

Doktori (PhD) értekezés

**Cultures of Pollution:
Epidemic Disease and the Biopolitics of Contagion
in Contemporary Anglophone Fiction**

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Debreceni Egyetem

BTK

2017

**CULTURES OF POLLUTION:
EPIDEMIC DISEASE AND THE BIOPOLITICS OF CONTAGION
IN CONTEMPORARY ANGLOPHONE FICTION**

Értekezés a doktori (Ph.D.) fokozat megszerzése érdekében
az irodalomtudományok tudományágban

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Készült a Debreceni Egyetem Irodalomtudományok Doktori Iskolája
(Angol-amerikai irodalomtudományi programja) keretében

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Én, Ureczky Eszter, teljes felelősségem tudatában kijelentem, hogy a benyújtott értekezés önálló munka, a szerzői jog nemzetközi normáinak tiszteletben tartásával készült, a benne található irodalmi hivatkozások egyértelműek és teljesek. Nem állok doktori fokozat visszavonására irányuló eljárás alatt, illetve 5 éven belül nem vontak vissza tőlem odaítélt doktori fokozatot. Jelen értekezést korábban más intézményben nem nyújtottam be és azt nem utasították el.

.....

Acknowledgements

The eight-year research synthesised in this doctoral dissertation is both a symptom of and a therapy for a personal and professional engagement with the dilemmas of embodiment and health. Most of all, I thank Professor Tamás Bényei, my supervisor, for supporting me during this long work process and contributing to its completion in more ways than I could count.

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Fig. 1. Angela Canada-Hopkins, *Cell No. 6* (2012)

Magyar nyelvű összefoglaló

A disszertáció egy speciális beteg test, a ragályos test/tetem metaforikus potenciálját feltárva kortárs anglofón, főleg brit történelmi regényeket elemez, amelyek különböző korokban játszódnak: a középkorban (William Owen Roberts: *Ragály*, 1991, magyar kiadás: 2004), a kora újkorban (Geraldine Brooks: *Csodák éve*, 2002, magyar kiadás: 2008), a viktoriánus korban (Matthew Kneale: *Sweet Thames* [Édes Temze], 1992 és Anne Roiphe: *An Imperfect Lens* [A tökéletlen lencse], 2006), valamint a késő 20. században (Alan Hollinghurst: *A szépség vonala*, 2004, magyar kiadás: 2011 és Alfred Corn: *Part of His Story* [A történet része], 1997). A dolgozat a nyugati kultúra három ikonikus járványos betegségének irodalmi ábrázolásait vizsgálja: a pestist, a kolerát és az AIDS-et. A három tematikus fejezet két-két regényt értelmez, s legtöbbjük a brit kulturális örökségben gyökerezik. London városa térbeli-kulturális állandóként jelenik meg, továbbá négy regényben is jelen van a Kelet-Nyugat dichotómia.

E témákat a dolgozat interdiszciplináris keretben tárgyalja, mely merít a kultúrorvostan belátásaiból, illetve a pszichoanalízis, a társadalmi nemek tudománya és az antropológia fogalmaiból is. A kultúratudományok tágabb kontextusán belül többek között Julia Kristeva pszichoanalitikus abjektelméletére, Mary Douglas antropológiai szenny- és margófogalmára, Michel Foucault hatalomfelfogására, valamint Susan Sontag betegségmetafora-olvasataira hivatkozom, valamint Antonio Negri és Michael Hardt, Slavoj Žižek, Gilles Deleuze és Jacques Derrida biopolitikai fogalmaira.

A *Ragályt* olyan regényként értelmezem, amely a test, az elbeszélés, az állam és gazdaság premodern és modern fogalmai közötti átmenetet ábrázolja. A testi szenny metaforái (a groteszk, karneváli test, az ürülék, a leprás alakja, a szexualitás és természetesen maga a pestis), valamint a szöveg töredékes, epizodemikus szerkezete kiemelik az olvasó 21. századi perspektívája és a regény 14. századi nézőpontja közötti episztemológiai távolságot. A *Csodák éve* a szubjektum kora újkori nézeteire épül, megragadva az egymással versengő ideológiákat: a talajt vesztő anglikán egyházat és a kibontakozóban lévő, megosztott orvosi intézményrendszert. A karantén és a füves asszony liminális alakja körvonalazzák a kor biopolitikai struktúráit, mely a 19. századi fertőző és fertőtlenített kolera-szenáriók felé vezetnek.

A viktoriánus kolera ábrázolásával Matthew Kneale *Sweet Thames* című regénye szemlélteti a kulturális és a térbeli fordulatok leszűrődését a bölcsészettudományokba, hisz a regény büzlő London-képe a 21. századi biopolitika sötét hasonmásaként és tisztos/tiszta elődjeként jelenik meg. Ehhez hasonlóan az *An Imperfect Lens* gyarmati színhelyet (Alexandria) használ arra, hogy kérdéseket vessen fel a politikai és orvosi autoritás 19. századi

felfogásairól. Ez a regény nem a londoni csatornarendszer földalatti tereit választja központi térbeli metaforájaként, hanem a mikroszkóplencse molekularizált élet-képét. A mértékletesség és a tisztaság 19. századi fogalmai nagyban emlékeztetnek a szexualitás mai, higiénikus, moralizált felfogásaira.

Alan Hollinghurst *A szépség vonala* és Alfred Corn *Part of His Story* című regényei az AIDS-járvány korai időszakát ábrázolják Londonban, s esztéta-alkatú, meleg férfi főszereplők sorsán keresztül mutatják be az áldozatok elszigetelődését. Nick Guest a Hollinghurst-regényben pharmakos-figuraként értelmezhető, aki az elit immunitásáért bemutatott egyfajta rituális áldozatként végzi. A *Part of His Story* ezzel szemben az AIDS-et az egyéni és a társadalmi történelem immáron historizált részeként pozicionálja, ahol London városa az amerikai utazó számára individualizált emlékművé válik. Az AIDS-testet ma elsősorban a bizonytalan határokkal rendelkező immunológiai testtel azonosítjuk, mely illeszkedik a szintén bizonytalan, egyre inkább medikalizált emberi szubjektum reprezentációs történetének ívéhez.

Summary in English

Exploring the metaphorical potential of a special kind of diseased body, the contagious corpus and corpse, the dissertation reads contemporary Anglophone historical novels set in different periods: the Middle Ages, the Early Modern period, the Victorian era, and the late 20th century: William Owen Roberts' *Pestilence* (1991), Geraldine Brooks' *Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague* (2002); Matthew Kneale's *Sweet Thames* (1992), Anne Roiphe's *An Imperfect Lens* (2006); Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (2004) and Alfred Corn's *Part of His Story* (1997). The dissertation will investigate the literary representation of three iconic epidemic diseases in Western culture: plague, cholera, and AIDS, and each chapter is devoted to the reading of two novels about the same epidemic, most of them rooted in British historical heritage. This study takes London as its constant spatial-cultural variable, moreover, in four of the novels discussed, there is a marked East–West dichotomy.

These issues can only be discussed using a multi-disciplinary approach, drawing upon the relevant insights of biopolitics, the fields of the medical humanities, psychoanalysis, gender studies and anthropology. The theoretical underpinnings of the readings are provided by, among others, Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic theory of the abject, Mary Douglas's anthropological approach to pollution and margins, Michel Foucault's ideas on power, and Susan Sontag's essays on the metaphors of illness, the writings of Giorgio Agamben, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, Slavoj Žižek, Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida.

I read *Pestilence* as a novel, which depicts the shift from pre-modern to modern notions of the body, narrative, state and economy. The metaphors of bodily filth (the grotesque, carnivalistic body, excrement, the figure of the leper, sexuality and the plague itself) along with the text's fragmented, episodemic structure underline the epistemological distance between the reader's 21st-century and the novel's 14th-century points of view. *Year of Wonders* builds on the early modern views on subjectivity, grasping the competing ideologies of the protestant Anglican church and the fledgling, internally divided medical establishment. The spatial control device of the quarantine and the cunning woman's treatment of plagued bodies outline the biopolitical structures leading up to (dis)infected 19th-century cholera scenarios.

Matthew Kneale's *Sweet Thames* demonstrates the infiltration of the cultural and spatial turns into the humanities, its putrefying London disclosing a desire of contemporary writing to purify our obsessive heritage of the Victorian era as a dark double and neat predecessor of 21st-century biopolitics. Similarly, *An Imperfect Lens* uses a colonial setting to pose questions about 19th-century images of political and medical authority in the face of a sanitary disaster, featuring not the vast sewage system but the tiny microscope lens and the molecularization of life as its

central spatial metaphor. Thus, 19th-century notions of temperance and cleanliness bear close resemblance to contemporary conceptions of hygienic sexual mores and often ageist ideas of wellness.

Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* and Alfred Corn's *Part of His Story* represent the early days of the AIDS epidemic in a London setting, using gay male aesthete protagonists to showcase the isolation of the AIDS victim. In *The Line of Beauty*, Nick Guest is interpreted as a pharmakos figure who challenges and at the same time sacrificially saves the elite's immunity. *Part of His Story*, on the other hand, portrays AIDS as a personal and (by now) historicized calamity, where the city of London becomes an individualized memorial for the American traveller writing his own narrative as a work of mourning—for himself as well. The body of AIDS is essentially conceived of today as an immunological body with risky boundaries, fitting the representational history of the precarious, increasingly medicalized human subject

Introduction: Disease as the Voice of the Organs

In his monograph on the medico-historical and philosophical concepts of disease, *The Normal and the Pathological*, Georges Canguilhem quotes the legendary French surgeon, René Leriche, when stating that “health is a life lived in the silence of the organs” (91). The research question of the present study has grown out of the implications of this sentence, i.e. from the idea that pathology could, then, be read as the “voice” of the organs, the language of the suffering human body. If disease can be seen (or heard) as the voice of the organs, it is also the biological encryption of cultural messages. My working hypothesis is that disease in a wider sense can also be interpreted as a cultural symptom and (retro)diagnosis, and that the culture-specific registers of the diseased body’s representation open up various discourses on embodiment, spatiality, gender, economic processes, and ultimately, biopolitics.¹ Illness as human suffering *par excellence* has been the topic of numerous works of art and literature in Western culture as well as a virulent metaphor of evil and pollution. In her influential essay, *Illness as a Metaphor*, Susan Sontag also claims that the metaphor of the body as a depiction of social and symbolic (dis)order is an age-old trope connecting the notions of disease and suffering: “[o]rder is the oldest concern of political philosophy, and if it is plausible to compare the polis to an organism, then it is plausible to compare civil disorder to an illness” (77). Accordingly, the representation of individual pain and the disruption of the social body appear to be historically interrelated issues, emphasising the cultural inscription and metaphorization of pathology both on personal and collective levels. In the (first) world then, “[i]llness is not only an individual experience, it is a cultural metaphor. Indeed, next to the ‘bomb’ it may be THE primary metaphor of the late 20th century” (Patton *Sex and Germs* 11). Epidemic as a calamitous subtype of disease especially raises the question of the body vs. polis dichotomy since the suffering, the pain and the symptoms of the somatic body appear to be not only in a metaphorical but also a metonymical relationship with the social body of the polis, posing a disruptive threat. The literary representations of epidemic disease hence constitute a prime field for examining this dilemma simultaneously as the voice of the organs and a cultural-discursive construct. Whenever a supposedly “new” contagious disease appears, it sooner or later sinks into general consciousness, challenging previously unquestioned concepts of purity and pollution in medical, ethical and even aesthetic ways. Contagious diseases are especially saturated, overdetermined cross-sections of various fields of perception and knowledge, since they inevitably function as distorted mirrors of current social risk factors and means of control. Thus,

¹ Bryan S. Turner’s postulates similarly claim that “(1) disease is a language; (2) the body is a representation; and (3) medicine is political practice (Treichler “AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse” 370).

the concept of epidemic disease mobilizes several different discourses, and, from a cultural studies point of view, its representations in literature (as well as film and popular culture) are particularly complex.

I shall start out from the premise that every historical epoch seems to produce its devastatingly new and interesting “period illness” (Spackman 32),² a malady that breeds discourses which reveal a great deal about the most pressing social anxieties and cultural tensions of the day. The dissertation will thus elaborate on the representations and discursive constructions of epidemic disease, focussing on the signifying practices of science, the institutionalization of disease and its accompanying biopolitical phenomena, as well as the metaphors of the contaminating, polluting, permeable and permeating body in historically changing social contexts. One key theme that connects the different notions of epidemic disease across the ages is the danger of the transgression of normalized bodily and social boundaries. This will be one of the recurrent questions of the individual chapters, for it is precisely the boundary-collapsing threat of epidemics that is crucial in the creation of various medico-spatial systems of surveillance and biopower.

Even though “infectious diseases as ‘big killers’ have largely been replaced (in the West) by degenerative illnesses” (Lange 68) by today, the so-called “re-emerging” diseases and “emerging infectious diseases” pose continuous threats to civilization.³ Consequently, the history of public health can be read as a blueprint of epidemiological ideologies, insofar as, according to Louis Althusser’s definition, “[i]deology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their own conditions of existence” (1498), and, one might add, to their physical wellbeing. Today in the West public health is both a national and a global issue, as “the Westphalian system of public health is at work [...] which was based on the principle of non-intervention in the domestic affairs of individual states. However, the first international health convention that was actually implemented, signed in Paris in 1903, placed public health within this international framework” (Zylberman 24). As a result of such 20th-century endeavours, currently an international system called Global Public Health Intelligence Network (GPHIN) exists, which “is a technique that enables timeliness of report, that is, a speeding up of international reports of outbreak to a point when outbreak occurs and intervention is possible” (Weir 258). On the individual level, the biopolitical rights of the human being were laid down

² As early as 1858 Jules Michelet’s *L’Amour* argued that “each century is characterized by a great illness: leprosy – thirteenth century; black death – fourteenth century; syphilis – sixteenth century; and in the nineteenth century it was the ulcerated womb of women and the paralysed brain of men that summed up the epoch” (Jordanova 76).

³ It is enough to think about the antibiotic-resistant superbacteria or “superbugs” that might lead to the reappearance of previously defeated diseases. Even the dreaded smallpox, eradicated from the Earth in 1977, can come back if, as a result of climate change, the permafrost in Siberia melts and discloses ancient graves (Johnston).

by the 1947 Nuremberg Tribunal and the Nuremberg Code, establishing the necessity of human consent in medical experiments. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1950 European Convention on Human Rights stipulated that there is no life that is purely and simply biological, a statement primarily necessitated by the actualized horrors of Nazi ideology, and, according to Giorgio Agamben, the very logic of modern biopolitics as such. Thus, the legal limitations of authorities concerning public health, the system of checks and balances are central to what is meant by European civilization today, while landmark scientific breakthroughs like the finishing of the Human Genome Project in 2000 still provide reason for trust and confidence in the powers of the medical sciences.

The prevention and handling of extraordinary public health dangers are embedded in an increasingly controlled culture of everyday healthism and rising levels of somatic anxiety. In the contemporary West, where, as Alison Bashford puts it, “the good citizen is the healthy citizen” (*Imperial Hygiene* 117), notions like “biological” or “genetic citizenship” (Rose 132) have started to define available subject positions. On the one hand, biotechnological achievements and the health-connected responsabilization of people create the belief “that life processes are transformable and controllable to an increasing degree” (Lemke 4), while this empowerment is built on a constant fear of losing control over our (social) bodies. The various private or state-governed purification and protection rituals one willingly or forcefully undergoes are all part of the 21st-century civic religion of wellness, a notion often applied in the face of such—only partly—preventable problems as econocides and pandemics. Biomedicine and the biosecurity industrial complex are formative of both the popular imagination and public policy today, creating fear as a means of control: “[w]e are worried about literal bioterrorism, but we are also obsessed with the ‘plague logic’, the suspicion that particular groups are secretly boring their way into our society, jeopardizing our security, poised to strike us in our collective vital organs” (Weinstein 103). The interrelations of seemingly contradictory medical and military rhetoric are symptomatic of this fear, since the “medicalization of war” and the “militarization of medicine” (Williams 214) gradually take place. As Slavoj Žižek points out, this cross-contamination is only logical, as health and war are the two extreme poles of the biopolitical scale: “[n]o wonder the two strongest industrial complexes today are the military and the medical, that of destroying and that of prolonging life” (“Biopolitics” 509). In spatial-political terms one can thus talk about an “intense bio-preparedness” (Bashford *Medicine at the Border* 13) in connection with national medico-legal border control, public health surveillance, while twentieth-century world health administration tendencies are often labelled neo-colonial, even: “this colonial inheritance has created a world health culture oscillating between ‘global neighbourhood’ and ‘universal otherhood’” (6).

The quick rise of biopolitics in the humanities in the past decades is rooted in the above outlined culture of somatic anxiety and security obsession, as the profusion of new terminology also suggests. For instance, Theodor Adorno used the notion of *physiocracy* (103) to describe this condition, while he also anticipated Foucault, who pointed out that *somatocracy* has been taking over the place of a theocracy (99) in the West. More recently, Lennard Davis and David Morris have coined the term *biocultures* with the goal of “building on established cross-disciplinary fields such as bioethics, medical humanities, and medical anthropology in order to formulate new, hybridized perspectives by which to account better for the intricate entanglement of biology and other spheres in the twenty-first century” (Barney 5). Furthermore, John Protevi uses the related notion of *political physiology* to examine the imbrications of the social and the symbolic: “how our bodies, minds, and social settings are intricately and intimately linked, by combining philosophy and politics” (*Political Affect* xi).

These acute biopolitical problems have been present in fiction for decades. For example, *1984* foretells the crisis of information technology, just as *Brave New World* can be read as a critique of biotechnology (Fukuyama 3-4). However, the present dissertation will focus on the literary depiction of epidemic disease in contemporary historical novels, with special attention to the bodily and spatially examined notions of contagion and pollution. The chosen texts seem to share a belief in the ability of literature to depict past crises in order to reconceptualise present-day dilemmas, to re-present absent stories and bodies in the Deleuzian sense, as Daniel W. Smith puts it in his introduction to the volume *Essays Critical and Clinical*: “[t]he fundamental idea behind Deleuze’s ‘critique et Clinique’ project is that authors and artists, like doctors and clinicians, can themselves be seen as profound symptomatologists” (xvii), or, as Deleuze⁴ himself claims: “[h]ealth as literature, as writing, consists of inventing a people who are missing” (4).

Exploring the metaphorical potential of a special kind of diseased body, the contagious corpus and corpse, the chapters will read contemporary anglophone, mainly British historical novels set in different periods: the Middle Ages, the Early Modern period, the Victorian era,

⁴ Interestingly enough, Gilles Deleuze, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Paul Ricoeur have all used the metaphor of disease or the virus to describe their professions as philosophers. Deleuze and Guattari argue in *A Thousand Plateaus* that “[w]e form a rhizome with our viruses, or rather our viruses cause us to form a rhizome with other animals” (10), while according to Wittgenstein, “[t]he philosopher’s treatment of a question is like the treatment of an illness” (PI § 255)” (qtd. in Elliot 12). Carl Elliot explains this as follows: “for Wittgenstein, the appearance of a philosophical problem is a sign that something has gone wrong, a pathology that the philosopher must diagnose and treat. He sometimes referred to philosophical confusion as a disease for which his method of philosophising is a cure (PI133, z § 382)”. Finally, Paul Ricoeur asks: “[m]y question: must we not ask whether the writing of history, too, is remedy or poison?” (*Memory* 141). Moreover, the Introduction will elaborate on Hans-Georg Gadamer’s notion of health, while the AIDS chapter is built on Jacques Derrida’s understanding of the pharmakos.

and the late 20th century: Wiliam Owen Roberts' *Pestilence* (1991), Geraldine Brooks' *Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague* (2002), Matthew Kneale's *Sweet Thames* (1992), Anne Roiphe's *An Imperfect Lens* (2006), Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (2004) and Alfred Corn's *Part of His Story* (1997).⁵ This rather wide time span is counterbalanced by a tight thematic focus: the dissertation will investigate the literary representation of three iconic epidemic diseases in Western culture: plague, cholera, and AIDS. To my present knowledge, no systematic treatment of contagion in contemporary (historical) fiction has been attempted so far, just as there is no monographic study to address similar issues in this or even a comparable body of contemporary historical fiction. However, beyond the theoretical works not directly connected to the topic of epidemic disease mentioned in the section on terminology, I have relied on other thematically related works, such as Arne De Boever's *Narrative Care: Biopolitics and the Novel* (2013), Jennifer Cooke's *Legacies of Plague in Literature, Theory and Film* (2009), an anthology of epidemic-related essays written from a cultural studies point of view entitled *Contagion*, edited by Alison Bashford and Claire Hooker (2002), and Barbara Fass Leavy's *To Blight with Plague. Studies in a Literary Theme* (1992). The interpretations will not address the cultural iconography of other widespread and symbolically loaded illnesses such as cancer, tuberculosis or syphilis. On the one hand, as opposed to massive, collective outbreaks, these diseases are identified "diseases of individuals" by Susan Sontag (*Illness* 60), and as such, they would require a different approach from markedly large-scale and quickly moving calamities. On the other hand, the literary treatment of the Romantic myth of consumption, the decadent discourse of "the pox", and the degenerative logic of cancer have all been widely researched even in the field of literary studies.⁶

A further important aspect of the dissertation is its historical perspective: rather than reading literary texts from the evoked historical ages themselves, the corpus selected for analysis consists exclusively of contemporary works, since the close readings of these novels will address late 20th-century and early 21st-century perspectives on biopolitics, which are inseparable both from the aftermath of the AIDS scare and the filtering down of the cultural

⁵The Age of Reason is an obvious structural gap here. The novels which could be discussed in this field (such as Clare Clark's *Nature of Monsters* [2007], Nicholas Griffin's *The House of Sight and Shadow* [2000], Andrew Miller's *Ingenious Pain* [1996], Rose Tremain's *Restoration* [1989], and, as a Victorian exception, Patricia Duncker's *James Miranda Barry* [1999]) represent the quest for scientific knowledge as driven by "pure" reason, and it is usually emblematised by the *leitmotif* of dissection, a key metaphor of the gendered discourse of medicine, allegorising the obsessive, masculine mission into the dark mysteries of the pathologized female body. Since "Foucault has described the penetration of the medical gaze into the interior of the body in the practice of pathological anatomy as 'the technique of the corpse'" (Cartwright 3), the readings of the above mentioned texts could interpret the voyeuristic disclosure of human anatomy and that of the history of medicine as parallel phenomena, which would require a separate study—the planned continuation of the present work.

