the undeniable fact of plague.

Prior to the eighteenth century, plague texts in general assign the destinies of individuals and nations to divine providence. In fact, texts like Defoe's *Journal* or Manzoni's *Betrothed* might be read, in part, as pleas or inquiries or evocations by authors of destiny to *the* Author of Destiny, given that any text might be considered to exist in a

dialogical relationship with its audience, its readers being its addressees and, as Mikhail Bakhtin asserts in “The Problem of the Text,” a presumed “invisible presence” or “third party”—the personification of an “ideological expression,” like God—being its “superaddressee” (126).¹⁵⁴ However variant may be the specific doctrines of faith that inform the plague narratives of Defoe and Manzoni, the former unfolding in Protestant England and the latter in Roman Catholic Italy, both share the assumption of a Christian deity, in whose providential hand lie the immediate fate and ultimate destiny of the men and women who people their tales. Empirical evidence convinces H. F. that the contagion originates in nature and is transmitted by humans; he does not doubt the operation of natural cause and epidemic effect. Neither does he disbelieve that pestilence is the instrument of God, however. For H. F., plague is the earthly agency of divine means, and while he would not presume to read the mind of God, his journal is not just a record of the 1665 plague for its addressees, who in the 1720s faced the threat of another pestilence, but also, implicitly, a plea to its divine superaddressee for mercy on the city and its people.¹⁵⁵ Plague comes with its apocalyptic companions, famine, war, and death to Milan in 1629 as it is fictively recreated by Manzoni two centuries later. Although the plague’s visitation occurs as providentially in Lombardy as it does in Defoe’s London, and while it serves as an instrument of a just and wrathful God in the seventeenth-century context of its tale, the plague in the story as it is related by the nineteenth-century narrator

¹⁵⁴ Among the “various ideological expressions” in which the superaddressee of the text might be personified, Bakhtin lists “God, absolute truth, the court of dispassionate human conscience, the people, the court of history, science, and so forth” (126).

¹⁵⁵ The superaddressee is thus present as a silent third party, or interlocutor, to what Vincent Crapanzano calls the “primary dialogue,” so that within and beyond the text of H. F.’s conversation with the prospective readers of his journal—i.e., the text as primary dialogue—occurs a “shadow dialogue.” Crapanzano notes that he “use[s] *shadow dialogue* loosely to refer to those dialogues that one partner to the primary dialogue has with an interlocutor, real or imaginary, who is not present at the primary dialogue. Such dialogues are ‘silent,’ ‘mental,’ ‘quasi-articulate,’ ‘beneath consciousness’ though capable, at least in part of becoming conscious” (214).

functions more significantly as a test of faith, in that it literalizes the indignities, hardships, and suffering that the betrothed Lucia and Lorenzo continue to endure in their pursuit of their personal destiny. While they in their virtue may survive the plague by providential design, in their marriage to each other, and to God, they also fulfill their personal destiny. Providentially and personally, they prove by their faith to be worthy of God's irresistible grace, and the telling of their story throughout is informed by a tacit appeal to God's invisible presence, which ultimately transforms a tale of romance and history into an exaltation of destiny.

As divine providence has little relevance in an absurdist universe, the invisible presence of God as a superaddressee is perhaps more keenly sensed—because it is ironically rendered, in the homiletic text of Father Paneloux within the narrative text of Dr. Rieux—in Camus's fabular tale of Oran than it is in the texts of Defoe and Manzoni. For God is clearly the third party being addressed in Father Paneloux's pulpit utterances, the second party being the congregated parishioners, the plague sermons' addressees, whose "responsive understanding" is sought, whereas, in Bakhtin's terms, the superaddressee's "absolutely just responsive understanding is presumed" (126) by the first party in the dialogue, the speaker Paneloux. The irony, of course, lies in the fact that, in the absurdist text of the Camusian narrator Rieux, the invisible presence is a conspicuous absence. Whereas Paneloux in his text places his faith in an all-comprehending if necessarily incomprehensible God, Rieux lodges his hope for his fellow citizens of an absurdist world in the idea of human community. The personification of that idea emerges as the third party to Rieux's account of plague in Oran; like Paneloux, as well as like the narrators of Defoe's *Journal* and Manzoni's

Betrothed, in the superaddressee Rieux lodges the creative force intrinsic to his construct of human destiny.