⁶ See for instance the works of Athena Vrettos, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Frank Mort, Susan Sontag, etc.

turn into contemporary literature. The reality and the metaphor of epidemic disease is given a special relevance by the current crises of our globalized world, as recent reflections on the migration crisis and xenophobia also show (see for ex. Gushulak and McPherson). Samuel Cohn's argument about the connection of AIDS and historical studies might also be valid for literary interpretations:

[i]n fact, A.I.D.S. has been the launching pad for historians' recent search for connecting disease and hate in the more distant past, especially with sixteenth-century syphilis and cholera in the nineteenth century, the latter unleashing class fear and hatred with organized attacks against physicians, hospital workers and government officials across eastern and western Europe and the Americas. ("Pandemics" 540)

Beside adopting a trans-historical approach to interpret universal human attitudes like xenophobia and stigmatization especially within an urban scenario, the dissertation also provides a double perspective on the diseases in question, as each chapter is devoted to the reading of two novels about the same epidemic. Most of the examined novels rooted in the British historical heritage—even though the authors themselves are not exclusively British, since Welsh (William Owen Roberts), Australian (Geraldine Brooks), and American (Alfred Corn, Ann Roiphe) authors are also featured. Thus, rather than the writers' nationality, the main criterion of inclusion have been the themes and settings of the works. Furthermore, all chapters end with a selection of images of the discussed epidemics, representing various media and eras in order to provide an iconic presence for the absent, contagious bodies of history, as Hans Belting argues about the roles of images: "*iconic presence* still maintains a body's absence and turns it into what must be called *visible absence*. Images live from the paradox that they perform *the presence of an absence* or vice versa" (Belting 312). For all the individual differences, this study takes London as its constant spatial-cultural variable, for it is the locus of three out of the six novels; also, the British capital has been an icon of urban culture as such: "throughout its long history, the 'London' novel—from Defoe to Dickens to Stoker to Ali—has always been a 'world' novel of this 'world city'" (Wall, Cynthia 342). London is thus a historically loaded space in any representation of large-scale epidemics and also a meta-representation of urban space, the modern polis and body politic itself. Moreover, in all the novels discussed in the dissertation, there is a marked East–West dichotomy, the East being—in the eyes of the Europeans—the perennial source of polluting invasion, whether the stories are set in Wales and Cairo (*Pestilence*), the Derbyshire village of Eyam and Oran (*Year of Wonders*), London and Alexandria (*An Imperfect Lens*), or London and New York (*Part of His Story*).

In terms of genre, most of the chosen novels can be labelled as examples of the postmodern historical novel, especially Hutcheonian historiographical metafiction, which “attempts to demarginalize the literary through confrontation with the historical, and it does so both thematically and formally” (108)—Kneale’s novel on cholera, for instance, is a pastiche of the sensation novel, while Roberts’ *Pestilence* rewrites the carnivalistic novel and the Menippean satire, as the respective chapters will elaborate on. Both the “postmodern” and the “historical” components of the genre, however, require some specification, even if the dissertation does not aim to address necessarily limiting but not necessarily enlightening literary theoretical questions of genre. From my point of view, David Cannadine’s general definition seems useful, as he argues that postmodern historical fiction uses the past to project contemporary problems onto previous discourses: “[t]hese are not historical novels in the sense that their main purpose is to re-create a past world through the exercise of the fictional imagination; rather, they are novels which find it easiest to address present-day concerns by putting them in a past context” (10). This self-reflexive relationship with previous ages is basically the approach Foucault identifies as the “history of the present,” what Deleuze metaphorically calls “tracing,”⁷ Reinhart Koselleck identifies it as *Begriffsgeschichte*, that is, “conceptual history” (Dubreuil 91), also echoing Paul Rabinow’s suggestion that “we need to anthropologize the West” (Sibley ix) by grasping the hermeneutic interest of such fiction in the evolution of certain historical themes up until the present. Brian McHale’s notion of apocryphal history⁸ seems to be even more useful, though. He sums up the strategies of the postmodern historical novel as follows:

[a]pocryphal history, creative anachronism, historical fantasy—these are the typical strategies of the postmodernist revisionist historical novel. [...] First, it revises the *content* of the historical record, reinterpreting the historical record, often demystifying or debunking the orthodox version of the past. Secondly, it revises, indeed transforms, the conventions and norms of historical fiction itself. [...] Apocryphal history contradicts the official version in one of two ways: either it *supplements* the historical record, claiming to restore what has been lost or suppressed; or it *displaces* official

⁷ “The cultural book is necessarily a tracing: already a tracing of itself, a tracing of the previous book by the same author, a tracing of other books however different they may be, and endless tracing of established concepts and words, a tracing of the world present, past and future” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 24).

⁸ According to McHale, “classic” historical fiction makes the transgression between the real and the fictional as invisible as possible, by matching the “inner structure” of its fictional worlds to that of the real world. As opposed to this, postmodernist fiction makes this transition as spectacular as possible by contradicting the public record of “official” history and by anachronisms (90).

history altogether. In the first of these cases, apocryphal history operates in the “dark areas” of history, apparently in conformity to the norms of “classic” historical fiction but in fact *parodying* them. In the second case, apocryphal history spectacularly violates the “dark areas” constraint. (90)

Contagious historical narratives can be identified as apocryphal ones as they represent and reimagine dominant historical narratives for contemporary audiences by supplementing and displacing narratives of the past. When it comes to the historical and literary representations of epidemics, it seems that despite the historically decisive nature of major epidemics, outbreak narratives were often created by writers of fiction, and not historians, as “[e]pidemic disease, when it did become decisive in peace or in war, ran counter to the effort to make the past intelligible. Historians consequently played such episodes down” (McNeill 4).⁹ As opposed to this, literature, especially the novel, appeared more capable of grasping the meanings of such events. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, the novel as such can be regarded as the most fertile genre due to its inclusiveness, and this is why it “continues to develop, that is as yet uncompleted” (“Epic and Novel” 3). Writing about Bakhtin, Michael Holquist sums up the advantages of the literary imagination over historical narrativization by claiming that

[h]istories occupy themselves with relationships between the strata of legal codes, religious beliefs, economic organization, family structure and so forth, in order to create a series of moments in which the interaction of these forces can be seen in their simultaneity as well as their continuity. And novels, too, concern themselves more or less with such interrelationships, the particular assemblage of discourses that define specific cultures. But histories differ from novels in that they insist on a homology between the sequence of their own telling, the form they impose to create a coherent explanation in the form of a narrative on the one hand, and the sequence of what they tell on the other. This templating of what is enunciated with the act of enunciation is a narrative consequence of the historian's professional desire to tell “wie es eigentlich

⁹The reason for this can also lie in the so-called “whiggish” tradition of history writing: “‘whiggish’ is academic shorthand for a version of history that postulates a single passage into the modern world leading resolutely from the dark ages of ignorance, superstition, and suffering into a brighter world of knowledge, science, and abundance” (Lindemann 1). As opposed to the “whiggish” tradition of history writing, de Certeau also identifies the work of the historian in a similar way, evoking Foucault’s position in *Archeology of Knowledge*, by the addressing of previously ignored fields, that is, spaces and bodies: “[t]he historian comes to circulate around acquired rationalizations. He or she works in the margins. In this respect, the historian becomes a prowler. In a society gifted at generalization, endowed with powerful centralizing strategies, the historian moves in the direction of the frontiers of great regions already exploited. He or she ‘deviates’ by going back to sorcery, madness, festival, popular literature, the forgotten world of the peasant, Occitania, etc., all those zones of silence” (*The Writing of History*, qtd. in Highmore 37).

gewesen ist". The novel, by contrast, dramatizes the gaps that always exist between what is told and, the telling of it, constantly experimenting with social, discursive and narrative asymmetries. (Introduction, M. Bakhtin: *The Dialogic Imagination* xxviii)

The postmodern historical novel especially seems to capitalize on the Bakhtinian notion of "novelness" by incorporating various discourses, such as medical history. It does so by creating a perspective to the past akin to cultural studies and the literary theories inspiring them, such as Foucault's archeology, which emphasises discontinuities, Deleuze and Guattari's above quoted critical-theoretical metaphor of contagion, and of course body, gender and postcolonial studies have also greatly contributed to the literary treatment of epidemics as formative historical ruptures or traumas. The chosen novel thus do not agree with Henry James' opinion of the historical novel's ability to abridge the time gap between the author's and the narrative's times, as Geraldine Brooks, the writer of *Year of Wonders* points out when quoting James, who "once wrote that any attempt to write about a time more than fifty years removed from one's own was worthless and should not even be attempted, because we cannot capture 'the representation of the old consciousness, the soul, the sense, the horizon, the vision of individuals in whose minds half the things that make ours, that make the modern world, were non-existent'" (Brooks P.S. 10).

The novels to be interpreted are all preoccupied with the historically constructed notions of disease, contagion and large-scale death, which can also be examined from a psychological point of view as so-called "constitutive traumas" (Highmore 141) of Western culture. Shosana Felman even originates literature itself in the clash of an uncontrollable social trauma and the power of law: "literature emerges from the very tension between law and trauma as a compelling existential, correlative yet differential dimension of meaning" (*Juridical* 8). The literary (aesthetic) and legal (biopolitical) aspects of epidemics will also appear in the chapters with special regard to Agamben's law-inspired biopolitical theories, such as the state of emergency, the camp and the homo sacer.

The emplotment of epidemics as chaos narratives has become a popular academic and literary topic only recently, insofar as in Hayden White's understanding emplotment means "the encodation of the facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific kinds of plot structures" (*Tropics of Discourse* 83). The increasing amount of epidemic novels and films in the past few decades can also be explained through a 20th-century tendency to masochistically showcase spectacular narratives of social collapse, as Žižek puts it: "one of the favoured intellectuals' exercises throughout the twentieth century was the urge to 'catastrophize' the

situation (“The Ideology of the Empire” 255).¹⁰ Catastrophe narratives like epidemics seem to be able to establish a meaningful contact, a conceptual bridge between various temporalities, not unrelated to the way in which Norbert Elias discusses the distance of slow biological time, quickening socio-historical time, and individual memory (*Time* 96-97). It seems that postmodern historical novels on epidemic outbreaks represent the continuity of a human need for meaningful narratives and development in the face of collapse, or, as Defoe’s narrator puts it in *A Journal of the Plague Year*, carrying out “the unpleasant Work of reflecting” (248).

From my point of view, the single most important feature that links the chosen works is their attempt to encompass the bodily and spatial contexts of epidemics. Thus, not only is the past a foreign country, as L. P. Hartley famously claimed, but it is also a foreign body, as my interpretations of the texts will argue, speaking through the voice of the organs. That is to say, the six novels interpreted in the dissertation want “to put the flesh back on history” (De Groot 3), showing that historical fiction¹¹ of the distant and the more recent past at its best “reminds readers of their historical particularity and simultaneity” (4). It could also be argued that questions of somato-spatial threats are especially central in the case of British literature, where the image and establishing fantasy of the self-enclosed island and the mentality of defensive insularity have long been tied up with the threat of contagious or colonial invasion, as Shakespeare’s John of Gaunt puts it, famously calling England a “fortress built by nature for herself / Against infection and the hand of war” (*Richard II* 2.1.43–44).

Taking as its focus the issues stated above and working with the corpus of chosen texts, the dissertation will argue that the figurative and discursive dimensions of contagious diseases suggest a great deal about the way the cultural imagination of the respective historical periods conceived of the boundaries of the human body and social space as such, and that contemporary literary depictions of plague, cholera, and AIDS can be read as simultaneously culture- and age-specific as well as trans-historical metaphors of the polluted/polluting human body. The chapters will thus examine various metaphors of the abject body that disrupts the symbolic constructions of the individual and social body, drawing upon the methodologies and insights of cultural studies, a complex approach that has been in fertile interaction with contemporary

¹⁰ Symptomatically, most post-apocalyptic stories are based on some kind of an outbreak narrative, for instance in zombie narratives and mainstream, high culture dystopias like Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) or popular films like *Children of Men* (2006).

¹¹ As opposed to this view, in Hayden White’s understanding, this is why postmodern historical fiction supports Aristotle’s theory that poetry is more philosophical than historiography, insofar as poetry addresses possible events, events that were plausible in their story context, while poetry reveals the typical and thus the essential about human fate. Historiography, on the other hand, is tied to real events and thus to the accidental – events that were often more surprising than plausible – so it lacked the inner logic that made poetry so philosophically instructive (*Tropes for the Past* 9).

historical fiction and the medical humanities. One presupposition behind the analyses is that the cultural meanings of contagious bodies in the medical sense are inseparable from the broader anthropological notions of social boundaries, and also from the mechanisms of repression and projection in the psychoanalytic sense.

As suggested above, the readings are connected by a consistent double focus on the culturally constructed somatic and spatial meanings generated by the given epidemic, drawing upon recent biopolitical theories. In the case of the plague, the metaphors of pollution are closely connected to moral punishment, varying religious and political forms of judgement, while in contemporary literature the plague is often represented as a figure of chaos, collapsing the binary oppositions of the sacred and the profane, order and disruption, purity and filth. In the opening chapter, plague is seen as the threshold between pre-modern and modern conceptions of individual and collective bodies, while the spaces of rural Wales and England are opposed to the cityscapes of London and Cairo. Both in the medieval world of *Pestilence* and the early modern story of *Year of Wonders* the increasingly secular surveillance of the body is depicted as a major shift in Western biopolitics and the treatment of states of emergency in the Agambenian sense. The closed space of the quarantine as the central spatial trope of plague control will be also read with Agamben's concept of the camp, while the gendering of the emerging medical profession is discussed via the figure of the female healer or "cunning woman" who will be interpreted as a symbolic continuation and containment of the witch.

The second chapter discusses cholera as the iconic epidemic of the 19th century, which appears as the disease of imperialism. 19th-century constructions of cholera epidemics reveal imperial anxieties as well as fears concerning urban development, while contemporary fictionalisations of cholera seem to reveal repressed, indirectly present problems such as the interconnections of sexual and sanitary politics in the age of the vast British Empire—the predecessor of today's globalisation practices. The urban management of London and Alexandria in *Sweet Thames* and *An Imperfect Lens* provides points of reference for the interpretation of cholera's role in the arrival of laboratory science and the microscopic gaze fighting the invisible "miasmatic" enemy, which is metaphorically linked to the abject metropolitan underclasses and the colonial natives. By reading the Jewish characters of Roiphe's novel as Agambenian *homo sacri*, the interpretation reads pogroms as universal scapegoating practices accompanying epidemic outbreaks.

Finally, the concluding section on AIDS forms a frame structure together with the chapter on plague, since AIDS was initially dubbed as the "gay plague". In this sense, the examination of the AIDS novels will also serve to establish a meta-level of reading contagion and contamination. Without a safe cultural-historical distance from it, the mechanisms of the

AIDS panic reveal the processes of scapegoating, stigmatizing, and othering. Cultural theoreticians tend to agree that we live in a risk society, and this diagnostic approach to 20th- and 21st-century culture seems to create AIDS as the emblem of contemporary victimhood—enhancing the interest of today’s novelists in past eras’ epidemics. *The Line of Beauty* and *Part of His Story* feature London and New York as the sites of aesthete gay men’s struggles with the emerging AIDS panic of the 1980s, when risk culture and the essentially intrinsic Other became the primary sources of anxiety, with the biopolitical rhetoric of immunity being central both to the medical and popular discussion of the disease. The aesthete figure is contextualized as an ambiguous *pharmakos*-like character, who is at the same time the cause and the cure for the late modern crisis of distinguishing the safe self from the precarious other. As the table below shows, the dissertation locates the three diseases in different parts of the social body, each epidemic symbolically pointing out the given period’s most pressing socio-cultural tensions: the skin in the case of plague buboes, metabolism and choleraic diarrhoea, the immune system in connection with AIDS. On the whole, the thesis claims that infectious disease has bred discourses of somatic and spatial biopolitical control in Western cultural history via the practices of distancing disease and identifying contagious bodies with culturally changing ideas of pollution.

<u>Contagion</u>	PLAGUE	CHOLERA	AIDS
Part of the (social) body concerned	skin (buboes)	metabolism (diarrhoea)	immune system (infection)
Areas and eras of contagious pollution	(pre-)modern collective & individual body	imperial natives & underclasses	postmodern gay sexual mores & mourning
Spaces of exclusion and inclusion	Wales and Cairo cosmic worldview & quarantine	London & Alexandria microscopic gaze & Petri dish	London & New York privacy & urbanity
Dominant discourse of the disease	religious	scientific	military
Biopolitical notions applied	state of emergency quarantine as camp	abjection Jews as homo sacri	immunity aesthete as pharmakos
Long-term social-cultural results of the disease	secular surveillance	laboratory science	risk culture

Disease, especially contagious disease, necessarily entails the crisis not only of the relationship between subjectivity and embodiment, but also the borderline between individual bodies, the transgression of bodily and symbolic boundaries within the social body. These issues can only be discussed using a multi-disciplinary approach, one that draws upon the relevant insights of biopolitics, supported by certain notions from the fields of psychoanalysis, gender studies and anthropology. The theoretical background of the dissertation is also informed by the field of the medical humanities, defined as the “socially interpretative dimension of modern medicine (Ferber 2), where textuality, materiality, and history play equally important roles. The broadest theoretical background of the dissertation, however, is that of cultural studies¹², with a marked Foucauldian slant. The central notions discussed here, contagion and pollution, inevitably

¹² Other relevant academic discourses and future points of departure could be disability studies, identity politics, corporeal narratology and psycho-geography—I thank Dr Anna Kérchy for all her helpful ideas.

challenge the seemingly pre-established meanings of normality and pathology. Within the broader context of cultural studies, the theoretical underpinnings of the introduction and the later close readings are provided by, among others, Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic theory of the abject in *The Powers of Horror*, Mary Douglas's anthropological approach to pollution and margins (*Purity and Danger, Implicit Meanings*), Michel Foucault's ideas on the "capillary functioning of power" (*Discipline and Punish* 207), surveillance and the social body, and Susan Sontag's essays on the metaphors of illness in *Illness as a Metaphor* and *AIDS and Its Metaphors*. I aim to initiate a dialogue between these diverse somato-spatial theories of transgression, othering, abjection and biopolitical power in my attempt to understand the dynamics of epidemics as disruptions of symbolic systems as dramatised in the chosen texts that explore the historically changing and culturally constructed notions of abnormality and pollution.

This approach is partly inspired by Michel de Certeau, who draws the following parallel between history and psychoanalysis as two different ways of critically relating to the past and the present, but still grasping both notions in spatial terms by "distributing the space of memory":

[p]sychoanalysis recognizes the past in the present; historiography places them one beside the other. Psychoanalysis treats the relation as one of imbrication (one in the place of the other), of repetition (one reproduces the other in another form), of the equivocal and of the quid pro quo (What 'takes the place' of what? Everywhere, there are games of masking, reversal, and ambiguity). Historiography conceives the relation as one of succession (one after the other), correlation (greater or lesser proximities), cause and effect (one follows from the other), and disjunction (either one or the other), but nor both at the same time). (*Heterologies* 4)

This phenomenological understanding of the past in the present will be complemented by reliance on biopolitical philosophy. As it is a field still in the making, its object is not easily defined. Thomas Lemke, for instance, defines it the following way: "the meaning of biopolitics lies in its ability to make visible the always contingent, always precarious difference between politics and life, culture and nature, between the realm of the intangible and unquestioned, on the one hand, and the sphere of moral and legal action, on the other" (31). Monica Casper and Lisa Jean Moore's definition of biopolitics, on the other hand, explicitly identifies the field with social surveillance processes:

[o]n a broader scale, biopolitics is defined as the social practices and institutions established to regulate a population's quality (and quantity) of life. Disciplinary power and biopower, which together can be understood as biopolitics, operate together to normalize individuals by coercing them, often by subtle mechanisms, to conform to standards and, in so doing, to create self-regulating pliant bodies and populations. (*Missing Bodies* 7)

Since Casper and Moore here use the Foucauldian term biopower, it needs to be pointed out that Foucault did not finish his oft-quoted research on this topic. In 1976 he used the term biopower to refer to a kind of political technique instead of biopolitics, but he died in 1984 without specifying the difference between the two: “[i]f one can apply the term bio-history to the pressures through which the movements of life and the processes of history interfere with one another, one would have to speak of bio-power to designate what brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life” (*History of Sexuality I* 143). Despite the incompleteness of his biopolitical research, Foucault's ideas on governmentality and discipline are still among the most inspiring notions of the field, as the works of Agamben, Rose and Esposito demonstrate.

Giorgio Agamben (along with the theories of Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt on colonisation and Slavoj Žižek's writings on consumer culture) has become one of the most influential thinkers working in the wake of the generation that included Foucault,¹³ the already quoted Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida, whose theory of the *pharmakos* will be elaborated on in the next section on terminology. Agamben's most important claim in his work *Homo Sacer* is that sovereign power is born from and maintained by the creation of the so-called biopolitical body: “[i]t can even be said that the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power” (6). Agamben introduces various notions of life in his works to be relied on later, the first two being *zoe* and *bios*:

[t]he Greeks had no single term to express what we mean by the word 'life'. They used two terms that, although traceable to a common etymological root, are semantically and

¹³ Agamben refers to Foucault when positioning his own results in legal history: “Foucault worked in many areas, but there are two he left out of account: law and theology. It seemed natural to me to direct my efforts in these directions” (qtd. in Durantaye 209). While Foucault's results are often criticized for their incompleteness, Agamben's style is famously difficult, “compact to the point of ellipsis” (Mills *The Philosophy of Agamben* 9). Also, the fact that Agamben created most of his works in the 1990s has a significance: “Agamben's *Homo Sacer* and other political works were written in the immediate post-Cold War period and their full appreciation is impossible without considering the context of their emergence and the political-theoretical standpoint they explicitly or implicitly targeted” (Prozorov 125).

morphologically distinct: *zoē*, which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods), and *bios*, which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group. (2)

Catherine Mills sums up all four of the central life notions of Agamben's theory as follows: "[t]here are thus four categories of life that operate in *Homo Sacer* and throughout other texts: *zoe* or biological life, *bios* or political life, bare life (sometimes rendered as sacred life or naked life, from the original Italian term '*nuda vita*' [what Walter Benjamin's '*das blosse Leben*' in his early writings on violence, my note]) and a new 'form-of-life', occasionally rendered as 'happy life'" (75). This theory of life/lives will be applied in the dissertation with relation to contagion and pollution, claiming that outbreaks of epidemics and their handling by authorities often reduces people to the level of *bios*, and at the same time such situations (states of exception or emergency) are also habitually utilized to create more controlled forms of *bios*. In order to apply this general biopolitical framework to the novels, however, a brief specification of the theoretical terminology is needed.

The dissertation on a general level addresses the culturally constructed notions of normality and pathology in discussing the historically changing biopolitical practices of engaging with contagion. The two poles of this binary opposition appear as mutually contaminating, one defined by the other. The chapters thus place the discourse on contagion in the context of this fuzzy dichotomy. Alison Bashford lists several notions that are metaphorically connected to the cultural meanings of contagion: "[t]he potent web of signifiers with which contagion is connected – resistance, immunity, colonisation, hygiene, blood, plague, hysteria—are concepts deployed poetically, theoretically, politically and scientifically" (*Contagion* 4). My approach to the topic partly relies on the same context with a stronger biopolitical background. To establish the terminological framework of this argument, I will elaborate the basic somatic and spatial notions to be used in the chapters, divided into three interrelated groups: (1) health, disease, epidemic; (2) pollution, othering, urban space; (3) biopower, death, precariousness.

Health, disease, epidemic

Health, despite its seemingly self-evident meaning, seems to be a notion very difficult to grasp either in a medical or a phenomenological sense, as the already quoted René Leriche's statement shows: "Diseases are new ways of life." (Canguilhem 100). The World Health Organisation's definition of health identifies it with a somewhat vague, potentially impossible, overall experience of well-being: "a state of complete physical, mental, and social *well-being*" (Aho 14, my emphasis). Kant also uses the same expression, arguing that "well-being is not felt for it is the simple consciousness of living" (qtd. in Canguilhem 243). Gadamer defines its meaning by a lack¹⁴ of awareness, too, as for him, health means the luxury of forgetting about ourselves:

[w]ithout doubt it is part of our nature as living beings that our conscious self-awareness remains largely in the background so that our enjoyment of good health is constantly concealed from us. Yet despite its hidden character health none the less manifests itself in a general feeling of well-being. It shows itself above all where such a feeling of well-being means we are open to new things, ready to embark on new enterprises and, *forgetful of ourselves*, scarcely notice the demands and strains which are put on us. This is what health is. (112, my emphasis)

In a more pragmatic way, Simon Williams reads health as the material condition of physical participation in culture by claiming that health is an "embodied practice and moral performance in which bodies, literally and metaphorically, become 'viable' – i.e. socially and culturally legitimated, materially shaped and practically 'enmattered'" (51). Foucault, on the other hand, in his introduction to Canguilhem's *The Normal and the Pathological*, approaches the normal functioning of an organism from the direction of negativity, the ability to deviate from normality: "in the extreme, life is what is capable of error" (22). Finally, Canguilhem himself states that disease is actually the sign of the body's ability to bounce back to its orderly state: "[t]o be in good health means being able to fall sick and recover, it is a *biological luxury*" (199, my emphasis). He importantly adds that "the normal is then at once the extension and the exhibition of the norm" (239), an idea which will play a crucial role in various understandings of disease, which is never simply a biological fact but a socio-historical inscription of otherness or difference from a politically constructed norm. These definitions explain why medicine might not be defined simply as a scientific technique to restore the normal functions of the

¹⁴ In a somewhat similar logic, Dezső Kosztolányi's 1932 short story entitled "Happiness" defines wellbeing as follows: "[p]erhaps it is no more than suffering's absence" (trans. Peter Sherwood).

body, but as a political practice that establishes the normal itself, and “constitutes the very dynamics of life” (Pieron 98).

Disease, consequently, can only be conceptualized in a particular historical and biopolitical paradigm of normalization. The British medical historian, Roy Porter goes as far as identifying it with culture in a Freudian fashion: “[c]ivilization brings not just discontent but disease” (*Blood and Guts* 1). Robert Hudson personalizes diseases within human history by claiming that they have a life cycle of their own: “[d]iseases are not immutable entities but dynamic social constructions that have biographies of their own” (qtd. in Hays 2).¹⁵ From a scientific point of view, disease is thus not even necessarily the diametrical opposite of health, it is a mere biological variation,¹⁶ the litmus paper of the human notion of bodily order:

[d]isease reveals normal functions to us at the precise moment when it deprives us of their exercise. Disease is the source of the speculative attention which life attaches to life by means of man. If health is life in the silence of the organs, then, strictly speaking, there is no science of health. Health is organic innocence. It must be lost, like all innocence, so that knowledge may be possible.” (Canguilhem 101)

By claiming that there is no science of health, Canguilhem also implies that health has no (his)story and no narrative either, defining it as a non-dynamic state of stagnation. As opposed to this, narratives of epidemic outbreaks show consistent and recognizable patterns, as the interpretation of plague tropes in the first chapter will soon show.

The phenomenological understanding of pathology makes a distinction between disease and illness, the latter referring to the individualized experience of biological norm breaking: “[b]y ‘disease’ we mean an organic pathology as discerned from one or more recognized clinical or laboratory procedures: a measurable deviation from a standard normal EEG brain function. [...] ‘Illness’ on the other hand, we take to mean a kind of nonquantifiable lived experience, not feeling well” (Aho 3). In this sense, the novels to be interpreted offer personalized *illness* narratives while at the same time they also create complex socio-historical contexts to read the discussed epidemics as medico-political *diseases*.

¹⁵ The question might be raised if there are new diseases at all: “[s]ome will allow no Diseases to be new, others think that many old ones are ceased; and that such which are esteemed new, will have but their time: However, the Mercy of God hath scattered the great heap of Diseases, and not loaded any of Country with all: some may be new in one Country which have been old in another. New Discoveries of the Earth discover new Diseases ... and if Asia, Africa, and America should bring in their List, Pandoras Box would swell, and there must be a strange Pathology.” (Sir Thomas Browne, qtd. in Sontag *Illness* 157).

¹⁶ Another Hungarian modernist, Frigyes Karinthy hypothesises in *A Journey Round My Skull* (1937) that his brain tumour might even prove to be a potentially useful new organ.

The cultural representation of disease often means the metaphorization of a given condition in an attempt to reassuringly explain and distance a morally charged source of social anxiety. This is why military rhetoric is so often coterminous with discourses of disease: “common ways of conceptualising illness are the threat of illness often incorporate imagery associated with war, fear, violence, heroism, religion, xenophobia, contamination, gender roles, vilification and control” (Lupton 78). However, the othering of disease and its projecting on a subaltern body is a definitive result of modernity, which brought about a major shift in the conceptualization and localization of illness: “there has been a clear shift in theory, so that, at least in the West, disease as imbalance (associated with medieval humoral theory) has been replaced by disease as invasion as the dominant mode of thinking in medical circles (only lately challenged)” (Goatly 31). The plague chapter will especially focus on this paradigm shift between pre-modern and modern notions of biopolitical agency as well as the private and the social body. However, as it has been already argued, each historical era seems to produce a so-called period illness, that is, usually only one condition can fully capture the cultural imagination of a period: “it seems that societies need to have one illness which becomes identified with evil and attaches blame to its ‘victims,’ but it is hard to be obsessed with more than one” (Sontag *Illness* 101). The interpretations of early modern plague, Victorian cholera and postmodern AIDS will capitalize on these insights of mainstreamed cultural anxieties.

The experience of illness became one of the key literary themes of the 20th century and the realization that it is a “biographical disruption” (Williams 95) leading to the increasing theorization of the so-called “sick role” (Lupton 7) and narrative medicine, creating an interface of medical and literary studies.¹⁷ The individualization of illness appears as a personal inferno in a secularized world. Even though the dissertation is not concerned with personal pathographies, the AIDS chapter will focus on the figure of the dying artist as an archetypal 21st-century figure of pathology. Lupton also draws a parallel between secular aesthetics and moralized pathology when quoting Meyers’ *Disease and Novel*, arguing that

¹⁷ The so-called “modern American pathography,” for instance, has the following metaphorical types: the battle, the journey, the rebirth. In terms of narrative they even show structural differences: “[a] restitution narrative depicts illness as a temporary and limited impairment or affliction; the afflicted individual is positioned as the same person as before the onset, and when the illness has passed or the patient is in remission, he or she is expected to return to their former levels of functioning. On this account, then, being ill does not alter the identity of the ill person. In contrast, the chaos storyline represents life as radically disrupted. The self is submerged in the illness, chaos reigns, symptoms are severe and irreversible, and the future is unpredictable. The third plot model, the quest, articulates a sense of self that has already been changed fundamentally by the illness. Being ill initiates a journey toward new experiences and a new identity. As witnesses to their own transformation, narrators of quest stories believe they have learned something valuable that they can bring home and pass along to others, particularly to other sufferers” (Hydén 5).

after the loss of faith in the twentieth century, disease replaced hell and became one of the most horrible punishments imaginable. The modern anti-hero—who experiences a physiological dialectic of suffering, a painful life and early death—is typified and condemned by disease. He is the archetype of the artist, the martyr and the criminal. He is inwardly infected; tormented in body and mind; tested by the endurance of pain; estranged from himself, from his fellow-sufferers, and from healthy men. Disease is a punishment that inspires guilt and shame, fear and self-hatred. (52)

Within the broad representational history of illness, the cultural images of epidemics¹⁸ occupy a special position, being both collective and individual traumas. Even though in 1969 William H. Stewart, surgeon general of the United States, proudly announced that “the war against infectious diseases has been won” (Torrey 124), history has dramatically refuted this opinion. Perhaps precisely because of the failure of medicine to eradicate epidemics, cultural studies have done a lot in recent decades to understand the civilizational meanings of such events. An epidemic outbreak, similarly to Canguilhem’s definition of disease, means the collapse of social structure and the disclosing of cultural order at the same time, it is “at once a biological event, a generation-specific repertoire of history, an occasion of a potential legitimation from public policy, and aspect of social role, and individual, intrapsychic, identity, a sanction for cultural values, and a structuring element in doctor and patient relationships.” (Charles Rosenberg qtd. in Herring and Swedlund 252-3). From a more abstract point of view, the cultural anxiety about epidemics has to do with the threat of invasion, colonization, the loss of (control over) self-identity: “the fear of epidemic is the abstract fear of relations between one and many, of the endless multiplication of the one” (Stengers 233). This aspect will be especially central in the cholera chapter, targeting the expansionist age of magnificent and guilty imperialism. Waldby uses a similar, but more general term, hybridization, to grasp the terror potential of outbreaks:

[t]he “human” is generally understood to coincide with the location of culture, but under conditions of epidemic the distinction between the natural and the human becomes blurred in biomedicine’s understanding. The infected appear as a human locus for the viral, hybrids who occupy an indeterminate position between nature and culture. All infection is imagined as hybridisation in biomedicine, because bacteria or viruses are understood to use human bodies as sites for self-multiplication. They colonise the human body and human subjectivity. (18)

¹⁸ The word epidemiology itself derives from the Greek *epi* meaning “upon,” *demos* meaning “the populace or common people,” and *logos* meaning “word” (Trsotle 4).

In their respective periods, the three epidemic diseases around which the dissertation is organised have spectacularly questioned the boundaries of self and other and even humanity as such. As Tamás Bényei argues in connection with the literary representations of metamorphosis, the iconography of epidemics becomes an especially crucial metaphor of the modern experience when disease strikes as both an individual and collective calamity, and along with cannibalism, mimicry and parasitism, epidemic appears as a central modern metaphor of the *phobic, contaminating touch*.¹⁹ Despite historical and biological differences, what these discursive and imaginative constructions share is a set of universal anthropological, narrative and symbolic tropes of controlling and representing disease. This also makes them comparable, as “sociologically and culturally, an epidemic is both an outbreak of a new event and a return to old patterns of behaviour” (Zylberman 33). The dissertation will thus aim at demonstrating this phenomenon by narrowing down its perspective to how certain ideas of *bodily pollution and spatial segregation* show culturally different but structurally commensurable features. One of these is the conceptualizing of the act of the contagious contact as a morally polluting exchange, also suggested by old lexicon definitions:

[t]he late-nineteenth-century compiler of the *Oxford English Dictionary* labelled several definitions of contagion as “figurative,” including “hurtful, defiling, or corrupting contact” and the effects of personal “influence or . . . example, sympathy, and the like.” The examples listed, dating back to Chaucer, use contagion to describe the interpersonal transmission of sin, fanaticism, foreign influence, grief, loyalty, and enthusiasm. (Pernick 860)

Questions of contact, hierarchy and transmission are also present in Deleuze’s rhizomatic logic, claiming that a “rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles” (*Thousand Plateaus* 9). The epidemic is of a *rhizomatic* structure as well, that is, without a clear-cut, coherent form. Thus, in epidemic narratives there are symbolic interactions at work not primarily between characters but subhuman (microbiological) and superhuman (biopolitical) phenomena. Deleuze argues that “contagion, epidemic, involves terms that are

¹⁹ “A test átváltozásának betegség-metaforája akkor lép be igazán a metamorfózis modern ikonográfiájába, ha a betegség nem csak egyéni, hanem a kollektív testet, az állam vagy a polisz testét sújtja: az érintkezésen alapuló folyamatként elgondolt metamorfózis legfontosabb biopolitikai metaforája alighanem a járvány.” (*Más alakban* 164). “Mimikri, kannibalizmus, járvány, parazitizmus: a modern irodalom metamorfózisait főként az érintkezés, az egymásba folyás, a behatolás fantáziái jellemzik” (171).

entirely heterogeneous: for example, a human being, an animal, and a bacterium, a virus, a molecule, a microorganism” (242), and the outbreak narratives in question address this heterogeneity, the dialogue of interspecies, intercultural and trans-historical meanings.

Beside the polluting image of the epidemic contact, the second shared feature of the three diseases is their ability to collapse pre-existing symbolic boundaries and inaugurate new systems of biopolitical order. The dissertation will thus read plague, cholera and AIDS narratives as representations of states of exception or emergency in Agamben’s sense where “*necessitas legem non habet*—necessity has no law (*State of Exception* 24), which is also translated as “necessity creates its own law”, that is, a threshold, a liminal space between order and disorder, an interface of inside and outside, a problem on which the plague chapter will elaborate. The state of emergency is situated by him at an “ambiguous and uncertain fringe at the intersection of the legal and the political,” constituting a “point of disequilibrium between public law and political fact”. It defines a regime of the law within which the norm is valid but cannot be applied, while, also, “the state of exception is neither external nor internal to the juridical order, and the problem of defining it concerns precisely a threshold, or a zone of indifference, where inside and outside do not exclude each other but rather blur with each other” (23). Agamben also emphasises that the norm and the state of exception are mutual conditions of each other:

the impossible task of welding norm and reality together, and thereby constituting the normal sphere, is carried out in the form of the exception, that is to say, by presupposing their nexus. This means that in order to apply norm it is ultimately necessary to suspend its application, to produce an exception. In every case, the state of exception marks a threshold at which logic and praxis blur with each other and a pure violence without logos claims to realize an enunciation without any real reference.” (40)

The ambiguous margin between the norm of health and transgressiveness of epidemics as states of emergency will be relied on in all chapters as a biopolitical space of signification and control.

Pollution, othering, urban space

Epidemics are closely associated with notions of pollution, contamination, waste and filth, both in a general, anthropological and specific, historical sense. In Mary Douglas’ anthropological theory, *dirt* presupposes an elaborate cultural system of differentiation: “[w]here there is dirt there is system” (*Purity and Danger* 36). Similarly to the dichotomy of health and disease, the idea of pollution can only be perceived against ideas of order and purity, as “dirt is essentially

disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder” (2). The binary opposition of pollution and purity, however, also has powerful social and class connotations, and as such can be especially revealing in a trans-historical study of a phenomenon such as epidemic disease. William Cohen also argues that “filth represents a cultural location at which the human body, social hierarchy, psychological subjectivity, and material objects converge” (*Filth* viii), and it is also essentially of a spatial nature: “dirt is, first and foremost, anything that impinges on the tidy insularity of a person” (Theweleit 386). In Ricoeur, the anxiety of pollution is a constitutive element of human civilization interconnected with individual or collective cleansing rituals: “[d]read of the impure and rites of purification are in the background of all our feelings and all our behaviour relating to fault” (*The Symbolism of Evil* 25). Also, the polluting stain is theorized by him as always already symbolic (41). Tamás Bényei claims that the phobia of polluting contacts is not only essentially symbolic, it is always intrinsically of an ethical nature as well (*Traumatikus találkozások* 101). Cleanliness, however, is equally loaded with symbolic and ideological content, and Virginia Smith’s argument seems especially pertinent for the Victorian understanding of hygiene and purity, the central topic of the cholera chapter: “the only thing that is universalistic about purity is the temptation to use it as a weapon” (*Clean* 35).²⁰

The emotion most often elicited by the perception of pollution in the novels is *disgust*, which is not anthropologically, but rather psychologically revealing of socio-spatial boundaries. William Miller even identifies disgust as a condition of humanity: “[t]o feel disgust is human and humanizing. Those who have very high thresholds of disgust and are hence rather insensitive to the disgusting we think of belonging to somewhat different categories: proto-human like children, subhuman like the mad, or superhuman like saints” (11). This idea will be evoked mainly in the plague chapter, where the very notion of modern selfhood is at stake. Similarly to Mary Douglas’ point on pollution, Miller also emphasises the spatiality of disgust: “disgust rules mark the boundaries of self; the relaxing of them marks privilege, intimacy, duty, and caring” (xi). Disgust awakened by pollution can be contrasted with another emotion connected to the transgression of social boundaries, shame, insofar as it is essentially a social emotion, an internalized experience of outward criticism: “the move from shame to disgust tracks exactly the move from public to private, from external to internal, from child to adult,

²⁰ Cleanliness has a controversial relationship with epidemics: “[s]tarting in Sweden in the 1880s, poliomyelitis increased in frequency in countries with increased levels of hygiene (Clark, David 225). Purity can also become a dictatorial device: “Singapore first showed symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder in 1964, when it banished cows and stray dogs from the city streets. Four years later, when its frequently re-elected benevolent dictator Lee Kuan Yew declared war on dirt with the first ‘Keep Singapore Clean’ campaign, he was quite clear that banishing dirt would lift the newly formed country from post-colonial backwater to paragon of modernity” (Pisani 95).

from expulsive to repressive” (173). Accordingly, the AIDS chapter will address what Ruth Benedict in *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* called cultures of guilt and shame in connection late 20th-century attitudes towards sexuality and security.