Even as Rieux acknowledges the absurdity of human existence he might on occasion harbor some nostalgia for the absolute, although he would not be likely ever to reside—as might Paneloux, finally, in his spiritual strife—in Nietzsche’s mind-darkening shadow of a dead God. A nostalgia for the absolute is at once conjured and dispelled in the fever dreams that introduce the AIDS-stricken Prior Walter to the initially seductive Angel of America and eventually to her apocalyptic cohorts, by whose absolutist dicta Prior along with the rest of humanity would not only stop moving but also cease being, in Kushner’s fiercely imagined play. Dead or not, God has abandoned the heavens, and on earth, in the twentieth century’s unrelenting succession of “terrible days” wrought by political plague and a lethal lentivirus, both of which have afflicted Prior, He has been everywhere as conspicuous in His absence as He is in Camus’s Oran. The invisible presence to which the text of *Angels in America* is addressed, then, is more immanently human than transcendently divine. In the epilogue’s millennial vision of “interconnectedness” and its blessing of “More Life” upon the audience of the play and addressees of the text—for “You are fabulous creatures, each and every one” (280)—the superaddressee becomes more apparently an embodiment of a communal human spirit in the face of a divided nation’s plague.

The essentially moral vision in both Camus’s novel and Kushner’s play has less to do with divine transcendence than with human community, as in both works plague gives rise in time—in a matter of months in Oran; by the epilogic year of 1990 in *Angels*, though, more than a decade has passed since the outbreak of AIDS—to common cause, to

collective action, “in the never-ending fight against terror and its relentless onslaughts,” as Rieux characterizes it (in language that might well invite allegorical interpretation), “despite their personal afflictions, by all who, while unable to be saints but refusing to bow down to pestilences, survive their utmost to be healers” (271). Yet the same drive toward community in the fight against plague typifies, two centuries earlier, the avowedly Protestant Defoe’s tale as well, of which Anthony Burgess writes, “it is neither God’s good grace nor innate goodness which saves man’s soul alive; it is rather his need for the community, his concept of the desirable life as one lived collectively” (18). Even as the epidemic begins to swell the numbers in London’s weekly bills of mortality H. F. chooses to remain in the familiar precincts of Aldgate, albeit he has, for all his protestations otherwise, both the opportunity and the resources to escape the infested city. He accounts his dangerous decision to a sense of civic duty; he would bear witness to the pestilence and in his journal record its progress for the benefit of the next generation that might experience the contagion, for in the 1600s one might still expect five visitations of plague in a century. H. F. would share with his fellow citizens in their collective destiny, however terrifyingly it is being wrought anew. Neither does Fra Cristoforo, in Manzoni’s nineteenth-century text, seek refuge from the plague in Milan, nor does he desert a massively afflicted community. The infestation of Milan would claim nearly half the city’s population before its subsidence in 1630—among its dead, the Capuchin friar who dedicated, or sacrificed, himself to healing the bodies and comforting the souls of the stricken in the *lazzaretto*. No doubt it is significant that the reprobate Don Rodrigo, who by chivalric presumption of patriarchal power has, like a plague, preyed upon the estates of Lombardy without conscience or concern for community, and indeed with utter

disdain for the peasantry, should himself die of plague, alone, neither wanting nor deserving human sympathy or divine grace. The power broker Roy Cohn in *Angels in America* dies alone as well, except for a ghost of his own sick imagining and a black, gay male nurse he views with homophobic and racist contempt. Cohn's isolation in the AIDS ward of New York Hospital ironically epitomizes the destiny of the man who could brag he was just fifteen digits and a telephone call away from the president's wife, Nancy Reagan, for increasingly his career has isolated him from any community: from the family his right-wing politics betrayed, from the public face of the conservative party he served, from the legal profession he embraces even in his disbarment, from the gay social and political network he slurs. Still, however execrable figures like Don Rodrigo and Roy Cohn may be in their isolation from community, either in their scorn of its value or in their want of a communal impulse, they do not die of plague *in fact* because they fail to recognize their "need for the community"; for, then, why would Fra Cristoforo in his selfless ministry to the afflicted Milanese not be justly spared? In instances like those of Rodrigo and Cohn, the text may imply a kind of poetic justice (and in *The Betrothed* Don Abbondio essentially states it in his observation that the plague has rid Lombardy of the cursed Rodrigo and his *bravi*), but the plague in fact does not discriminate—not even in the case of AIDS, which never was in fact a "gay plague." Likewise, Father Paneloux, who in Camus's view may be misguided in his Jesuitic principles but is not evil or morally lax or hypocritical, does not die because he isolates himself from the community he should succor any more than Dr. Rieux survives because he doesn't: The moral lesson in plague texts is a product of the narrative discourse, not the disease.

Aschenbach, too, ends his life in disease and isolation in Mann's densely allusive novella. With a plagued soul, his strange, newly emergent yearnings as an artist being unassuaged by his magisterial dignity and authorial fame, the solitary traveler Aschenbach arrives in Venice, where he contracts the city's incipient plague—cholera morbus—not because he divorces himself from the tourist community as well as the Venetian social establishment that capitalizes on it but because foolishly, in the folly of his infatuation with Tadzio, he ignores the precarious reality of his situation in plague-stricken Venice. Obsessed by Tadzio's beauty, as if the boy had given form to "a thought of God," Aschenbach is increasingly imprisoned by his own psyche, where in nightmares he hosts battles between Dionysus and Apollo, between the passionate frenzy of the Stranger-God and the aesthetic discipline of poetry's deity, for control of his soul, while in delirium and daydreams he imagines and conducts dialogues, like a dissolute, modernist Socrates in discourse with his youthful Phaedrus, on beauty and love. Thus might Mann's narrator be superaddressing the case of Gustav von Aschenbach to the ghost of the inscrutable historical Socrates, in whose invisible presence would the narrator have the destiny of the novella's dialectically afflicted artist be measured: a destiny that aesthetically weds the artist—bereft, spent by unrealized dark Dionysian desires—to a vision of Apollonian beauty, as the pale, apparitional figure of a boy beckons him into his death, in Venice. Or so it is imagined for Aschenbach by the narrator.

Mann's narrator also links Aschenbach's decline into sensual depravity to the descent of cosmopolitan Venice into cultural decadence, as he in the city and the city in him mirror each other's dissolution and disease. The allusive language embedded in the

narrator's text—as when he states that Aschenbach's soul-annihilating Dionysian dream leaves “his whole being, the culture of a lifetime, devastated and destroyed”—sustains the parallels that might be drawn between Aschenbach's surrender to the chaos of his unconscious and not just Venice's capitulation to institutionalized crime and social disorder but also Europe's march to the dark forces that would lead it into a world war. Civilization is yielding to its discontents.

Whereas Mann's “stricken and disordered” city and hero forebode the decline of European civilization, in the chaos of the plague city Milan Manzoni's narrator foresees the rise of a new world order. For it was to Milan in the aftermath of the plague that Manzoni traced the birth of the spirit that more than two centuries later (after the Spanish and Austrian dominations) would effect the Risorgimento and, in 1861, the unification of Italy. To whatever degree Milan may have set the stage for the Italian resurgence and statehood, in *The Betrothed* Manzoni joined the idea of national destiny in the nineteenth century to the history of Milan in the seventeenth. Conversely, he infused the destiny of Milan in 1630 with the spirit of renewal and reform that emerged in Italy after the fall of Napoleon and the Congress of Vienna in 1815 and that in time, forty-five years of it—and for twenty of them, from 1820 to 1840, Manzoni was writing and rewriting his text—propelled Italy toward political unity and national identity. The plague scourges the city of its patriarchal villainy, and, in the penultimate chapter of the novel, torrential rains cleanse the land, the “sudden turn” in the weather signaling if not a *risorgimento* at least a “*risolvimento*” in the destiny of peasant-born Lorenzo, a *risolvimento* that Manzoni would extend to the people of Italy.