In connection with anthropological understandings of pollution, the psychoanalytic notion of the *abject* can be applied as a third term when it comes to the interpretation of pollution and disgust. Julia Kristeva applies this term to all unacceptable, to-be-excluded materials that cannot be integrated into the clean and proper body, that are perceived as uncannily foreign and familiar to the boundaries of the self. Thus, “abjection is coextensive with social and symbolic order, on the individual as well as on the collective level” (*Powers of Horror* 68). Moreover, the abject is primarily defined by its ability to blur safe margins: “it is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order” (232). This idea already links the abject to medical or symbolic notions of disease, while Catherine Waldby directly connects it to epidemics when stating that “abjection is contagion in the biomedical imagination” (45). By this she means that both abjection and contagion presuppose a polluting contact between symbolically separated entities. These entities of course can be human beings as well, as Judith Butler claims:

The abject designates here precisely those “unlivable” and “uninhabitable” zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the “unlivable” is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. This zone of uninhabitability will constitute that site of dreaded identification against which—and by virtue of which—the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life. In this sense, then, the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, “inside” the subject as its own founding repudiation. (*Bodies that Matter* 3)

The contagious, penetrable, polluting bodies of the novels can also be read as abjected corpses and corpses, embodiments of unmentionable materials representing the failure of culture to maintain its own clear-cut somato-spatial boundaries. Especially the plague and the AIDS chapters will elaborate on the spatial rituals of exclusion via the reading of the quarantine and the treatment of the HIV infected gay man, drawing upon biopolitical theories of cultural space and otherness.

In general, the connotations of filth are connected to the idea of the infectious other, and the logic of scapegoating also appears as an anthropological universal of epidemic narratives.²¹ According to Edward Said, “a distinctive aspect of being ‘other’ is that one is the object of someone else's fantasies, but not a subject with agency and voice” (Waldby 18); while Sontag points out that “there is a link between imagining disease and imagining foreignness (*Illness* 134). Epidemic disease is habitually blamed on subaltern subjects, who are racially, sexually or class-wise inferior to the pure norm. All iconic contagious diseases of Western cultural history had a target group of *Others* who were made responsible for the contagion:

[I]eprosy came from fornicators, plague from the Jews, or from sinners in general, cholera from the poor, the irrelegious, or the immigrant. AIDS in its early history came from the '4-H' group (a particularly ironic reference in the U.S., where the 4-H clubs, a long-established rural youth association, are symbols of virtuous country life) three of which were easy targets for blame: homosexuals, heroin addicts, Haitians, and hemophiliacs.” (Hays 301)

The position of the scapegoated bodies of the polluting others' in urban space appears as a major epidemic site in all the chosen novels, featuring Eastern and Western metropolises such as Cairo, Alexandria, London, and New York. The outbreak-stricken city can also be read as the manifestation of its own ultimate purpose, the human struggle for meaning and order. In a Bakhtinian sense, the epidemic stricken city could also be read via the chronotope of the subverted, carnivalistic public square, the spatial metaphor of dis/order in the social body: “that space which he will later call ‘carnival’ and which, unlike its ancient correlative, is not only not coextensive with the public sphere but also in every respect defined against the latter, as (so to speak) its negative image. (Pechey 96). Moreover, Lefebvre suggests that the city body should ideally be designed to be able to properly contain even illness, when he talks about the “pathology of space”:

[s]ince society does not function in a satisfactory manner, could there not be a pathology of space? Within this perspective, the virtually official recognition of the priority of space over time is not conceived of as indication of social pathology, as symptom among others of a reality, which engenders social disease. On the contrary, what are represented are healthy and diseased spaces. The planner should be able to distinguish between sick

²¹ Even La Fontaine' fable “The Plague” has a morale claiming that „[t]hus human courts acquit the strong, / And doom the weak, as therefore wrong”.

spaces and spaces linked to mental and social health, which are generators of this health. As physician of space, he should have the capacity to conceive of an harmonious social space, normal and normalizing.” (*Writings on Cities* 99)

The segregation of healthy and diseased spaces thus becomes the paradoxical source of the city’s unity. Similarly, Michel de Certeau identifies the separation, management and the removal of pollution/illness as a primary functions of the city’s personalized urban body:

[t]he ‘city’ founded by utopian and urbanistic discourse is defined by the possibility of a threefold operation. First, the production of its own space (*un espace propre*): rational organization must thus repress all the physical, mental and political pollutions that would compromise it; Second, the substitution of a nowhen, or of a synchronic system, for the indeterminable and stubborn resistances offered by traditions; univocal scientific strategies, made possible by the flattening out of all the data in a plane projection, must replace the tactics of users who take advantage of ‘opportunities’ and who, through these trap-events, these lapses in visibility, reproduce the opacities of history everywhere. [...] On the one hand, there is a differentiation and redistribution of the parts and functions of the city, as a result of inversions, displacements, accumulations, etc.; on the other there is a rejection of everything that is not capable of being dealt with in this way and so constitutes the ‘waste products’ of a functionalist administration (abnormality, deviance, illness, death, etc.). (*Walking in the City* 129)

The interpretation of the early modern plague quarantine will rely on this idea of unavoidable waste production in the face of highly controlled spaces, eventually leading to the creation of modern biopolitical practices, especially in the reading of Geraldine Brooks’ *Year of Wonders*. Later, the *cordon sanitaire* gained increasingly metaphorical, political meanings, and the passages on utopian Victorian ideas on sewage and the ethical implications of the HIV test will argue for a symbolic continuity with the logic of the quarantine as a punitive and protective biopolitical device.

Beside pathological, polluted and still potentially cleansing spaces all the discussed novels include similarly ambiguous characters who are healers, helper figures and are blamed and punished for the epidemic at the same time. The medieval Muslim traveller from the East (*Pestilence*), the early modern cunning woman (*Year of Wonders*), the Victorian sewer engineer (*Sweet Thames*) and laboratory scientist (*An Imperfect Lens*), the aesthete lodger (*The Line of Beauty*) and the mourning artist (*Part of His Story*) are all carriers of symbolic or biological

contagion but they also appear as the ones who can transcend it via their superior knowledge. Therefore, in the chapter on plague and AIDS I will apply Agamben's notion of the *camp* and Derrida's understanding of the *pharmakos* to examine the symbolic spatial and bodily meanings of epidemic control.

The idea of a pathological urban space appears in Agamben's theory of the camp²² as the biopolitical model or paradigm for modernity as such. Agamben relates modernity to the above discussed state of exception/emergency: "[t]he camp is the space that is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule" (*Homo Sacer* 169), and adds that state order as such can only be born from the enclosed, disciplined, pathologized space of the camp:

[i]n this light, the birth of the camp in our time appears as an event that decisively signals the political space of modernity itself. It is produced at the point at which the political system of the modern nation-state, which was founded on the functional nexus between a determinate localization (land) and a determinate order (the State) and mediated by automatic rules for the inscription of life (birth or the nation), enters into a lasting crisis, and the State decides to assume directly the care of the nation's biological life as one of its proper tasks. (174-5)

While the extremely controlled, modern space of the camp is a biopolitical device of containment, segregation and discipline, the figure of the *pharmakos* will be applied in the AIDS chapter as an excluded, spiritually loaded, sacrificial body, whose ritualistic function is to purify the community by taking their sins on himself and being ejected from the city.

Biopower, death, precariousness

Since all the interpreted novels are contemporary, the 21st-century understandings of embodiment gain centre change, especially the medicalized private body as a secular source of selfhood and a perennial threat to global security. Starting out from the insight that the body is the primary field of the metaphorization of cultural experience; that "the body is neither a purely natural given nor is it merely a textual metaphor, it is a privileged operator for the transcoding of these other areas (Stallybrass & White 192), the dissertation will aim at reading contagious bodies as cultural texts and novels as representations of social bodies. In the readings of the

²² His major conclusions are: "1. The original political relation is the ban (the state of exception as zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exclusion and inclusion). 2. The fundamental activity of sovereign power is the production of bare life as originary political element and as threshold of articulation between nature and culture, *zoe* and *bios*. 3 · Today it is not the city but rather the camp that is the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West" (*Homo Sacer* 181).

postmodern historical novels, Holquist's idea that "[t]he body is, if you will, intercorporeal in much the same way as the novel is intertextual (87) will echo, especially when it comes to the recycling of phobic bodies through the ages. The anthropological notion of the body as understood by Mary Douglas will be applied as well, where the human body and social structures are examined as mutual mappings, spatial reflections of each other – as Adrienne Rich described the body: "geography closest in" ("Notes Toward a Politics of Location"). Concerning the spatiality of the body, Douglas emphasizes somato-spatial structures and marginality:

[t]he body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its *boundaries* can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious. The body is a complex structure. The functions of its different parts and their relation afford a source of symbols for other complex structures. We cannot possibly interpret rituals concerning excreta, breast milk, saliva and the rest unless we are prepared to see in the body a symbol of society, and to see the powers and dangers credited to social structure reproduced in small on the human body." (*Purity and Danger* 116, my emphasis)

The traditional correspondence between social and bodily forms of signification has gained special significance in the 20th century, when subjecthood was increasingly defined by control over our own embodiment and being part of biopolitical systems of surveillance. This is what Ernst Heinrich Haeckel as early as 1899 named the cellular state ("the cells are truly independent citizens, billions of which compose our body, the cellular state" qtd. in Waldby 53), what Bryan Turner calls "somatic society" and what Baudrillard explains as the inversion of the Cartesian hierarchy of body and mind: "the body has today become an object of salvation. It has literally taken over that moral and ideological function from the soul" (129). Nikolas Rose, on the other hand, underlines how 21st-century *biopolitical citizenship* is increasingly about the biological, not the 19th-century, machine-like materiality of the corpus:

[h]umans have become even more biological, at the same time as the vitality of the body Has become increasingly open to machination. In and through such developments, human beings in contemporary Western culture are increasingly coming to understand themselves in somatic terms: corporeality has become one of the most important sites for ethical judgments and techniques. (Rose 254)

In line with these insights about contemporary forms of embodiment, the realization of cultural studies that “power is both external to the subject and the very venue of the subject” (Butler *The Psychic Life of Power* 15) has been one of the starting points of recent biopolitical theories. In terms of political control, Michel Foucault uses the concepts of governmentality and *dispositif* to designate the “structural entanglement between the government of a state and the techniques of self-government in modern Western societies” (Lorey 23). The biopolitical understanding of power is thus especially indebted to Foucault and Agamben, even though their views are in many ways opposed, insofar as “Foucault shows that sovereign power is by no means sovereign, since its legitimacy and efficiency depend on a “microphysics of power,” whereas in Agamben’s work sovereignty produces and dominates bare life” (Lemke 59). Moreover, the Foucauldian notion of disciplinary power can also be differentiated from biopower on the basis of the latter’s collective nature: “disciplinary power has as its target the individual, employing surveillance, normalizing techniques and a panoptic grid of institutions. Biopower, on the other hand, has as its target the population as a whole (Morton 1). This difference is significant when it comes to epidemic disease, as it affects both the private, biological and the social, institutional body.

However, the major difference between Foucault’s and Agamben understanding of biopolitics is probably that for Agamben it is above all “*thanatopolitics*” (Lemke 59), the power implications of death, especially murder. This makes his theory even more relevant today, as the West’s relationship to death has radically transformed in the past five hundred years. On the one hand, as the plague chapter will explain, secularization has led to “the general rationalization of the dead body which has occurred in high modernity (Shilling 192). The desacralization of death went hand in hand with its medicalization, and the evolution of civilization has paradoxically led to the inhuman experience of dying: “[n]ever before in the history of humanity have the dying been removed so hygienically behind the scenes of social life; never before have human corpses been expedited so odourlessly and with such technical perfection from the deathbed to the grave. (Elias *The Loneliness of the Dying* 23). In the same vein, Gadamer talks about “an almost systematic repression of death” (63) in our enlightened world, which is very far from the Platonic tradition of the “*melethe thanatou*” (learning how to die), the necessary coping with the knowledge and experience of our own death, which in Bataille’s understanding, “means the continuity of being (Bataille *Eroticism* 13).

The dissertation will rely on a notion connected to a particular kind of death, the death of the *homo sacer* as Agamben’s 1995 book examines it. First, Agamben refers to the Nazi ideology of killing and defines the notion of “a life unworthy of being lived” as follows: “[t]he concept of ‘life devoid of value’ (or ‘life unworthy of being lived’) applies first of all to

individuals who must be considered as ‘incurably lost’ following an illness or an accident and who, fully conscious of their condition, desire ‘redemption’ (*Homo Sacer* 138). The homo sacer of ancient Roman law is someone who can be killed with impunity but cannot be sacrificed. His or her death is completely without consequences, either punitive or ritual, which can both have a purgative function for the social body. The homo sacer is the one whose life is without worth, the absent body in history, just like the contagious bodies in the novels. The uninfected family members of plague victims locked up in houses with a big red X on the door; the poor Victorian underclasses of London or colonial natives defined by their own filth on their clothes; or the gay man with Kaposi’s sarcoma on his emaciated body have all been treated as lives unworthy of being lived in different historical periods.

The fact that first world citizens live in a culture of risk is constantly being rubbed in by social scientists and cultural theorists nowadays: “Western modernity, along with its conceptions of sovereignty and biopolitics, is unthinkable without a ‘political culture of danger’, without the permanent endangerment of the normal, without imaginary invasions of constant, everyday threats such as illness, filth, sexuality, criminality or the fear of ‘racial’ impurity, which must be immunized against in various ways” (Lorey 37). Thus, the expansive logic of modernity itself appears as a kind of global contamination and an impulse for hybridity. At the same time, the political practices and rhetoric emphasising the protection of Western citizens’ bodies and state borders become the primary source of the fear of contamination. In what Isabell Lorey calls “modern security societies” (44) the state’s provision of protection seems to generate a constant feeling of vulnerability: “contrary to the old rule of a domination that demands obedience in exchange for protection, neoliberal governing proceeds primarily through social insecurity, through regulating the minimum of assurance while simultaneously increasing instability” (2). While the “molecularization of life, together with the individualization of risk, has given rise to a new ‘somatic’ self, and a new ‘ethopolitical’ order in which our biological life has becomes our life’s work” (Braun 6), resulting that Western citizens are perennially terrified of unexpected and uncontrollable global threats (terrorism, pandemics), they feel increasingly responsible for single-handedly maintaining their own healthy somatic boundaries by appropriate, safe diets, exercise regimes and sexual behaviours.

The notion of risk is often discussed in the same breath as precariousness and *securitization*, where the former term can basically be described as insecurity, vulnerability, and destabilization. The counterpart of precariousness is the ambiguous notion of safety, “protection, political and social immunization against everything that is recognized as endangerment” (Lorey 14). Elizabeth Grosz emphasises this dichotomy by approaching the entire history of Western culture by distinguishing four ages of security:

[s]piritual security presupposes *spiritual vigilance*: the vigilance of the wise man who pays careful attention to his spiritual capacities and means of support, as well as to his possible weaknesses, as studied by Foucault in *Hermeneutics of the Subject* as one of the aspects of the care of the self. Imperial security presupposes *paternal solicitude*: the Emperor watches over his subjects like the shepherd over his flock, with that kindly care studied by Foucault in his writings on pastoral government. Sovereign security presupposes *centralized surveillance* of internal and external enemies, all submitted to the total gaze of the state as in Bentham's Panopticon, the kingdom of spies. Biopolitical security implies *flow control*: the control of movements and communications, but in a decentralized fashion, depending on competing transnational networks, which immediately raises the question of access: who will have the right of access to any given network to control or redistribute any given flow? (27-8)

While all four ages will appear in the dissertation, connected to the fourth age of security, 21st-century flow control, the biopolitical implications of the immune system and immunity will have a special significance in the AIDS chapter, as theories of immunity²³ are bred by today's climate of insecurity. Immunity is commonly contextualized along with thanatopolitics, technology, and globalization, which are all key elements of understanding epidemics as well, for example in the writings of Peter Sloterdijk, for whom,

modernity essentially consists of the struggle to create these metaphorical space suits, immunitary regimes, he will call them, that will protect Europeans from dangerous and life-threatening contact with the outside (outside understood in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as the imperial heart of darkness and as the ruinous effects of too close a proximity to one's neighbour in twentieth-century totalitarianisms). (qtd. in Campbell 88)

These biopolitical notions of *immunity* will be applied in the AIDS chapter in a re-literalized and re-metaphorized way, arguing that the immune system of contemporary, mainstream heterosexual society treats gay men with the same rhetoric of exclusion that the medical establishment used to describe the virus, the dreaded disease itself.

²³ Derrida reduced the category of immunity to the concept of "auto immunity to depict American geopolitics of 'homeland security' after 9/11" (Borradori 2003).

The Marks of the Black Death: Plague and the Birth of the Modern Biopolitical Body in Wiliam Owen Roberts' *Pestilence* and Geraldine Brooks' *Year of Wonders*

"Oh happy posterity who will not experience such abysmal woe—and who will look upon our testimony as fable." (Petrarch's letter to his brother, qtd. in Gottfried xiii)

The first thematic chapter on the literary representations of epidemic disease examines two contemporary novels set in the late Middle Ages and in early modern Britain, respectively: *Pestilence* by Wiliam Owen Roberts (2003), and Geraldine Brooks' *Year of Wonders* (2001). Although both narratives unfold around the experiences of plague-stricken small rural communities and are mostly set on the island known as Great Britain today, there are revealing differences in their engagement with the plague's socio-historical significance. *Pestilence*, set in Wales and originally written in the Welsh language, is hailed on the back cover as "a witty satire in the tradition of Chaucer, Boccaccio, and Voltaire". Roberts' novel is indeed well-researched from a cultural studies point of view as well as deeply indebted to the picaresque genre and the carnivalesque tradition of medieval culture, offering a uniquely vivid reconstruction of 14th-century Europe before and after the Black Death of 1348. In contrast, *Year of Wonders* is based on the true story of a 17th-century Derbyshire village, Eyam, which, on advice of the Protestant pastor, voluntarily quarantined itself during the plague of 1666. *Year of Wonders* was Brooks' first novel, and, as opposed to the rich period detail of *Pestilence*, it is a popular rather than a historically authentic retelling of the village's legendary story.²⁴ What connects the works of these two non-English writers—apart from their thematic focus on the plague in Britain—is their indirect portrayal of 20th-century global biopolitical dilemmas through their satirical and modernized approaches to the cultural imagery of pre-modern and early modern health crises. Their fictionalized and micro-historical revisiting of the literary *topos* and cultural trope of pestilence from a 21st-century point of view seems to confirm Margaret Pelling's point that "some diseases are more socially constructed than others" (*The Common Lot* 7). Plague is probably the most semantically loaded and metaphorically productive epidemic disease in Western cultural and literary history; while biologically it also "remains, in the words of a plague researcher at the Institut Pasteur, 'probably the most pathogenic infectious agent on the planet right now'" (Gilman *Representing the Plague* 254). It is estimated that the Black Death killed as many as twenty-five million people during the

²⁴ The Australian author previously worked as a war correspondent and covered various military conflicts in Bosnia and Somalia before turning into a novelist, relying on her personal experience of humanitarian catastrophes. Still, the novel was mainly inspired by her stay in a small US town and the close-knit community there.

years 1348–1350, which meant the loss of one-third of the population of Europe and the Middle East (Bollet 22).²⁵ Seven hundred years on, what Western historiography calls the Black Death, what medieval Europeans knew as the Great Mortality (*Magna Mortalitas*), and was described by medieval Muslims as the Year of Annihilation, remains the “greatest natural disaster in human history” (Kelly 2). From a postmodern perspective, the plague is a global and globalizing biopolitical event, an Agambenian state of exception, ceaselessly interpreted and rhetorically recycled by later commentators of social crises, as the readings of cholera and AIDS will argue. Plague thus plays a crucial role in the creation of modern subjecthood as such, and the novels represent two major moments of this epistemic shift. The closed, clean, controlled body is one of the building blocks of the Western notion of agency, and since this subject formation has taken effect, one can argue with Robert Castel that “historically specific political, legal and social relations have corresponded to nothing other than the ‘search for systems of protection’” (qtd. in Lorey 48). In the light of this insight, the readings of *Pestilence* and *Year of Wonders* will focus on the subject and community (re)forming effects of pre-modern and early modern apocalyptic experiences of plague outbreaks, examining how the novels narrativize the biopolitical processes which have moulded the individual and the social bodies of the West.

Plague as a non-dead metaphor of disorder in Western cultural history

In one of the most comprehensive studies on the meanings of plague in cultural history, Ernest B. Gilman points out that from the perspective of social history, the disease is a constantly revalorised trope of individual and social collapse. Gilman’s contextualization of 21st-century plague studies suggests relevant points of departure for the purposes of literary studies as well:

[p]ersonhood—whether regarded as the integrity of a somatic body or as a function of that body’s incorporation in the political or natural order of things—is put under special pressure by the crisis of plague. Furthermore, recognizing an affinity between the construction and deconstruction of the modern subject on the one hand, and plague times on the other reveals the prehistory of our own posthumanist engagement with epidemic disease. (“Plague Subject” 24)

²⁵ Plague is caused by the bacteria *Yersinia pestis*, a zoonotic bacteria, usually found in small mammals and their fleas. Humans can be contaminated by the bite of infected fleas, through direct contact with infected materials or by inhalation. People infected with plague usually develop “flu-like” symptoms after an incubation period of 1-7 days. There are 2 main clinical forms of plague infection: bubonic and pneumonic. Bubonic is the most common form and is characterized by painful swollen lymph nodes or ‘buboes’. Septicaemic plague occurs when infection spreads through the bloodstream, following a bubonic or a pneumonic plague. The most recent outbreak was registered on 9 January 2017 in Madagascar. (WHO „Plague”).

Gilman thus claims that the “cultural fascination” with plague marks the birth of the self-fashioned, self-sufficient, closed Western subject of discrete bodily boundaries. This is why the most relevant stakes of plague narratives today are the ideological interconnections of the notions of individual and social somatic crises, especially in the case of the metaphorical ties between plague and AIDS, the way these two contagious diseases delineate pre-humanist and post-humanist, premodern and postmodern images of embodiment and subjectivity, personhood and their disruption by disease. The symbolic connection between the plague and later epidemics is also confirmed by Donald Beecher: “arguably these [plague and AIDS] are two salient moments in Western intellectual history in which contagion-as-metaphor achieves the potency of an *idée force*—an idea offering to explain more pervasive dimensions of the human condition, the first at the end of the fifteenth century, the second in the last decades of the twentieth (251). Thus, the study of plague representations from a biopolitical perspective allows us to see how past and present power structures affect patterns of epistemologically knowing about the human body and phenomenologically dwelling in it in the face of internal contagious illness and/or external governmental authorities. In the case of plague, the medieval notions of selfhood as well as early modern images of the increasingly surveilled, individualized and secularized biopolitical body thus come to the forefront.

Considering the significant time-gap between the novels’ settings and their 21st-century preoccupations, it seems necessary to briefly outline some aspects of plague semiosis, the overlapping of its historical-social, cultural-literary, and metaphorical-poetical-rhetorical meanings as a threshold of modernity. Firstly, plague is conventionally regarded by historians as the endpoint of the Middle Ages (Gottfried xiv), Hecker emphasises that it served as a decisive turning point in history, representing the transition between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance period, or even the “modern world” as such (qtd. in Hays 54) and Millard Meiss argued as early as 1951 that the post-plague period marked “a period of crisis, the first crisis of what we may call, in its larger sense, humanism” (qtd. in Getz 285). Plague’s many names also suggest its ubiquitous nature, foregrounding the later narrativization of traumatic outbreaks: “[t]he term Black Death was first coined in the sixteenth century and became popularized in the nineteenth. Even so, Black Death is now the standard designation for this event [the outbreak of 1348-49]” (Aberth 1). The dissertation will thus use the word pestilence in the most general sense of a collective epidemic calamity, while Black Death specifically stands for references to medieval plague.

Despite the consensus that positions plague as a historical watershed, there has been a major shift in the cultural contextualizing of the disease in the second half of the 20th century.

This revalorization took place partly as a result of cultural studies pointing out, for instance, that medieval medical knowledge should not be retrospectively devalued as the benighted double of the Enlightenment period: “[t]he attack on gothic epidemiology [the underrating of medieval knowledge about disease] began in earnest after World War II, and paralleled the tendency among historians to fall away from condemnations of the Middle Ages as those bad old days” (Getz 283). However, since the plague was *the* epochal disaster of the Middle Ages and early modern Europe, it can also be approached as the first truly modern epidemic, leading Europe to a completely new paradigm of embodiment. This emergent contagion was one of the first negative consequences of the earliest phases of what we call today globalization, as trade and migration along the Silk Road saw the dissemination of *Yersinia pestis* from its natural reservoirs in Central Asia to Europe and East Asia (Price-Smith 38). Plague even started to be applied as a form of biological warfare quite early, in 1346.²⁶ By the 20th century, its disappearance as an acute threat meant that its existence became increasingly metaphorical, and even when it actually emerged, it was an embarrassingly uncivilized problem: “the appearance of plague in Los Angeles in 1924 was denied by newspapers, which called it ‘malignant pneumonia’” (Hays 35). Its physical (there was an outbreak in Madagascar in January 2017) and metaphorical (AIDS as the “gay plague”) presence in contemporary culture thus suggests how non-dead and unmentionably medieval plague is today, while its discursive construction rooted in the biopolitics of the Middle Ages is as powerfully present as ever.²⁷ Even though René Girard in “The Plague in Literature and Myth” (1974) somewhat over-optimistically claims that plague as an image for social discord is merely a metaphor today in “a world where the plague and epidemics, in general have disappeared almost altogether” (*To Double Business Bound* 138), its actuality in literal and literary senses has not lost its signifying power. Plague in a biomedical sense may seem to be a thing of the past, but epidemics as such are definitely not, along with their somatic and spatial implications. Since the literary depictions of plague can often be read as culture-specific allegories of the filthy, revolting, morally stained and

²⁶ During the siege of Kafa (now Feodosia, Crimea) the attacking Tartar forces which were subjugated by the Mongol empire under Genghis Khan, used the bodies of Mongol warriors of the Golden Horde who had died of plague, as weapons, and as recently as World War II, the Japanese used airplanes to spread plague infected fleas over several Chinese cities (Bollet 17).

²⁷ The very first plague was probably the Antonine Plague of AD 164–180 described by Galen, even Marcus Aurelius died of it. Galen’s description is not recognizable to us, and some authors think this epidemic was more likely smallpox or typhus than plague (Bollet 19). Historical records suggest that a plague began in Egypt in AD 541 (Emmeluth 11). Following this outbreak, the Plague of Justinian happened in the sixth century and swept from Egypt west to Britain and east as far as China. It killed an estimated 100 million people. Anglo-Saxon records mention at least forty-nine disease episodes or epidemics between AD 526 and 1087 (Reff 52). The Black Death of the 1300s was the next to occur. The third pandemic began in China in 1892 and spread to many parts of the world, including the United States (Hardman 7).

indocile (social) body, one might still argue with Camus's Jean Tarrou from *The Plague* that "we all have plague" (242).

When trying to unravel the various meanings of contemporary texts set in medieval and early modern Britain, it is my aim to consider the disease primarily not from a medical or even a medical historical, but a literary-cultural, tropological point of view.²⁸ Plague is here thus understood as a social experience represented by a shared set of ideological, political and rhetorical plague topoi that occupy a central position in European iconography. Ravaging Europe and Britain at the time of the birth of the modern individual and the humanistic view of the body, plague was widely viewed scholastically as God's collective punishment, a divine scourge for either the greedy excess of the rich or the deprived filthiness of the poor.

The novels recycle countless examples of plague tropes in literature, often using plague as a metaphor of a great social collapse. A brief list of both widely known and less canonized fictional representations of plague might start with Boccaccio's (whose father died of plague in 1348 and who makes a cameo appearance in *Pestilence*) *Decameron*, continue with Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* ("[a] plague on both your houses," runs a metaphorical line of the dying Mercutio), Daniel Defoe's *The Journal of the Plague Year* (1722),²⁹ William Blake's carvings from 1793 (*Pestilence and The Great Plague of London*, *Plague* and *The Bellman*), Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), Alessandro Manzoni's *The Betrothed* (1827), Edgar Allan Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" (1842); continue with 20th-century works like Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912), Karel Čapek's *The White Plague* (1937), Albert Camus' *The Plague* (1947, to which *Year of Wonders* pays a symbolic tribute by leaving the narrator-protagonist in the city of Oran at the end of the novel) or Antonin Artaud's manifesto on the Theatre of Cruelty (1964), observing that "the theatre, like the plague, is a delirium and is communicative" (qtd. in Boluk 133); and finally end with postmodern historical and popular fiction such as the "Bring out the Dead" scene from Monty Python, Ann Benson's multitude of sci-fi books like *The Plague Tales* (1997), Ken Follett's *World Without End* (2007), Peter Ransley's *The Plague Child* (2011) set in the 17th century, or Karen Maitland's Boccaccio-inspired medieval travelogue entitled *The Company of Liars* (2009) and Patrick Deville's

²⁸ Andrew Cunningham maintains that "the coming of the laboratory has led to the past of medicine being rewritten to accord with the laboratory model of disease, and it has thereby been misunderstood." "The laboratory construction of plague," he concludes, "means that there is an unbridgeable gap between past 'plague' and our plague. The identities of pre-1894 plague and post- 1894 plague have become incommensurable." (qtd. in Hays 45).

²⁹ The primary significance of Defoe's 18th-century work according to Margaret Healey is that it relies on a traditional homiletic frame, the genres of the medieval complaint and the Protestant plague pamphlet, and also, "[t]his is the first plague narrative to yield such a complex texture of interwoven relationships between the subjective and the social, the private and the collective—the kernel of any novel" ("Defoe" 40), while Kari Nixon compares Defoe's narrator to an early version of the flâneur (77).

biography of Alexandre Yersin, *Plague and Cholera* (2012).³⁰ In a more general sense, several critics interpret bio-thriller movies like Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002) as present-day cinematic contributions to the tradition of plague topoi. As a stubbornly non-dead metaphor, the plague could be called a zombie trope³¹ of urban collapse as well, eternally marking the borderline of inside and outside, order and chaos, health and illness, life and death as well as spiritual and scientific realms of power. Maybe even this non-exhaustive list indicates that it is not an exaggeration to state that plague is "part of the collective memory of the West" (Kelly 3) and during the past seven centuries it has inspired many artists to use it as an allegory of simultaneous social and individual breakdown.

For centuries, the plague has been an especially virulent urban metaphor of social and ideological discord, "the specific metaphor of the sick city" (Mitchell-Boyask 3). The latter aspect is one of the most relevant plague tropes today, as "[t]he medieval experience of the plague was firmly tied to notions of moral pollution, and people invariably looked for a scapegoat external to the stricken community" (Sontag *Illness* 71-72). Although *Pestilence* and *Year of Wonders* both feature village communities, they also put special emphasis on great cities (London, Cairo, Italian city states) as centres of infection. The success of *Pestilence* and *Years of Wonders* is no doubt a result of the anthropological universals in plague topoi, by which I do not only mean the apocalyptic rhetoric of plague as a recurring topos in much of European crisis fiction, but also a set of plague topoi that cut across centuries and cultures, such as the practices of *scapegoating* (pogroms), *isolation* (quarantining), the intentional endangering of others as an act of *revenge* (anointers), panic inspired *pseudo-scientific theories* of pollution (flagellants and other forms of self-mortification), the image of the *mass grave* (plague pit), and of course *victim-blaming* along with the *moralizing* of the disease (divine punishment). Thus, the plague has been a Western mastertrope of urban trauma and biohorror for centuries, mutating all the time and assuming updated semiotic techniques, that is, making metaphorical-allegorical marks on the body.

³⁰Some other examples from the Antiquity: *Iliad*, Sophocles' *Oedipus, the King*, Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, the works of Livy, Virgil, Ovid' *Metamorphoses* (the story of Aesculapius), the Ten Plagues of Egypt in the Bible. Modern examples are Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* (2013), Dan Brown's *Inferno* (2013), Louise Welsh's *Plague Times* trilogy (2014-), Terry Hayes's bestselling thriller *I Am Pilgrim* (2013), the TV series *Utopia* (2013), Michael Crichton' *The Andromeda Strain* (1969), Stephen King's *The Stand* (1978), Richard Preston's *The Hot Zone* (1994), Jose Saramago's *Blindness* (1995), Jim Crace's *The Pesthouse* (2007), Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor* (1985), Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* (1989), *The Navigators* (an Australian plague film, 2001), Hesse's *Narciss and Goldmund* (1930), Kálmán Mikszáth's *The Black City*, Zsuzsa Rakovszky's *The Shadow of the Snake* (2002) and Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1957).

³¹As "zombies, like plague, are great social levellers and their model of contagion is one dependent on a social model of interpenetration and connectivity" (Boluk 135).

States of emergency and the subversion of medieval world order in *Pestilence*

“yet I Alive!”(Daniel Defoe: *A Journal of the Plague Year* 248)

Via the vivid representation of medieval European worldview, *Pestilence* captures the cultural moment before the outbreak of the Black Death to show its aftermath. The novel connects plague with a major socio-economic shift, the birth of modernity and the establishment of secularized social and somatic boundaries via formative identity crises on individual and collective levels. *Pestilence* capitalizes on the juxtaposition of such binary oppositions as East and West, plague and health, religion and medicine, feudalism and capitalism, and to represent the ambiguity of cultural dichotomies on the narrative level as well, it also starts twice. First, an epilogue-like opening image offers a glimpse of the life of a medieval Welsh village where an annual festivity is being held, and then suddenly we find ourselves in Cairo, where a young Muslim scholar, Salah, is given a secret mission to travel to Europe and assassinate the French king. *Pestilence* is the story of Salah’s picaresque-like journey across the Continent, and by the time he ends up in the God-forsaken Welsh village, he has travelled through most of medieval Europe before, during and after the Black Death. Considering its representational techniques, *Pestilence* can be called a postmodern historical novel³² or a pastiche as it does not only retell a landmark historical event but also relies on a web of intertextual hints. Its satirical social panorama is strongly evocative of *The Canterbury Tales*, while its episodic structure and satirical humour also link it to Boccaccio, the picaresque novel and the Menippean satire as understood by Mikhail Bakhtin. With regard to this rich generic background, the reading of *Pestilence* will focus on the following symptomatic aspects of the depiction of medieval plague: the relationship of the grotesque body and pollution, the text’s episodic structure and satirical style, and finally its contrasting of Eastern and Western cultural spaces and the economic metaphors of the modern world order.

Grotesque bodies and somatic metaphors of pollution

In the above mentioned prologue-like vignette we see the serfs of the Welsh village, waiting for an annual local contest: several men set themselves against a black cat released from a sack,

³² While the postmodern historical novel was initially identified with neo-Victorianism, in contemporary fiction there is a tendency of turning towards the Middle Ages, see for ex. John Fuller’s *Flying to Nowhere*; Barry Unsworth’s *Mortality Play*; Robert Nye’s *Merlin, Faust, and Falstaff*; Adam Thorpe’s *Hodd*, the Scottish medieval fiction of Margaret Elphinstone, George Mackay Brown and Sian Hayton; Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Buried Giant*; Gregory Norminton’s *The Ship of Fools*; Philip Terry’s *Tapestry*; Peter Benson’s *Odo’s Hanging*; Paul Kingsnorth’s *Beast and The Wake*, or in popular culture we should mention Ellis Peters’ *Cadfael* series.

wanting to be the one who kills the animal. While the village girls collectively wet themselves in excitement, the narrator repeatedly underlines that “the crowd was in a frenzy,” “the crowd was wild” (Roberts 3), suggesting the intense, communal, carnivalistic mood of the festivity, a day outside the strict framework of feudal order. This opening represents the dominant dichotomies of the medieval world order as it shows what Bakhtin calls the two lives of a medieval person:

one was the official life, monolithically serious and gloomy, subjugated to a strict hierarchical order, full of terror, dogmatism, reverence, and piety; the other was the life of the carnival square, free and unrestricted, full of ambivalent laughter, blasphemy, the profanation of everything sacred, full of debasing and obscenities, familiar contact with everyone and everything” (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 129-130)

While celebrating, the village dwellers are also discussing a man’s toothache, which is described with a biblical simile as “a pain worse than purgatory,” while they profanely compare the taste of pus seeping from the inflamed tooth to “licking a dog’s tongue for three days on end” (Roberts 2). Also, the narrator refers to another medical condition, piles, known euphemistically as the “Kinght’s Blight” (17), indicating the pervasive presence of debasing bodily nuisances and the mixing of sacred and profane registers in everyday speech. Also, the lower part of the body is already comically evoked here as the locus of carnivalistic experience. Then, during the race, the universal contact of bodies is approaching the deadly climax: “[f]ilthy feet scrabbled for a purchase. The evening sky faded. The yells grew louder. The dust rose higher. Yells ... dust ... yells ... dust. And a thin ribbon of blood on the church wall” (3). The cat’s blood as some kind of a sacrificial offering thus ominously marks the beginning of the novel. The blasphemic pollution of the church wall with violently spilt animal blood appears as a symbolic purification for the community and a foreshadowing of later morbid events, the intermingling of Christian and pagan realms of cultural meanings. This carnivalistic register of the pre-plague world is defined by a simultaneously cosy and cruel communality as well as general, non-phobic contact, the opposite of individual endeavours for separation, discreteness or cleanliness. During the festivity, the unproblematic transgression of bodily boundaries becomes a normal and normalizing cultural practice, but after the plague the very notion of normality would change radically.

As the grotesque Others of the modern, distinct self, the medieval bodies of *Pestilence* seem subversive even before the outbreak of the plague. In the novel, plague is constructed as an avenging figure of chaos, but at the same time it installs clear lines of demarcation when it

comes to the binary oppositions of high and low, order and disruption, purity and filth. The premodern body³³ is thus by definition filthy from a modern point of view, the opposite of the implied 21st-century readers' self-image. The novel's representation of pre-plague bodies echoes Naomi Baker's argument about the early modern period:

[i]t leaks polluted bodily fluids and is consumed with flesh-eating diseases, emphasising the extent to which the ugly subject, marked by his or her unruly corporeality, horrifyingly fails to maintain a discrete, clearly defined identity. Put simply, ugly figures in early modern texts often embody all that the emerging modern subject, a subject premised on self-control and the ability to transcend the body through the rule of reason, must not be. (2)

The leaking, stinking fluids and monstrous buboes of late-medieval plague victims are similarly key elements of representing the incoherent and unruly pre-modern subjectivity. *Pestilence* repeatedly emphasises the ways the epidemic disrupts the symbolic constructions of the individual and the social body. Even though Bryan Reynolds has remarked that "sweating sickness, bubonic plague and syphilis are not filth diseases in the 19th-century sense" (21), in the case of the plague the premodern metaphors of pollution are also closely connected to moral implications and punishment, various religious and political forms of judgement, and, more importantly, the boundaries between spiritual-moral and secular-medical discourses. The novel provides the iconic social paraphernalia of popular and pseudo-scientific fatalism surrounding plague hysteria in 1348, all meant to purify the social body symbolically via probing the margins of the individual body.

It is especially the picaresque antihero, Salah, who gets into all sorts of polluting situations as a series of initiations into Western culture. In Florence, for instance, it is striking that all the scenes are built on Salah's body being physically affected by insults, he is being dragged about in the market, he smells various odours and the city space itself is identified as ordered chaos, finally, his immersion in excrement is the culmination of this phenomenon. His first filthy encounter in Europe takes place in a brothel, where he is tricked out of his money and falls into the latrine: "Salah tried to sit up, but found his fingers sinking in slime. And realized that he was lying in slime. He was covered with it. It was all over him. Realization

³³ The following anecdote quoted by Norbert Elias from a 16th-century etiquette book sheds more light on the evolution of modern filth concepts: "it is far less proper to hold out the stinking thing for the other to smell, as some are wont, who even urge the other to do so, lifting the foul-smelling thing to his nostrils and saying, 'I should like to know how much that stinks', when it would be better to say, 'Because it stinks do not smell it'" (*The Civilizing Process* 111).

dawned. He had fallen into the latrine” (Roberts 66). Salah’s encounter with human waste, *par excellence* filth, seems to prepare him for facing the ultimate pollution of the plague, eliciting an even stronger sense of disgust. For these reasons, he can be read as a grotesque body in the Bakhtinian sense, whose body is transgressing itself all the time and is characterized by gross exaggeration and hyperbole, it is “a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body” (*Rabelais and His World* 317). In order to fully grasp the meanings of the brothel scene it also needs to be considered that in medieval times human excrement had a significant presence in the religious discourse as well, where “it embodies sin, but it does not embody evil” (Bayless 166). Also, an “apotropaic protection” was attributed to it, difficult to conceive for a present day reader. Salah’s total immersion in human waste in the centre of an immoral house is thus a kind of profane baptism or even inoculation, making him invulnerable against all later pollutions and dangers, while the indefinable nature of “slime” as a half-solid, half-fluid material can also stand for repressed, inarticulate cultural contents in the West. His unintentional descent into the latrine’s underworld also reflects the moment in the civilizing process when the explicit rejection of human waste becomes the point of reference for the modern subject of clean and clear-cut boundaries: “the rise of the modern state and the strength of the bourgeois family as building blocks of European civilization in the early modern period rested upon a rejection of excrement, bodily odors, and everything reminiscent of human beings’ base, animal origins” (Barnes, David S. 113)—an idea which links medieval plague to the interpretation of Victorian cholera, as the next chapter will argue.