Like Mann's Venice and Manzoni's Milan as well as Camus's "our town [*notre ville*]" or any city of Oran, Defoe's London further illumines and enlarges the significance of destiny in the plague narrative of *Journal*. In all four texts, it is the city that beds the plague, its populace that breeds the contagion, until eventually the pestilence subsides—as Dr. Rieux would have it in Camus's tale, it never goes away—but only after the city has witnessed its own devastation. In Defoe's *Journal*, like the texts of Manzoni, Mann, and Camus, the city is more than a setting for the narrative, as in H. F.'s journal the city's parishes are explored, its streets charted, its landmarks noted, its shuttered residences contemplated, the stench and filth and noise and keening detailed and deplored. London might indeed be read as the protagonist of H. F.'s story—a love story of sorts—and with H. F. she survives. H. F. closes his journal on a cautiously joyous note, although when he exclaims, "yet I alive!" after the pestilential trials of 1665—and after the Great Fire of London in 1666, which elicits comment by H. F. on occasion in the text—he does not know that subsequent to the city's devastation by plague and fire she will be rebuilt in even greater glory, with architectural design by Christopher Wren. The phoenix-like rise of London from her ashes of course lies beyond the time in H. F.'s narrative, 1665-6, but not beyond the time of its composition by Defoe in the early 1720s. The history of London in the fifty-five years beyond the text of the plague narrative in the novel, perhaps, allows Defoe the note of optimism that he extends to his narrator after the calamitous year he shared with London in her destiny.

What qualifies any optimism in regard to the destiny of the city at the end of H. F.'s journal is the fact that it is contingent upon human nature. Thus H. F. laments that, as the pestilence has subsided, the citizens of London—having forgotten already that by

God's judgment the plague was visited upon them for their unrighteous behavior and only by His mercy they have been miraculously delivered from it—have begun again to engage in “all manner of wickedness.” Like the children of Israel, when they were delivered from Egypt by God's parting of the Red Sea, H. F.'s fellow Londoners have sung God's praise but have forgotten His works. While the return of the city to normality may be cause for joy, then, it is reason for caution, too. As Dr. Rieux warns in the final paragraph of Camus's text, which frequently echoes that of Defoe, “such joy”—the joy that accompanies the restoration of bourgeois custom after the plague's abatement in Oran—“is always imperiled.” For Rieux, as for H. F., the peril lies in the nature of humans to forget both the plague's terrifying effects and its cause. However naturally the contagion may progress in its earthly course, it operates divinely, in H. F.'s Protestant view, as an instrument of God; but the cause of its visitation is lodged squarely by H. F. in the moral failures of man. In the three hundred years that separate Defoe's *Journal* and Camus's *Plague*, God has been variously declared dead, and H. F.'s divinely ordained and morally ordered cosmos has ceded, for Rieux, to an absurdist universe, which he epitomizes in the city of Oran. Rieux can account neither the emergence of plague nor its abatement to divine intervention in the affairs of the signally ordinary Oran. With certainty Rieux can lodge the plague's cause in a bacterium, *Yersinia pestis*, but the nature of the cause, the bacillus itself, exists in mystery: Inexplicably, it “never dies or disappears for good” but instead retreats into dormancy and “bides its time” until one day, unpredictably, absurdly, it rises up again. Plague continues to resist the constructs that would contain or explain it, and the serums that would obliterate it. The destiny of the city continues to hinge on a bacillary whim.

Or, in the New York City of Kushner's *Angels in America*, on the replication of *Human immunodeficiency virus 1*. By 1985, the year in which HIV-infected Prior Walter perforce confronts destiny—his own, his community's, the city's, the nation's—the “strange virus of unknown origin,”¹⁵⁶ AIDS, has for five years, with no evidence of surcease, been steadily decimating the gay populations of New York, the East Coast epicenter of the epidemic in America, and its West Coast counterpart, San Francisco. That the city, like Prior, as well as the Reagan-infatuated nation, like Cohn, is at once host and victim of the disease and its metaphorical replications in the political culture of America's 1980s might be deduced from Prior's manifest vision of heaven, which he visits in his second fever dream. As the stage directions indicate, “Heaven looks mostly like San Francisco after the Great 1906 Quake. It has a deserted, derelict feel to it, rubble is strewn everywhere” (252). Prior remarks that, by contrast, the “real” city of San Francisco, the one on earth, is “unspeakably beautiful,” yet the reality that is being suffered by the actual, plague-stricken city in 1985 may be more truly represented in the derelict, God-abandoned city of Prior's dream imagination. In the devastation of San Francisco after the earthquake—or, vis-à-vis the chronicles of the angelic realms, in the desolation of heaven after its “Seismic Catastrophe”—Prior's dream objectifies the devastation in body and mind of the gay community in New York as well as San Francisco after the calamitous onset of AIDS. Likewise, in heaven's unending deterioration, Prior might find analogues for the progressive, degenerative physiological effects of the insidious retrovirus on its human casualties (for Prior, they start with a kiss, the wine-dark one of KS, and that isn't Kansas). So, too, might he view all those cracks

¹⁵⁶ The phrase serves as the title of Jacques Leibovitch's *A strange virus of unknown origin*, which was published in translation (from the French) in New York in 1985.

in the plaster of heaven's highest chambers of authority—the Hall of the Upper Orders “looks remarkably like the San Francisco City Hall, with much cracked plaster” (254)—as the critical fault lines in the policies of a terminally ill America.

In post-eternal San Francisco and pre-millennial New York, in Restoration London and Mantuan Milan, in 1940s Oran and three decades earlier in Venice—plague defies geography, and time. It travels, it mutates, it multiplies. The *Vibrio cholerae* that brings death to Venice and to Aschenbach originates in the Ganges delta; Syrian traders transport it to the Mediterranean. The Black Death that desolates Milan in 1629-30 has been borne by traders as well, from the far Orient, via Asia Minor and North Africa (where it has and will again visit the Algerian port city of Oran); the same bubonic *pestis* will migrate to Holland and eventually, in 1665, to H. F.'s London. AIDS by 1985 has not only crossed the American continent but virtually circled the earth (and in 2010, when *Angels in America* was revived by the Signature Theatre Company in New York, AIDS itself, uninterrupted, was continuing its thirty-year run). While plague texts do not share the same geography, in their authoring of a plague city's destiny they both create and share a dialogical arena that lends them analogical resonance and that, by provision of plague-specific *topoi*, enlarges their significance. While Defoe's *Journal* might be considered a seminal text in modern plague literature, in his liberal use of the Bible, notably Jeremiah as well as Lamentations and Psalms, and the Roman Jewish historian Flavius Josephus's *The War of the Jews*, by which H. F. draws parallels between his contemporary London and ancient Jerusalem, Defoe establishes a dialogical context for his plague narrative: a narrative that, in turn, will provide context for Manzoni's *Betrothed* and Camus's *Plague* (not to mention content for Kathleen Winsor's popular,

racy 1944 Restoration romance *Forever Amber*, in which the adventuress Amber St. Clare's encounter with the London epidemic figures as a centerpiece).¹⁵⁷ In *The Plague* Camus evidences an aesthetic debt, at least in part, to Defoe's *Journal* in the epitomizing of the city as the plague's collective victim and, in the aftermath of contagion, as its perilously joyous survivor. In particulars, too, *The Plague* often allusively echoes Defoe but also numerous other texts, like Boccaccio's *Decameron*, which is set during the 1348 plague in Florence,¹⁵⁸ and, more notably, Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War* and Lucretius's *De rerum natura*, both of which treat the historical pestilence in Athens in 430 BCE, thereby bringing the classical canon of plague literature into the arena of Camus's novel. "I will now explain *the nature of epidemics* and the source from which the accumulated power of pestilence is able to spring a sudden devastating plague upon the tribes of men and beasts," writes Lucretius (250), in a statement of purpose that in spirit is embraced equally by Camus. To that end he allusively enlists the tropes and *topoi* of plague from twenty-five centuries of texts to illumine the destiny of a mythically