Beside the excrement taboo, Salah also involuntarily and repeatedly violates the death taboo when as a punishment he is entombed with a dead Italian archbishop and we see him sucking the finger of the “putrefying Archbishop” (Roberts 83) to get hold of his precious ruby ring, while regular gas explosions are emerging from the corpse’s stomach. The symbolic, spiritual body of the decomposing archbishop is reduced to its material reality, divested of all its cultural meanings, especially for a non-Christian foreigner like Salah. The “horror of the corpse”, as Bataille calls it, might also be another foreshadowing element of the plague, the contagiousness of the body’s inner violence: “[i]f they have to bury the corpse it is less in order to keep it safe than to keep themselves safe from its contagion. Often the idea of contagion is connected with the body’s decomposition where formidable aggressive forces are seen at work.” (*Eroticism* 46-7). Thus, Salah’s transgressive encounters with the contaminating margins and materials of the human body indicate that the connection between disgust and disease is a crucial element in the novel’s poetics of pollution. The link is reinforced by Martha Bayless’s claim, according to which “disgust probably first evolved as a protection against illness.

Humans seem to be hard-wired to recoil from certain things that may transmit disease or infection, such as the bodily secretions of others, decaying food or creature such as lice, maggots or worms. In Steven Pinker's words, 'Disgust is intuitive microbiology'." (14). In this sense, excrement and corpses are metonymically connected to the plague via the affect of pollution and disgust.

The figure of the leper in the Welsh village, Einion Fychan appears as the metaphorical embodiment of the decomposing human body *per se*, at the same time representing the emblematic epidemic of the pre-plague Middle Ages. *Pestilence* makes the figure of the leper a significant character, for he is the sinister predecessor of the plague panic. The interconnected symbolic meanings of leprosy and plague in the novel reveal a great deal about changing medieval notions of personhood and morality, and probably this is why the local leper already appears on the first page. The strong, healthy bodies are starting to deteriorate during the fight: they get dirty, noses get broken and bleed. The next paragraph establishes a parallel with this when it mentions the seeping nose of the leper, creating a symbolic unity between the included and excluded members of the community. The leper is a passive spectator, just like the other villagers, but he is not victimized and murdered as a suspected plague-infected character in *Year of Wonders*. As a representative and precursor of contagion, he is voyeuristically gazing at the others' festivity from a safe distance. The leper's abject gaze provides an outsider's view of community life, he is always poaching on the boundaries of culture as a polluting figure, cast out into nature. Later we also learn how he ended up exiled like this, in a lifelong cycle of fear and shame: "[w]hile the priest was intoning the service for the dead, his brother has placed earth on Einion Fychan's feet. It was the sign that, as a leper, he was dead" (Roberts 115). This cruelly ritualized social death sentence has connotations of the ostracizing treatment of AIDS patients, in whose case it is the hospital, not the church, where the verdict of the diagnosis is announced. The leper becomes a social outcast, whose social death precedes his physical death. Einion Fychan is the abject embodiment of filth, a polluted somatic margin between the living body and the threat of disintegration. The leper's repeated appearances thus emphasise that leprosy can be read as the metaphor of several medieval dilemmas also brought to the (skin) surface later by the plague—bodily distortion as a sign of divine punishment and how moral corruption gets written on the visible, outer layer of the corpus. During the Middle Ages, leprosy indeed represented the punishing somatisation of spiritual sins, particularly pride, envy, avarice or anger (Grigsby 35). As the leper is supposedly located on the margins of culture, his appearance near any member of the community is always a transgression, like in the following scene: "[i]t was a dreary afternoon in late December, and Einion Fychan the leper was fucking his goat," while "he ran his hands down her flanks, and "then put a finger in his mouth, before sliding it

down her nose and into her mouth” (Roberts 188). The leper then catches a little girl peeping at him through a hole on his hut. Similarly to the prologue’s festivity scene, there is voyeurism included here as well, but now it is the little girl curiously watching, suggesting that the look of the leper or even looking at him are by definition forbidden and potentially contaminating. This passage is especially important as it is also foreshadowing the sexually polluting scene when The Lady of the village (the Lord is fighting in The Crusades) recalls mysteriously getting pregnant (and having a stillborn baby later) after drinking a lot of wine on Ash Wednesday, going to her chamber and being visited by “angel”, (the leper, apparently), who also “ran his hands down her flanks, then put a finger in her mouth, before sliding it down her nose and into her mouth” (188). These parallel scenes of sexual transgression are all the more important as the mouth³⁴ is known to be the dominant part of the grotesque body, as the “grotesque face is actually reduced to the gaping mouth; the other features are only a frame encasing this wide-open bodily abyss” (Bakhtin *Rabelais and His World* 317). The above scene also shows a consistent connection of sexuality and eating in the novel, which again follows the semiotics of the carnival; at the same time it also refers to the phobic fear of touching as a basic trope of epidemic narratives. The figure of the leper thus suggests the permeability of the strictest boundaries of the pre-plague world between species, genders and social classes, similar to plague, which would collapse such distinctions for good.

The leper’s decomposing skin is a prime example of the polluted and polluting nature of bodily margins. His skin as the locus of disease had a special significance in the medieval era, as the skin as such marked the boundary of the visible and the invisible, the parts of the body that are taboo sight even today, dangerous to cut open and gaze at. Skin in the Middle Ages is “that unseen through which the body must be seen, the ground against which the body is figured (Connor 26). The materiality of the body was generally regarded as a physical reminder of human fallibility, and the most emblematic plague token, the bubo, is the somatic equivalent of the body’s imperfect envelope, the skin being the surface on which God’s judgement materializes and becomes legible. But it is not until the sixteenth century that skin begins to become visible (Walter 3) and a topic of interest, as the reading of *Year of Wonders* and the emerging symptoatology of the plague will show. In this sense, there is a symbolic line of continuity between leprosy, plague, syphilis and AIDS, for in all four diseases skin distortions appear as the signs of being penetrated, morally corrupted by infection, putting the sufferer to social shame before physical pain. Agamben’s reading of Foucault draws a similar

³⁴ Bakhtin emphasizes that in Rabelais the mouth is even the locus of plague: [t]here is a plague in one of the towns, the result of foul vapors rising from Pantagruel’s stomach” (*Four Essays* 174).

parallel when he interprets the biopolitical, spatial implications of leprosy as a paradigm of exclusive society and plague as a paradigm of disciplinary techniques:

[t]he paradigm of leprosy was clearly based on exclusion, it required that the lepers were “placed outside” the city. In this model, the pure city keeps the stranger outside, the *grand enfermement*: close up and exclude. The model of the plague is completely different and gives rise to another paradigm. When the city is plagued it is impossible to move the plague victims outside. On the contrary, it is a case of creating a model of surveillance, control, and articulation of urban spaces. (“Metropolis”)

In this passage, Agamben emphasizes the biopolitical stakes of the differences in the spatial-political treatment of these two dominant medieval contagious diseases, interpreting both of them primarily in terms of the dichotomy of inside and outside, urban incorporation and ejection from the social body, the ultimate metaphor of which is the city gate, the metaphorical mouth of the city body. These opposing practices have called into existence radically different kinds of social borders and margins of governmentality. Foucault’s own discussion of leprosy and plague sheds more light on the role of the individual in the creation of the Western biopolitical discourse on epidemics, where the plague town is “the utopia of the perfectly governed city”:

The leper was caught up in a practice of rejection, of exile-enclosure; he was left to his doom in a mass among which it was useless to differentiate; those sick of the plague were caught up in a meticulous tactical partitioning in which individual differentiations were the constricting effects of a power that multiplied, articulated and subdivided itself; the great confinement on the one hand; the correct training on the other. The leper and his separation; the plague and its segmentations. (*Discipline and Punish* 199)³⁵

The dominant ideology behind the exclusion of the leper is a firm belief in the maintainability of a firm boundary between an intact inside and a polluted outside. The development of the plague paradigm,³⁶ however, marks a loss of Western biopolitical innocence in this respect: the

³⁵The following Foucault passage establishes a link with the 19th-century heritage of plague and leprosy discourses, and even though it does not mention cholera, the emergency measures introduced during cholera outbreaks are rooted in the exclusionary and disciplinary methods of previous epidemics: “it is the peculiarity of the nineteenth century that it applied to the space of exclusion of which the leper was the symbolic inhabitant (beggars, vagabonds, madmen and the disorderly formed the real population) the technique of power proper to disciplinary partitioning” (*Discipline and Punish* 200).

³⁶ Regarding the scientific and medical explanations of the plague, *Pestilence* indirectly portrays how the very first cultural institutions dealing with the disease were established. On the political level, the so-called Ideology of

realization the contaminating outside eventually gets inside. This insight is part of the birth of modernity, the gradual taking control over individual bodies. The fact that in the closing scene of the novel we see the untouchable Welsh leper friendly hugging the foreigner, the Muslim Salah implies that “otherness” and “pollution” always survive any ideas of sanitized order: “Salah Ibn al Khatib and Einion Fychan the leper clinging to one another with thin arms, one pair dark, the other white” (Roberts 263). On a more general level, the ostracising of the leper and the urban disciplining of medieval plague anticipate the treatment of 19th-century cholera, which shows symptoms of both methods: colonial cholera was primarily denied and excluded from the life of the Mother Country and blamed on its polluted, tropical victims, while the English working classes, The Great Unwashed, were continually disciplined and contained in workhouses as the filthy sources of London outbreaks. The AIDS patient, on the other hand, embodies 20th-century dilemmas of individual rights to privacy, a voluntary exclusion from the public discourse of the disease and a compulsory exposure of sexual and medical facts for the sake of the “pure” majority.

Beside the carnivalistic bodies and the contaminating figure of the leper, sexuality almost exclusively appears in *Pestilence* as grotesque and transgressive—again, from the 21st-century reader’s point of view. There is not a single example of consensual heteronormative sexuality in the text, while episodes of sex with animals, children, corpses and members of the same sex prevail. It is especially Salah, the Everyman-like picaresque hero, who gets into all kinds of subversive situations. For instance, he has a bizarre erotic nightmare about the above mentioned deceased Archbishop after escaping from their shared entombment: “[a] lolling purple tongue and decaying fingers were all over is body, fumbling with his clothes. Salah was unable to stir, suffocating under the mouldering weight. The Archbishop, with running nose and rheumy, bloodshot eyes, was thrusting his swollen prick at Salah, so that he could fondle it” (99). Later he fancies a young abbot, and they are just about to have sex in an abandoned plague-hit farm house when Salah is faced with a—for him—unwelcome revelation: “Salah encircled him with his arms. He ran his hands up to caress the Abot’s shoulders. And encountered breasts” (192). The very possibility of a consensual, adult heterosexual encounter without the exchange of money thus appears as totally abnormal for Salah.

Order, active from 1450 on in Italy, implied the policing of movement, compulsory burial, the isolation of the sick, providing food and medical care for the isolated as well as subsistence for those whose livelihood was destroyed. Although the famous slogan, “flee soon, go far, come back late” (Waddington 20) was also coined during these years, the first plague hospitals were also opened in the period, operating very much as mere barriers on the outskirts of the city (Crawshaw 4). Lacking any effective treatment, isolated was the only known method: “when a sick person entered a hospital, he was treated as if he were dead” (Gottfried 120), evoking Foucault’s description of the 18th-century proto-clinic.

While the foreign Salah's sexual experiences are either unwanted or based on farcical misunderstanding, the European characters willingly engage in activities stigmatized today, such as sodomy or paedophilia. However, the leper's intimate "relationship" with his goat is still not as disturbing as the episode (an intertext from a Boccaccio short story) when a serf manages to have sex with a little girl of about ten by telling her that his painfully erect "devil" can only be cured if it can go home into her "hell" (206). These episodic scenes create a fragmentary but panoramic image of pre-plague notions of somatic boundaries, which appear simultaneously rigid due to feudal order and shockingly flexible. Sexual activity, just like the plague, is not represented as a private, discrete bodily experience betraying anything about the individual, while modern notions of desire and disease tend to be much more personalized, outward reflections of inner, subjective impulses, an issue to be examined in the AIDS chapter. Bakhtin explains this paradigm shift towards the modern, self-sufficient body in the following way: "[i]n the modern image of the individual body, sexual life, eating, drinking, and defecation have radically changed their meaning: they have been transferred to the private and psychological level where their connotation becomes narrow and specific, torn away from the direct relation to the life of society and to the cosmic whole" (*Rabelais and His World* 321). Disease and sexuality are thus not the expressions of distinct subjectivities and biopolitical agency for the medieval subject: such experiences are rather polymorphously perverse, appearing in all kinds of forms, that is, they do not mirror an inner, individualized world order.

Plague as the ultimate source of pollution appears rather late in the novel, which uses Salah's journey to narratively explore the last days of the pre-plague world. As a picaresque novel and postmodern pastiche, *Pestilence* meticulously recreates the medieval plague discourse by portraying Christian, Muslim and popular interpretations of the disease. Uncontainable and undisciplinable, the plague is the actual protagonist of *Pestilence's* grotesque travelogue. Despite its delayed appearance, there are various foreshadowing elements referring to it, which subtly contaminate the early chapters as well. For instance, a folk song sung by the village people in Wales runs: "[n]o plague for me, no plague for me / For me, nor yet my family" (Roberts 11).³⁷ The narrator also comments that when Salah sets out for Europe, "at the very same time, something else was starting its long and terrible journey, leaving the Black Sea and making its implacable way towards the continent of Europe" (14), and this creeping, contaminating stain would explode the pre-existing systems of meaning.

³⁷ A similar rhyme is quoted by Norman F. Cantor, metaphorising plague tokens as rose-coloured signs: "[r]ing around the rosies / A peckful of posies / Ashes, ashes / We all fall down" (5).

The dark continent: the episodemic narrating of cultural otherness

In *Pestilence*, such realms of knowledge as geography, economy, astrology and politics all appear as equally significant ingredients in the making of medieval plague discourse. For instance, the sailors on the ship taking Salah to Europe argue that “ever since that brave sea-captain, Taborik al Achita, whose mother was born in Compostella, ventured too far and fell off the edge of the world, chill fear had struck at the sailors in the ports of every land” (22). That is, before the plague, the world’s end was conceptualized as a literal, reachable location, as opposed to the apocalyptic, endlessly contagious events of the epidemic. On the ship Salah also plays chess—a game of Eastern (Persian) origins—with a fellow traveller who introduces the game in the following way: “[t]his game is a microcosmos of the whole order of creation” (42), evoking the contemporary idea of a direct correspondence between human microcosm and divine macrocosm. Yet another spatial image of the medieval notion of hierarchical space appears when the leader of an Italian nunnery describes her institution: “[t]his house is a small city, built for God, and to defend us from the corruption of the world without” (121), suggesting the same logic of the endless, homologous repetition of the same structure in different proportions. This understanding of the world is what Bakhtin links to Paracelsus and his ideas on the macrocosm (the universe) and the microcosm (man) (*Rabelais* 361). Besides, there are regular references to the so-called “Dark One” as the mysterious causer of the plague in the novel, just as witches and goblins are fully valid actors of everyday reality for the villagers, indicating a similarly superstitious, by today’s standards naïve view of the world.³⁸ Plague images are thus interpretable on a number of levels: the literal, the allegorical, the moral and the mystical, all of which are present in *Pestilence*. In line with this worldview, newly introduced plague interventions, the management of the disease took place rather on an allegorical level, relying on astrological constellations, while hospitals and plague tracts only appeared later as further steps of the spatial and somatic, the verbal and textual treatment and containment of plague. All medical approaches to the plague were based on the writings of Hippocrates, Aristotle, Galen and Avicenna, whose humoral theories provide but little useful advice on this disease. The epidemic was generally blamed on the corruption of natural, moral and civic order (Gilman *Representing the Plague* 220), infecting all layers of society. Thus,

³⁸ The existential uncertainties resulting from the medieval correspondence between micro- and macrocosms, the human body and the universe were climactically rooted in the so-called Little Ice Age between the 14th and the 19th centuries. This influenced the weather conditions of Europe, leading to extreme climate-related events often regarded as the causes of disease, and evoking the Biblical images of The Black Horse of the Apocalypse and its Pale Rider, also referred to as The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, which were pestilence, war, famine, and death.

totum pro parte, the reasons for the disease were projected onto the large geographical and heavenly bodies including human bodies.³⁹

Pestilence does not only focus on the Western world order's plague paradigm, though. Just like in *Year of Wonders* and *An Imperfect Lens* (to be discussed in the cholera chapter), there is a marked East-West dichotomy in the text, the East being—in the eyes of Europeans—the perennial source of polluting invasion, whether it is between Wales and Cairo in *Pestilence* or the Derbyshire village of Eyam and Oran in *Year of Wonders*. However, the interpreted novels often localize pollution in the middle of the West as the heart of real darkness, where the eruption of polluting filth is preceded by its always already being there. In *Pestilence*, the Islamic world appears as a contrast to the apocalyptic Western view of plague. Right at the beginning, following the already mentioned prologue-like vignette in the Welsh village, which establishes dominant Western ideologies of social structure, religion and popular culture, the first numbered chapter is set in the city of Cairo, telling us about the fine and “delicate arcades” (Roberts 7) of the academy where missionaries are trained for long years in a clean and peaceful environment of refinement. This is where Salah learns that he “was to start immediately on a journey, into the very heart of the dark continent” (14). As opposed to the utter profanity of the village festivity of dirt, blood, pus, piss and sweat, the Cairo academy appears as the clean and silent spiritual space of erudition of the East.

The Western characters obviously identify the East as the filthy source of infection, while for Salah, the cultured representative of it, it is actually the West which is disgustingly polluted. *Pestilence* thus debunks European myths about the dark and dirty Orient. Later, during his journey, monks tell Salah that “[t]hey say there have been terrible cataclysms in the East;” floods and famine, and when “Salah opened his mouth, the Abbot went on” (100), thus Salah never gets to dispel the stereotypes about his place of origin: it seems that scapegoating and othering are stronger than reality. Salah's erudition does not at all appear inferior to Western explanations of the disease, on the contrary, *Pestilence* pokes fun at the pretentiousness and money-grabbing attitudes of European authorities, both clerical and secular. Among the European peoples encountered by Salah, the English (the colonizers of the Welsh, who consequently appear as the lowest of the low) are depicted as even more backward than the French (whose queen gives birth on a table in front of an audience), since the French language

³⁹ See the dichotomy of universal and particular reasons for the plague: “Following the ideas of Avicenna, late medieval scholars considered two types of causes responsible for pestilence: universal and particular. Following tenets of astrology, the former was celestial, linked to the heavens, a result of harmful planetary conjunctions as well as solar and lunar eclipses. The resulting changes in light affected the climate and seasons and thus the air quality. The second cause was terrestrial, linked to particular local geographic conditions affecting the earth and water, such as earthquakes and storms” (Risse 196).

“was, after all, the language of government, culture and civilization, the lingua franca of Christendom” (16) in England. The farther Salah travels in the West, the less culture he finds. The ideology of oriental refinement is thus implicitly present here via pre-modern European concepts of the dirty source of disease, which will appear in an even stronger form in the cholera chapter.

The Eastern plague paradigm is an equally crucial chapter of the cultural history of the disease, and the novel powerfully utilizes the opposing traditions of plague doctoring and theodicy. *Pestilence* reflects these cultural differences, as Salah does not flee from plague, he actually travels right into the middle of it, while all the European characters are desperately trying to avoid it. His sense of mission also distances him from his fellow travellers. Even though the novel does not elaborate on Salah’s cultural background, the fact that he is a young Muslim scholar evokes the role of the Islamic world in plague culture. The Islamic discourse on the plague is just as Other, ungraspably foreign to the Europeans as the plague itself, and becomes the symbol of unassimilable difference in the story, questioning Western expectations about the cradle of filth:

[i]n the fourteenth century the most striking contrast was not that between religious and secular views of disease but between Christian and Islamic attitudes toward it. When confronted by plague, Islam adopted a fatalistic response. No effort was made to take precautions, to isolate victims, or to prevent transport of the infection. Indeed, the very idea of contagion was strenuously denied. The teachings of the Prophet dictated three principles: Plague was a mercy and a martyrdom sent by God; plague could not be contagious because disease came directly from God; no Moslem should flee from a plague-stricken city. (Ober 293)⁴⁰

Potentially the most important difference resulting from this view is that scapegoating was not a typical plague trope in Islamic countries. As opposed to this, the understanding of plague in Europe was not even based on the identification of the pestilence as a single calamitous entity but the heterogeneous workings of collective bad faith, as René Girard argues in connection with a novel, *Judgment of the King of Navarre* by Guillaume de Machaut, a French poet of the mid-fourteenth century: “[e]ven in retrospect, all the real and imaginary collective scapegoats, the Jews and the flagellants, the rain of stones and the epydimie, continue to play such an

⁴⁰ For ex. al-Wardī writes in 1349: “this plague is for the Muslims a martyrdom and a reward, and for the disbelievers a punishment and a rebuke” (Aberth 50). Plague (taun) death also means entrance to Paradise (Hopley 54). The Islam notion of the plague was about accepting God’s fate (tevekkiil) instead of pursuing individual action (kaza) (Bulmus 15).

effective role in Guillaume's story that he never perceives in them the single entity that we call the 'Black Death'" (*Scapegoat* 4).