¹⁵⁷ The dialogical arena of plague literature of course comprises myriad texts from popular culture as well as literature's canon: 2500 years of it, from Plato's *Symposium* to Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death," from Sophocles's *Oedipus Tyrannus* to Sinclair Lewis's *Arrowsmith* (the protagonist's name alludes to the ancient symbol for plague, the arrow, by which the god of plague, Apollo, slew the earth-dragon Python). For an example of the analogical resonance such texts gain in their dialogical arena, one might cite Elia Kazan's 1950 film *Panic in the Streets*: In it, a port city (New Orleans) is threatened by an outbreak of pneumonic plague, which can in part be viewed allegorically, in terms of the emergent Red Scare in the late forties (the Communist witch hunts of Senator McCarthy and his acolyte Roy Cohn would soon follow), just as Camus's plague can be read in terms of the Nazi occupation of France. And, for another example, just as AIDS serves Kushner as a metaphor for the political failures of the Reagan years in America, so does Alan Hollinghurst's 2004 novel *In the Line of Beauty* for those of Thatcher's England in the 1980s. For a third, in the memoir *Before Night Falls*, the dissident gay writer Reinaldo Arenas escapes the oppressive political plague of Castro's Cuba in 1980 but, by an irony worthy of Mann, contracts AIDS in New York (where he committed suicide in 1990).

¹⁵⁸ The Black Death haunts the narrative introduction to the *Decameron*: In the opening lines, the deadly pestilence, we are told, visits the fairest of Italian cities, either by the influence of celestial bodies or by the wrath of God as retribution for human iniquities. Further, we learn, the plague had its origin in the East and, propagating itself without respite, spread to the West. The signs and symbols, the geography, and the descriptions of the stricken city that follow strike familiar chords in the composition of the plague texts, ancient and modern, that coexist in the dialogical arena of plague literature.

conceived (and rigorously absurdist) city under the siege of pestilence. Camus's novel is plague literature's meta-text.

Lucretius concludes that pestilence either comes down upon the earth from the sky, its pestiferous "atoms" invading and poisoning the atmosphere, or else rises up from earth when the soil has been rotted by unseasonable extremes in the weather. The contagion that laid waste to Athens, he reasons, writing nearly four hundred years after the fact of the Peloponnesian war and Athenian plague, must have "traversed a wide expanse of air and billowy plains" before swooping down upon Attica, for its "well-spring [lay] in the heart of Egypt" (251). Thus the pestilence rose up from the earth in Egypt, eventually to fall down on the earth in Athens. Although Lucretius does mention plague-stricken Athenians being "spectator[s] of the starry vault" (254), he does not report any evidence in the Attic skies of planetary portents or cometic omens; he asserts no celestial conjunctions of Saturn with Jupiter, like Manzoni's Don Ferrante, or astral influences, like London's street prophets in Defoe's *Journal*. Like Thucydides four centuries before him, Lucretius studies plague empirically in terms of cause and effect, and interventions by the gods in the destiny of man do not fall within his purview. He allows for no Olympian temperaments or mythic dragons in his account of the atomic origins and pestilential course of plague. Lucretius's Athens is no Thebes, reaping a destiny it has sown, like Oedipus and all the sons and daughters of old Cadmus, who slew a dragon and founded their city. Plague may spring suddenly from the earth in Lucretius's disquisition, but not from dragon's teeth that have been buried in the land. For neither Lucretius nor Camus, whose text in its philosophical attitude assumes a dialogical assonance with that of the conclusion to *De rerum natura*, is pestilence

retributive, nor is its chaos a dragon's work. Plague simply is: An atom or bacterium, it ineradicably is; a poisonous atom or pathogenic bacterium, it unfortunately is, and in its vastly catastrophic effects, it radically refashions human destiny.

Although the dragon, as either a monster or a constellation, generates no dialogical resonance in Lucretius's plague text, Draco assumes many identities in Greek myth, one of them being the dragon slain by Cadmus. Like most mythological dragons,¹⁵⁹ Cadmus's is linked to the sinuously patterned constellation in the northern skies named Draco, which four thousand years ago included the polestar. In the plague-afflicted, politically crippled world of Kushner's play, Roy Cohn's career as a defender of the neoconservative faith has unquestionably proved him to be a monster, so it is metaphorically apt that Belize should regard him as "the dragon atop the golden horde" and that Louis, in the same metaphorical vein, should deem Cohn to be "the polestar of human evil."¹⁶⁰ While human destiny in *Angels in America* is not, by either faith or reason, construed to be determined or defined by the stars, it is nonetheless, aesthetically and with allusive resonance, passingly described in terms of the stars as well as of angels in Prior's celestially invaded dreams. On the other hand, like the Pythagoreans of ancient Greece, Plato in his *Timaeus* and the Myth of Er in Book X of *The Republic* marries human destiny more literally to celestial design in his proposition that an individual life

¹⁵⁹ In the war between the Titans and the Olympians, Athena flung into the sky a dragon that attacked her, and its body wound itself around the axis of the world. Draco is associated as well with the dragons that guarded the Golden Fleece and the Golden Apples of the Hesperides. As the Audubon Society's guide to the night sky notes, "Draco has stood for all the dragons of mythology, from Tiamat of the Sumerians to the monster slain by Saint George" (511).

¹⁶⁰ Because over time the precession of the Earth has shifted the position of the Earth's axis and the celestial poles, the star closest to the north celestial pole—i.e., the polestar, or North Star—is no longer in the constellation Draco, but in Ursa Major. Thus, on May 2, 2011, the heavens again afforded a metaphor for human evil in reference to the post-9/11 plague of terrorism. The front page of the *New York Times*, headlining the assassination of Osama bin Laden, described him as "The North Star of Global Terrorism" (the epithet originates with the CIA).

unfolds under the influence of a star. The idea resonates in plague literature, as when Lorenzo, beleaguered by his misfortunes in Milan, thinks that he may have fallen prey to the pull of an evil planet; or when Aschenbach, in the moment—critical, as it turns out—that he allows the misdirection of his luggage to delay his departure from Venice, considers himself in his seeming ill fortune to be more fortunate than “a man born under a lucky star,” and if the thought passes his mind with more irony than credulity, the irony will nonetheless compound itself as that star returns Aschenbach not just to a hotel but to an unanticipated destiny. In the literature and legend of the Christian era, although stars (and Plato) maintain a significant hold over the authorial imagination, their influence upon individual destiny in plague texts is often translated into the guardianship of angels. As the celestial lineaments of human destiny change, as their metaphysical dimension shifts, the referential and metaphorical possibilities of the aesthetic constructs in plague texts accrue in the dialogical arena. Prior’s fever dreams, for example, indeed feature a star, or diva, in the shape of a guardian angel; she, as it unconventionally happens, is not only a crazy, mixed-up reactionary but also a messenger of death, in whose Tome of Immobility is written both Prior’s and all humanity’s cessation in a “starless” night. By such a plague even never-setting Draco would slip into the angel’s vision of onyx oblivion.

So it is that the meanings attached to the *topoi* in plague texts—to signs and omens, angels and demons, fate and scapegoats—continue to shift; that reinvention skews their interpretation and surprise displaces expectation; that destiny, tottering, is reconstructed, and the dialogue in the arena of plague literature continues to be renewed. The play ends, the novel closes; the story does not. And the conversation goes on.

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