Salah's Cairo academy is the symbolic place for Muslim epistemology and world view, where "Salah, sentence by sentence, episode by episode, and through constant repetition, had made the Holy Book a part of himself, weaving him, with its fine web, into the rich tapestry which patterned and comprehended every part of the universe" (Roberts 8). That is, right in the first chapter the text establishes that Salah's attitude to meaning production and learning about the world are based on a highly abstract episodic structure characterized by endless repetition, producing an infinite tapestry-like form of signification—the tapestry as a metaphor is all the more meaningful as it was a dominant medieval Western genre of allegorical world creation as well. Considering the fact that Islam forbids figurative representation and that the tapestry is a Western, figurative form of art, this image in the novel is especially ambiguous. A tapestry does not offer a clear, teleological narrative, it is rather a decorative tableau of unrealistic spatialization. Salah's episodic epistemology is similar to the novel's fragmented structure with its seemingly illogical sequence of unrelated events, finally adding up to one large panoramic image of late-medieval European society.

In terms of narrative techniques, the disruption of medieval European and Muslim plague experience is hypertextually represented by the novel's evocation of the picaresque novel and the Menippean satire. In the course of his adventures, Salah becomes a *picaro*. As the picaresque novel decrowns all hierarchical positions, it is characterized by sudden shifts, creating a "zone of familiar contact" (Bakhtin *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 158), also, it often relies on "crude slum naturalism":

[t]he adventures of truth on earth take place on the high road, in brothels, in the dens of thieves, in taverns, marketplaces, prisons, in the erotic orgies of secret cults, and so forth. The idea here fears no slum, is not afraid of any of life's filth. The man of the idea—the wise man—collides with worldly evil, depravity, baseness, and vulgarity in their most extreme expression philosophical universalism." (114-118)

Salah, the picaresque hero keeps mixing the registers exactly like this, and becomes a Bakhtinian grotesque body, developing without a centre, an embodiment and metaphor of foreign chaos (and pestilence) itself. Salah, just like the plague, is sent to kill, to assassinate Western power (epitomized by the French king). *Pestilence* consistently avoids creating coherent characters as individual subjects of complex psychological motivations; as a result, it is impossible for the reader to identify with any of the characters. While the spatial metaphor

of isolation in the case of quarantine will take centre stage in the second part of the chapter, the spatial politics and poetics of pestilence feature the logic of episodic isolation on the level of the text's structure.

Pestilence has countless intertextual connections to Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* as well. Especially so in scenes like the one when Salah's father dies before his son's journey and wishes to share his last thoughts with him, when "a goat below the window drowned his father's last words" (Roberts 13). This kind of humour comically counterpoints every regime of meaning and order created in the novel. With the use of satire, the realms of high and low are constantly reversed, upsetting the spatial and cultural hierarchy of the normal, non-carnivalistic world, a feature typical of a highly influential medieval genre, the Menippean satire. According to Bakhtin, the Menippean satire is the mockery of serious forms, full of digression and exaggeration, and is not based on biographical time, but only the unusual moments of the protagonist's life (*Four Essays* 116). Moreover, "the unfettered and fantastic plots and situations all serve one goal-to put to the test and to expose ideas and ideologues. These are experimental and provocative plots" (26). The carnival square is a central spatial metaphor in the genre (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 125), and this is exactly the urban space where Salah meets Giovanni Boccaccio himself in a self-reflexive, metaleptic encounter.⁴¹ The Italian author even lays out his *ars poetica*:

'Oh, just light, humorous stuff, with a sparkling of satire. I believe in pleasing the reader. No need to offend them unnecessarily with gratuitous sex and filth.' 'Absolutely,' rejoined Salah. He needed time to think. 'You must give readers what they want. It's no use writing a whole lot of highbrow, intellectual stuff that only a bunch of posers pretend to understand. Literature shouldn't be muddled up with politics.' (Roberts 85).

The passage's humour comes from its postmodernly anachronistic nature, openly addressing contemporary readers in a tongue-in-cheek way, since *Pestilence* is nothing but a pastiche-like series of filthy anecdotes and episodes. The Italian author's ironical and self-reflexive manner, at least as it is represented in the novel, is in sharp contrast with the overwhelming presence of various forms of pollution, both somatic and moral. The narrative functioning of the novel thus

⁴¹ Bakhtin contrasts Poe's story with *Decameron* in the following way: "[a]t the heart of the familiar story 'The Masque of the Red Death' there lies a Boccaccian matrix: the plague (death, the grave)-a holiday (gaiety, laughter, wine, eroticism). But here this matrix also turns out to be a naked contrast creating a tragic, in no sense Boccaccian atmosphere. In Boccaccio the all-embracing whole of life (not, of course, a narrowly biological life), life triumphant and moving ever forward, reduces the force of the contrasts. In Poe these contrasts are static and the dominant of the entire image is, therefore, oriented toward death" (*Four Essays* 200).

seems to reflect various patterns of plague narratives. Consequently, while satire subverts the vertical hierarchy of high and low, the episodic structure denies the possibility of a coherent horizontal order, a logical, linear, chronological sequence of plot elements. The poetics of *Pestilence* thus deny teleological plotlines, the seriousness of composition, even the seriousness of storytelling.

From the point when Salah eventually encounters the plague for the first time in Italy, the chapters get shorter and shorter, as if to indicate the heterogeneous, fragmented, unintelligible reality of the outbreak. Symptomatically, there is no present tense account of the plague either by Salah or the third person narrator, one of the chapters just retrospectively, briefly comments that “[t]he whole of creation went mad” (235). However, all previously respected authorities and methods, like using vinegar or praying to Saint Roche, prove useless, and general chaos gradually penetrates every layer of reality, while all ideological realms of meaning collapse. Prisoners are pardoned and released, famous doctors do everything they can to cash in on the epidemic and give invaluable pieces of advice, such as avoiding oversleeping. When it comes to the narrative power Salah’s culturally other, external point of view, it again has to be noted that “[p]lague can only be accounted for by those it spares. It can only be written from the outside” (Gilman 53). Plague narratives are thus usually characterized by a moral urge to share the story of chaos with posterity, as if the survivor’s sense of guilt could only be relieved by the act of narration: “[f]rom classic fiction to the latest journalism, the standard plague story is of inexorability, inescapability. The unprepared are taken by surprise; those observing the recommended precautions are struck down as well. All succumb when the story is told by an omniscient narrator” (Sontag *Illness* 139). Historically, pestilential narratives show that verbalization always accompanied the event, moreover, “in the biblical Hebrew, the three-letter word for “plague” רבד (= DBR) is orthographically identical with the word for “word” itself, proving that the disease was not a mere thing of nature but the medium of God’s speech” (Gilman *Representing the Plague* 221). *Pestilence* thus depicts both the anthropological universal of semiotizing chaos and the medieval approach to the divine punishment it represented.

In *Legacies of Plague in Literature, Theory and Film*, Jennifer Cooke identifies the fragmented structure of isolated, short bits in Defoe’s *Journal of the Plague Year* as “episodemic”; and argues that plague texts are essentially disrupted: “pandemic, in its interminable duration, generates texts of fragments rather than sequels” (24). Such a by definition fragmented narrative structure is also the central poetic device of *Pestilence*, where two separate plotlines are destined to meet, one of them set in the remote Welsh village, while the other is chronicling Salah journey from Cairo to the “the cradle of the infidel” (Roberts 14).

Jennifer Cooke also calls them “bubonic narratives” characterized by a special kind of behaviour: “[t]hey break out over the body of the text and erupt from the surface of the narrative in a way that could be considered ‘episodemic’ in the light of their disease context and sporadic dispersion” (22). Elana Gomel in “The Plague of Utopias: Pestilence and the Apocalyptic Body” similarly claims that “[s]equentiality presupposes a closure followed by a new beginning. The plague, however, is governed by the logic of repetition. The chain of death grows by addition of more and more identical links. Pandemic, in its interminable duration, generates the texts of fragments rather than sequels: an accumulation of repetitive episodes, deferring any kind of meaningful closure” (408). The episodemic narrative of *Pestilence* thus does not only portray the plague of 1348 as God’s punitive message to people, but also stages the much more earthly lesson of the outbreak that transformed medieval society for good, as the economic imagery of the closing chapters show.

Economies of the plague

On a broader social, political and historical level, *Pestilence* narrates the aftermath of the epidemic, the birth of early capitalism out of feudalism, and thus the plague also becomes a powerful economic metaphor, a system of not only biological but symbolic exchange mechanisms—a metaphoric realm that will also appear in connection with the Victorian psychology of waste and profit as well as the AIDS-related view of homosexuality as a non-productive closed circuit. Historical evidence shows that even before the Black Death “the integrity of medieval communities was also undermined by the geographical mobility of country people in the decades before the plague” (Bennett 51), and this migration-like movement threatened the strict cosmic and social order of the era.⁴² Economically, the pre-plague world is characterized by the complete feudal suppression of the serfs. In the novel we witness a scene at the Michaelmas Circuit (a religious holiday serving as an occasion for a meeting of the serfs and the landowners) when only one serf is allowed to represent his whole community. Since the meeting ends when a single candle burns down, by the time it comes to the serf’s turn to articulate the sufferings of his kind, he is simply speechless with frustration. One of them formulates their existential crisis this way: “we’ll be no more than flies on a bullock’s arse, to be whipped by the devil’s tail” (Roberts 39).

⁴²The serfs’ oppression culminated in the Peasants’ revolt of 1381: “[i]n 1349 and 1351, King Edward III of England made it illegal for workers to demand wages higher than they had before the plague. It also became illegal for workers to refuse work or to leave their villages to look for better wages somewhere else. In the 1370s a series of new taxes, called poll taxes, were placed on labourers. [...] The main rebel leaders were executed, and most of the king’s promises were not kept.” (Hardman 46).

The novel portrays the weakness of the church as a stronghold of the feudal system when the plague appears, how religious fatalism gains ground in the period of a massive economic transformation, when “[s]hortage of labour, high prices, new tensions, rampant anti-clericalism” (259) follow the outbreak. The figures belonging to the church are all cruelly satirized, for they are either greedy or deranged. The disempowerment of the church is satirized in *Pestilence* through a wide spectrum of clerical persons being discredited during the outbreak. As a result of the plague, fear gradually turns into hysteria without religion being able to offer real solace to the crowds. Characters keep swearing and crossing themselves, wear sacred toenails for protection, flagellants are marching in the streets, the leper sets the village church on fire, the local priest mysteriously disappears, the Lady of the village becomes a holy anorexic and goes on a fasting diet to save the village, a nun in Genoa experiences “divine ecstasies” and becomes a “holy invalid” (108). Another nun makes a spectacular church career after her self-sacrificial death of plague: “[s]he leaned over the young girl and put her lips to black bruise on her thigh, and sucked the pus from it” (202), making Salah, who witnesses the act, vomit; then we learn that “the young girl died the next day. The tall nun died three days later and was canonized the following year” (203). Chaos is to be found even around the Pope: when Salah and his company finally find him, they are somewhat let down by the setting: “those not afraid to speak their minds said that the palace of the Pope at Avignon was just a muddle of bricks and shabby buildings” (148), and then the holy man himself turns out to be a double disappointment: “I apologize for this unpleasantness. Pope Clement VI turned to face his audience, sitting open-mouthed. I really was going to pop in before the end. But I was having a bath when I heard the all the kerfuffle” (159). As it turns out, this is not even actually him, but his physician trying to impersonate the pope, filling in the increasingly empty symbolic function of the Catholic leader, just as the decomposing Archbishop represents the *vanitatum vanitas* nature of church functions. This scene also demonstrates a generic feature of the Mennipean satire, “the joyful relativity of replaceability” (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 125), although it is disillusioning rather than pleasurable for the desperate characters.

At the end of the novel, however, it turns out that there are inevitable, major changes to happen, even though it also becomes obvious that there is really nothing new under the sun. The exploitation of the poor underclasses never ceases, and the social hierarchy of high and low is actually only re-established by the introduction of a new world order. As a poet’s friend claims, “if this social order weren’t in existence, there’d only be another” (Roberts 176). In the last chapter, we witness this shift when a peasant tells the Lord who has just returned from the Crusades to the village after the plague that “we’d like to work for someone else. For a wage. Work for money, that is...” (248). He also articulates a heartfelt realization: “since I was knee-

high to a grasshopper, you taught me that I had need of you, that I couldn't live without you. But I'm beginning to see that it's the other way about, that it's always been the other way about" (249). This representative of the emerging yeoman class, renting a piece of land as a free tenant, realizes that "we are strong, strong through our own labour" (255). The moral conclusion of the outbreak is that "[t]he pestilence made us rise above ourselves, see ourselves in a new way" (255). Besides being a representation of transforming medieval society, this sentence is also an intertextual homage towards Camus's *The Plague*, where the epidemic disease "helps men to rise above themselves" (121) as an anthropological universal.

Beside the to-be yeoman peasants, another social layer, embodied by the trickster figure of the Italian tradesman, Francisco Datini, also finds new ways of survival. Datini claims to be a merchant, and turns into a cunning businessman at the end of the novel, stating that "everyone needs capital and loans. They're what makes the world go round" (Roberts 34). His transformation signals the beginning of the new era of profitable economic exchanges. He articulates that "it's unrealistic to force everything back into the pattern we had before the pestilence" (259) because of the "shortage of labour, high prices, new tensions, rampant anticlericalism" (259), and because "the new trinity is money, power and sex" (259). But his most important advice to the Lord is this:

'The new society will move far more quickly than the old one. And you can't return to the old means of production. There's a much easier way of keeping serfs in their place, as well as getting more money for yourself. Just divide the township's lands into strips, and rent them out to any serfs who are interested. For money. If he doesn't want that, then give him a wage in return for his labour.' Datini picked up the clock. 'You pay him by the hour as your servant. And make sure you pay him with money. Then he can buy what you produce. Sheep, meat and wool. (260)

Also, the businessman⁴³ later clearly spells out in his explanation to the peasant demanding wages that "we're on the brink of a new age, Chwilen. It's the age of the market, the age of production!", and following this statement, they have a toast "to God and profit. To profit and God" (263). The novel ends with the remark that "somehow Chwilen knew, then and there, that his history was only just beginning" (263). Thus, in the concluding scene we have a subaltern

⁴³ Francesco Datini II embodies the new era of individual gumption, in which trusting God is replaced by one's own wits, as a family anecdote also shows: the older Datini met by Salah on his way to Europe tells Salah how his father made him jump from the cupboard, telling him he would catch him but he did not even try. Datini's son, appearing at the end of the novel, tells the same story, however, he was suspicious enough of his own father and simply climbed down instead of jumping.

peasant reflecting on his socio-historical position as an individual for the first time in his life.⁴⁴ This paradigm shift towards modernity is also symbolized by a mysterious object the Lord brings with him from his journey: a clock—a device to measuring a new, modern, accelerated time.

All these economic, social and epistemological changes translate into the formation of the modern biopolitical body in *Pestilence*, leading on to the further individualizing and disciplining of the self in the Early Modern period. As Norbert Elias describes in *The Civilizing Process*, the human body was subjected to a disciplinary process during which it emerged as a fortified structure in control of its affective and emotional impulses:

[t]hrough specific figurational pressures, centrifugal tendencies, the mechanisms of feudalization, were slowly neutralized and how, step by step, a more stable central organization and a firmer monopolization of physical force were established. The peculiar stability of the apparatus of psychological self-restraint which emerges as a decisive trait built into the habitus of every ‘civilized’ human being, stands in the closest relationship to the monopolization of physical force and the growing stability of the central organs of society.” (369)

This is probably the most significant insight provided by the novel’s reading today: how the plague initiated new forms of power and governmentality in the Foucauldian sense and changed people’s concepts of themselves as individuals and building blocks of the social body. As the serf of *Pestilence* puts it: “everything can be explained by natural laws. There’s nothing mysterious or supernatural about it. There is nothing but the material world” (Roberts 260). *Pestilence*, in a grotesquely carnivalistic and picaresque vein, subverts pre-modern binary oppositions between East and West, polluted and pure, uncivilized and civilized in order to introduce the new Western world order of biopolitical control. The secular, increasingly scientized, centralized, rationalized and socialized laws of the modern cosmos were to play a central part in the cultural understanding of the plague in the following centuries as well, as Geraldine Brooks’ novel set in Early Modern England shows.

⁴⁴ Bakhtin quotes the plague scene from a chivalric romance to demonstrate medieval social hierarchies: [i]n a meadow during the plague Langland gathers together, around the image of Piers Plowman, representatives of all social classes and levels of feudal society from king to pauper, representatives of all professions and all ideological persuasions, and all of them take part in a symbolic deed (coming to Piers Plowman in a pilgrimage after truth, to help him in his agricultural labors, etc”) (*Four Essays* 156).

Disciplining the Plague: Quarantine and the Cunning Woman in *Year of Wonders*

“Officialdom can never cope with something really catastrophic.”
(Camus: *The Plague* 120)

As opposed to the depiction of medieval plague as a threshold of modernity in *Pestilence*, the early modern images of an outbreak in *Year of Wonders* show major differences in terms of the spatial and somatic management of the disease. The enclosed space of the quarantine and the gendered body of the female healer get centre stage within the increasing secularization, communal administration and scapegoating of 17th-century British plague discourse. Geraldine Brooks' novel is set in 1666 and is based on a true story. The text is narrated in the first person by a smart but uneducated maidservant girl, Anna Frith, who gradually becomes a so-called “cunning woman”, an unprofessional healer (also known as wise woman, herbalist or healing woman) during the plague outbreak in her Derbyshire village, Eyam. Anna goes through a significant *Bildung* in the course of the story and becomes an example of the modern subject who daringly questions both religious and medical authorities, having an innate curiosity about the world around her. She even articulates opinions about the divine or natural causes of the plague: “[p]erhaps the Plague was neither of God nor the Devil, but simply a thing in Nature” (Brooks 215). This claim seems to be the logical continuation of the villagers' above quoted realization at the end of *Pestilence*, where natural laws are put forward as the universal explanation for chaotic experiences like the plague. Thus, the narrative structures and the representational techniques of the two novels correspond to the chronological gap between their settings and the different notions of the human subject implied by them, featuring plague as a watershed between pre-modern and modern biopolitical thought. Colin Platt's *King Death: The Black Death and Its Aftermath in Late-Medieval England* elaborates on the fact that the plague gave people economic and social freedoms that had been unknown to the lower classes in the pre-plague years. Indeed, both novels reveal the plague as a major impetus for socio-economic change, leaving behind providential order and medieval feudalism for modern capitalism and organising a civic government. The materiality and the narrativization of the plague radically changed, too: instead of the grotesque mixing of symbolic realms dramatized by *Pestilence*; the methods of surveillance, isolation and quarantine take precedence in Anna's story at the time of *Year of Wonders*. In Roberts' novel one witnesses the deconstruction of the religious, church-dominated plague discourse, while Brooks depicts the formation of the professional, medical discourse on epidemic disease. However, the legitimization of the male doctor's position seems

to be stemming from the discrediting of alternative figures of authority like the Anglican priest or the cunning woman.

The significance of the representational shift from the medieval view of plague lies in the fact that “early modern plague discourse thus exemplifies, symptomatically, a defining moment in the history of individuality in which the modern, autonomous self (as singular victim and infectious agent) is visible but in a form still enmeshed in its indivisible incorporations—in the state, in the body of the church, and in the miasmal biosphere” (Gilman *Plague Subject* 27).⁴⁵ The modern individual’s bodily and spiritual agency and the development of the state management of biopolitical issues show parallel paths of evolution. Margaret Healey also claims that “the early modern is a period repeatedly described as a highly somatic moment, one that witnessed an unprecedented series of exchanges between medical and other knowledges; between the corporeal and other domains;” an era in which the plague gradually becomes “the object of investigation rather than veneration” (*Fictions of Disease* 3). Symbolically, the first registered autopsy on a plague victim was also carried out in the year 1666, starting to demystify the transgressive cutting open of skin, the body’s envelope, the somatic boundaries of inside and outside. In the Early Modern period, “an epistemological shift took place during which the universalist notion of order which made sense of the phenomena of the world by way of a hierarchy of analogies and correspondences gave way to an epistème that we see, at least in part, as the beginning of our own ways of generating meaning” (Scholz 2). In the light of these major ideological changes, the plague management of Eyam in 1666 appears like a case study 17th-century structures of power and knowledge. Since Anna is the maidservant of the local priest, Michael Mompellion and his wife, Elinor, who originally came up with the idea of the quarantine, the village community’s legendary decision to close itself up against the epidemic brings to surface the teeming social and intellectual tensions of the era: the religious, scientific and pagan explanations of the epidemic, the antagonism between male and female healers as figures of emerging secular authority, the interdependence of urban and rural communities as well as the crisis of the notion of surveillance, stigmatizing and spirituality. The interpretation of *Year of Wonders* thus emphasises the significance of the spatial politics of the quarantine in relation to early modern notions of contagious disease and the gendered identity of the female healer confronting masculinized medical and religious authorities.

⁴⁵ The secularization process also had its odd experiments: “[d]uring one of the major London epidemics in the early seventeenth century someone allegedly had an idea of filling a ship with peeled onions and, when the wind direction was favourable, floating it down the Thames through the capital” (Porter, Stephen 17).

Early modern plague culture and the heritage of Eyam

It is not the outbreak itself that makes the story of Eyam a remarkable episode in British history but the back then still new and much debated method of spatial isolation, the quarantine.⁴⁶ As early as 1578, Elizabeth I was the first monarch to officially order the compulsory isolation of plague victims, and The Plague Act of 1604 was yet another major landmark in British biopolitical legislation, heralding a new era of natural, moral and civic order. However, despite all legal precautions, the Great Plague of 1665 was killing almost four thousand Londoners every week. In comparison with the scarcity of sources from the Middle Ages, there are countless literary and academic depictions of the epidemic from this period. Especially with the country's break with Rome, the divorce of secular and religious responses became even more evident. The verbal culture of plague in the British Isles at this time is extant primarily in the form of a large amount of written documents representing various discourses, such as religious sermons, jeremiads, political satires, popular plays, medical advisories, official proclamations, and broadsheets written during and between outbreak years. British religious plague discourse was thus primarily written, while in Catholic countries like Italy "in the artistic and ritual traditions surrounding Catholic plague saints, the visible [...] fills a gap—material, juridical, representational—between the affliction and the afflicted, and in its appeal to the sight it does so with a therapeutic effect embedded in vision itself" (Gilman *Plague Writing* 90). As a result, the legion of plague saints, the traditions of the European *danse macabre*, the triumph of death, and the Madonna of Mercy were not available for the newly Protestant country. In short, the plague for the British in this era was nothing but "God's word made legible upon the body" (Gilman *Representing the Plague* 7). In terms of the religious readings of the disease, the most important change after the Middle Ages is thus the individualization and verbalization of a collective catastrophe:

[i]n seventeenth-century plague theologizing, the guilt that provokes the divine scourge is correspondingly "individual" in both senses of the word: plague identifies the victim as the cause of his own suffering insofar as his sin is his own, proper to him as an individual sinner, but also, inevitably, proper to his nature as a descendent of Adam, a member of the individual body of humankind." (Gilman "The Subject of the Plague" 26)

⁴⁶ In the 17th century, Britain was repeatedly struck by outbreaks of plague: during the reign of Elizabeth I in 1563-4, 1592-3, and 1603; during James I in 1603-4; during Charles II in 1625-6, 1636-9, 1641, 1643-7; and finally during Charles II in 1664-6.

In line with the individualization of the disease, there are approximately eighty autobiographical plague accounts in English from this period. Other genres blossomed as well, such as history, historical novel, spiritual autobiography, moral tract, practical advisory (Gilman 229), cultivated by authors including Samuel Pepys, Ben Jonson, John Donne, William Shakespeare,⁴⁷ Daniel Defoe, Thomas Dekker (whose *The Wonderful Year* from 1603 is the intertext and motto of the novel). Anna Frith's first person singular account with its richly emotional language and personal accounts of her intellectual struggles with understanding the disease seems to recycle especially the genres of the spiritual autobiography and practical advisory as hypotexts, similarly to Roberts' treatment of the Menippean satire and the picaresque novel.

Within this highly verbal early modern Protestant culture of plague, the village of Eyam can be rightfully called one of the "epicentres of Europe's plague heritage" (Wallis 31). Brooks's narrative is based on the true story of this Derbyshire village, which became famous because its protestant pastor, William Mompesson (Michael Mompellion in the novel) decided to quarantine the whole community during the outbreak of 1665-1666. Eventually, 259 of a population of 330 died of plague; Mompesson himself survived the epidemic, but his wife, Catherine (Elinor in the novel) passed away, their children (they have none in the novel) were away to Yorkshire, so they survived (Wallis 32). Geraldine Brooks remarks in an interview at the end of *Year of Wonders* that the story was actually inspired by a short sentence from a letter written by the pastor, commenting that "fortunately my maid continues in health" (Brooks P.S. 3), and the author started to wonder how a young, uneducated girl could have perceived the plague at that time. Another inspiration might have been a maidservant's, Anna Seward's personal account of the events was also published posthumously in a successful edition of her collected poetry and literary correspondence edited by Sir Walter Scott, and, as some critics point out, the romantic novelist might have inspired her to a great extent when recollecting the outbreak. The village's story eventually became widely popularized, especially from the 18th century on, and gained special popularity during 19th-century cholera outbreaks, demonstrating the symbolic continuity of epidemic narratives and the persistence of plague tropes. The plague of Eyam served for 19th-century London cholera outbreaks as a miniature and contrastive model

⁴⁷ As several literary historians have argued, Elizabethan plays keep strangely silent about the plague, for a good reason: "[p]lague's Elizabethan invisibility upon the stage directly resulted from its visibility in the London streets and from the existence of a historical and religious discourse which had already claimed the disease for its own" (Cooke 49). Still, there are several metaphorical references to it in Shakespeare: "in *Antony and Cleopatra*, Scarus reports that, with Cleopatra's flight, the battle, on Antony's side is 'like the token'd pestilence, / Where death is sure' (3.10.12-13)—to which Enobarbus replies that his eyes 'did sicken at the sight' (3.10.20). In *Twelfth Night*, Orsino declares: 'O, when mine eyes did see Olivia first, / Methought she purged the air of pestilence!' (1.1.20-21). In love and war, Shakespeare's language conjures up the plague as its dramatic atmosphere, the imaginative simulacrum of the miasma" (Gilman *Representing the Plague* 9).

of a utopian, rural, insular community's self-control, tinged with religious reassurance—values that the metropolitan, imperial capital needed desperately (as the chapter on Victorian cholera will show). Later, however, the general opinion about the idolized story of Eyam changed: “[a]uthors in the twentieth century turned against the single-minded conviction, faith and authority of nineteenth-century representations of Mompesson, as these characteristics became increasingly unpalatable” (Wallis 48). While acting out of pure religious conviction was an acceptable and nostalgically missed trait for the increasingly agnostic and industrialized Victorian society struggling with its own moral and sanitary position, the spiritual and decision-making power of the pastor became a sign of totalitarian blindfoldedness by the 20th century. Also, the village's story has made a career as part of the late 20th-century heritage culture of postmodern Britain, embodying all the neo-conservative values cherished especially in the Thatcherite 80s. Eyam has been compared to “an epidemic theme-park” (46) even, visited by countless tourists each year. No wonder that the plague of Eyam has been subject to countless retellings, becoming one of the most powerful *lieux de mémoire* of the long history of British plagues. Thus, the representational history of Eyam in itself provides a comprehensive case study in the culturally changing constructions of the plague and the treatment of contagion in Britain in the past three hundred centuries. The major point of interest of Geraldine Brooks' *Year of Wonders* is thus that it revisits both the universal tropes of plague panic and the period detail of Eyam's voluntary self-isolation as part of early modern English cultural heritage, and does so by giving voice to a dynamically evolving female subject.

The quarantine as a camp

While in *Pestilence* the major metaphorical realm of plague imagery is connected to various notions of pollution and the collapsing of boundaries, *Year of Wonders* depicts the disease primarily as the root-cause of the spatial dilemma of separation and isolation, be it that of clerical and secular powers, upper and lower social classes or healthy and infected people. The most important difference between the intellectual reactions to plague in the two novels is probably the gradual loss of faith in the church as a reliable authority: “[p]rovidential order gives way to civic government. [...] These underlying tensions enact a double trauma: that of the plague itself, full of ‘unaccountable things’ and symbolized by the ‘great pit’; and that of the crucial failure of theology to render a satisfying moral or medical account of such things” (Gilman *Plague Writing* 243). The device of the quarantine is the prime example of this ideological shift, where the method of isolation and containment establishes a model for later crises as well (embargos, sanitary cordons, laboratory tests) of individual patients or whole

groups, which often appears in the form of enclosed spaces (a ship, a house, a town, a hospital ward). This is why it is especially important that in *Year of Wonders* it is the priest who comes up with the idea of the quarantine, describing it in military metaphors like “voluntary besiegement” (Brooks 104); and also defines the quarantine in spatial terms as a new microcosm for the community: “let the boundaries of this village become our whole world. Let none enter and none leave while this plague lasts” (104). The reading of *Pestilence* has already commented on the exclusionary paradigm of leprosy giving way to the inclusionary control of plague, and Foucault’s ideas about enclosed spaces as described in *Discipline and Punish* can shed even more light on the modern handling of contagion. Foucault uses the image of the plague town as the historically paradigm-setting example of this:

[t]his enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded, in which an uninterrupted work of writing links the centre and periphery, in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, the sick and the dead -- all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism. (*Discipline and Punish* 198)

In order to understand the meanings of the village’s self-imposed quarantine as depicted in the novel, the general use of this isolating institution has to be understood in the context of the era. In 1636, quarantine was still a relatively new policy to England (Newman 809); however, in 1665-6 it had already become a controversial method of discipline and/as punishment in London: “the government engaged in double-speak; it claimed to only use quarantine as a method of isolating the sick and exposed, but in practice it also employed quarantine as punishment for breaking other regulations” (826). During 1665, the year of the last great outbreak of plague in the capital and the novel’s setting, quarantining was consequently a highly unpopular handling of the problem. Also, common knowledge soon identified it with solitary confinement: “contrary to this government narrative of disease prevention there was a popular narrative that portrayed quarantine and isolation as personal punishment rather than prudent policy” (810). If we agree with the claim that “quarantine becomes the emblem of an enforced privacy” (Gilman 91), Eyam’s self-isolation can be seen as an extreme example of individualism as well. The political significance of the quarantine in the early modern plague-stricken town is contrasted by Foucault with the logic of the 19th-century panoptic

establishment, as “a counter-city and the perfect society” (*Discipline and Punish* 205) has to be created.

The “plagued” settlement as a dystopic *counter-city* is traditionally the emergency breeding ground of ever stricter means of biopolitical control that often survive the state of exception itself. Since the whole dissertation interprets outbreaks of devastating epidemics as states of exception in the Agambenian sense, his notion of the camp as the primary model of the modern era’s political paradigm can be also used to examine the emerging method of the quarantine. For Agamben, the camp is not “a historical fact and an anomaly belonging to the past (even if still verifiable) but in some way as the hidden matrix and nomos of the political space in which we are still living” (*Homo Sacer* 166). He goes even further when claiming that “if the essence of the camp consists in the materialization of the state of exception and in the subsequent creation of a space in which bare life and the juridical rule enter into a threshold of indistinction, then we must admit that we find ourselves virtually in the presence of a camp every time such a structure is created” (174). He thus does not only identify the camp as a modern political paradigm of isolation, enclosure and total control, but also argues that modernity as such necessarily originates in the formation of these oppressive practices, i.e., “the political space of modernity” (174). Living in a camp thus seems to be an enforced disciplinary condition, but psychologically it can also create the illusion of advancement and safety, just like in Camus’ *The Plague*, when Monsieur Othon surprisingly states “I want to go back to the camp” (249) upon being released from the gender-segregated quarantine of Oran.

Similar disciplinary measures of inclusion and supervision are introduced in the village of Eyam, where the self-isolation of the village and its self-reduction into a miniature village state seems to be the ultimate consequence of the civilizing process as outlined by Norbert Elias’, a kind of self-enclosure, as Anna Frith puts it in the novel: “for hundreds of years, the people of this village pushed Nature back from its precincts” (Brooks 11). The self-identity of civilization in this sense depends on its ability to draw and maintain its margins against nature, and spatially, the quarantine is the mastertrope of the cultural discourse on epidemic. Margins, however, are by definition polluted and polluting, as the outbreak of plague in the novel shows. Symbolically (and historically), it is a piece of luxurious textile from London that brings the plague to the village: the medium or even metaphor of the epidemic is again trade, the capital’s capitalism, that is, the never fully controllable acts of exchange, circulations and economic processes as opposed to the closed circuit of the quarantine.⁴⁸ This economic route of contagion

⁴⁸ According to Boluk’s interpretation, economic metaphors are especially central in Defoe’s *Journal of the Plague Year*, where the circulation of capital becomes the instrument of plague, as it spreads in the marketplace and trade

evokes the events described by Defoe in *A Journal of the Plague Year*, where it is also a “Parcel of Silks imported from Holland” (204) which starts the outbreak, as if the economy and modernization unavoidably bred contamination. The first victim of the plague in Eyam is the tailor who ordered the luxurious fabric and who is the widowed Anna’s new lodger, working on an elegant outfit as a surprise and wooing gift for her. The interconnection of economic and moral meanings intersect when the tailor’s money-grabbing customers insist on taking even the unfinished bits of the craftsman’s work after his sudden death, and thus unwittingly start to spread the disease, while Anna follows the dying man’s advice and burns her beautiful new green dress.⁴⁹ It thus seems that it is her denial of luxury items and narcissistic pleasure in her own beauty that save her life: her ethical choice biologically immunizes her to health dangers. In terms of economic metaphors, the meaning of the expression “plague token” changes between the medieval and the early modern periods: in *Pestilence*, the plague tokens tend to be read as allegorical bad omens predicting the unavoidable arrival of collective divine punishment, while later they become inscribed on the individual body as aphysical, medically interpreted giveaways. The tokens are legible not metaphorically but symptomatically in *Year of Wonders*; not to mention the economic sense of the word “token” as a symbolic object which can be used in legitimate exchanges as opposed to the contaminated, uncontrolled circulation of plague.

Beside the contagious fabric, the appearance of the plague signs is foreshadowed by the imagery of rotten apples, and “the scent of rotting apple” (Brooks 6), referred to several times by Anna in the first few sections. The novel starts with chapters called “Leaf-Fall” and “Apple-Picking Time”, the period of plenty and harvest, when the smell and sight of the fallen, decomposing fruit resembles overripe plague bubos opening up like rotten fruit, revealing the taboo sight of inner decomposition. In the first chapter, Anna takes apples to the mourning priest which soon go brown as he does not eat at all. Apples are sinisterly connected to the plague in another scene as well. The local noble family’s cook escapes from the village, but in the next village people only throw apples (food for the pigs) at her, and the same thing happens to the leper on the first page of *Pestilence*. While the leper easily escapes the apples (and even considers them as free food), the cook’s dignity is destroyed by shame of the excommunicative

routes. The narrator “identifies ‘Business’ as the only sufficient reason to go about in public during a time of plague and thus risk infection” (Boluk 131).

⁴⁹ While no one suspected trading items to be contagious, personal hygiene was considered a major risk factor in the period. As Elias points out, in the 16-17th centuries there was a widespread European belief that bath houses spread disease: “[w]hat could be imprinted on consciousness was the simple fact: water baths are dangerous, one can poison oneself in them. For it was in this way, as a kind of poisoning, that human reason at this time assimilated the mass infections, the plagues that swept through society in numerous waves” (*The Civilizing Process* 531).

attack, she gets a stroke and dies soon afterwards.⁵⁰ Or, as the description of the tailor's death suggests, the bubo—in Anna's eyes—is the result of a grotesque reproductive process: "Viccars lay with his head pushed to the side by the lump the size of a newborn piglet, a great, shiny, yellow-purple knob of pulsating flesh" (42).

The rotten apples' waste metaphorics is also echoed by the novel's rat imagery: Anna witnesses several dead, bleeding rats around the village before the outbreak, even her own children are caught playing with rat corpses, but beyond the disgust elicited by the conventionally filthy animal and dead material as such, no special significance is attributed to these events. Even though it can be claimed that since the Middle Ages the rat "was a phobic mediator between high and low" (Stallybrass and White 146), a transgressive animal even before its contagiousness was realised, the rat only acquired overt connections with the plague in the modern era. Previously, its meanings were more general but still connected to cultural boundaries, pollution and multiplication, that is, all the features of pollution and contagion: "[r]ats, pigs and cockroaches have had a particular place in the racist bestiary because all are associated with residues—food waste, human waste—and, in the case of rats, there is an association with spaces which border civilized society, particularly subterranean spaces like sewers" (Sibley 28). Moreover, rats and mice share in the pre-modern worldview the status of "imperfect" creatures along with frogs, toads, worms, and scorpions, and are similarly thought to be capable of spontaneous generation (Cole 69). This idea might evoke the Deleuzian notion of the pack as applied in *A Thousand Plateaus*, where rats are identified as rhizomatic creatures among the so-called types of multiplicities: "packs, bands, are groups of the rhizome type" (358), also, they "continually transform themselves into each other, cross over into each other (249). And the multiplicity of the crowd is an essential type of filth: "along with the dirt of decay, finally, there is the dirt of the mass. As individual entities, people despise anything that throngs or sprawls, any mass in which they might become caught up and irretrievably lost" (Theweleit 386). So, the dead rats in *Year of Wonders* embody the decentered, deconstructive nature of contagion and its (for humans) incomprehensible semiotic logic of endless self-reproduction. They are still not read as explicit biological signs, metonymic causatives of the plague itself but mark the transition between superstitious early modern and fully modern scientific, medical knowledge. The rat was rather retrospectively constructed as the filthy phobic object of contagion (*Yersinia pestis* was only discovered in 1894 by Alexandre Yersin), but today it is well known that plague is spread by *zoonosis*—it is primarily a disease of rats and other small animals (Bollet 93). It was thus an early modern realization that rats were

⁵⁰ I thank Dr József Lapis for this insight and so many others as well.

somehow the vectors of disease, and as time went by, they became symbolically identified with it. As the dead, bleeding rats in the opening scenes of Camus' novel also emerge as obvious giveaways with their grotesquely open, bleeding mouths. As Patrick Deville comments in his Yersin biography about the 19th-century Chinese plague outbreak: "since Camus that has seemed obvious, but not to them" (134). In the filth and waste economy of *Year of Wonders*, rotten apples, dead rats and plague tokens thus provide the sinister background of the outbreak—later complemented by the figures of the sexually transgressive priest and the wicked witch as mysterious harm-doers vs. healers and potentially polluting figures.

Wicked witch or cunning woman?

As opposed to the medieval world of *Pestilence*, where even a noblewoman, the Lord's wife is described by one servant to another anxious to meet The Lady as "a woman's a woman. That's all you need to know" (Roberts 15), and the cross-dressed young abbot points out in quite a contemporary, feminist way that "[t]here are only two choices for a woman, marriage or the cloister" (197). As opposed to this, in *Year of Wonders* the figure of the female narrator strikes us as an evidently modern subject who experiences a process of female empowerment both in terms of her education and sexuality. Her character development clearly reflects early modern preoccupations with the roles of women in biopolitical crises and the gendering of the budding science of medicine, as Anna's Bildung is juxtaposed to two female figures embodying the extreme poles of female power: the angelic, self-sacrificial wife of the pastor, Elinor, and the wicked, murderous witch, Aphra, the second wife of Anna's abusive, alcoholic father. The third term or middle ground between these extreme types of femininity is represented by the local cunning woman and her daughter, Mem and Anys Gowdie. They stand for lay peasant culture and an ideal, ancient and utopistic relationship with the powers of nature.⁵¹ Anys is also the one who articulates a proto-feminist opinion on men and the institution of marriage: "why would I marry? I'm not made to be any man's chattel. I have my work, which I love. I have my home—it's not much, I grant, yet sufficient for my shelter. But more than these, I have something very few women can claim: my freedom" (Brooks 54). Even though these women all appear as powerful in the novel, they eventually die a violent death—and not one of plague. Just like the medieval holy anorexic (see The Lady in *Pestilence*), the Victorian hysteric or prostitute and the AIDS infected gay man, they are by-products, embodiments of the dominant biopolitical discourse. My argument in connection with these female characters in the

⁵¹ Lawrence Norfolk's *John Saturnall's Feast* (2012), set during the Civil War, also features such powerful femal characters in possession of ancient, pagan healing knowledge.

dissertation is that they are social symptoms as well, representing culturally constructed and changing social anxieties concerning biopolitical control, sexuality and otherness, as the two upcoming chapters will show.

The pastor's wife and the witch are thus positioned on the same scale of available early modern subject positions for women: their power is subject to a man of authority: the saintly and renowned and/or despised, abusive husband. While Elinor appears as a kind, pure, tireless nurse in her continuous visiting of the ill, Aphra's evilness shows itself in various antisocial acts, and her anger is only aggravated by the loss of her own child and husband—her child dies of the plague and her husband is cruelly punished by the locals for thieving. Aphra tricks the villagers into buying false cures by masquerading as a ghost, keeps her own dead child's decomposing corpse in her house, starts to carry out various dark rituals, and, in a fit of madness, stabs the vicar's wife to death as an act of revenge in the church when they are announcing the end of the outbreak and finally turns against herself. Aphra's story's is in many ways the opposite of Anna's: her negative *Bildung*, the distortion of her character is the result of her victimization and traumatization by her husband, her abandonment by the community and the loss of her children. However, the first women to be murdered are Mem and Anys Gowdie, who are blamed with witchcraft and tortured to death by the village mob, thinking that they are responsible for the outbreak. Despite the scapegoating, torturing and killing of the cunning women, Anna educates herself to become one to help the community, and thus she broadens the fuzzy symbolic boundaries of the nurse/wife and the assailant/witch. As a cunning woman, she occupies the by then sadly empty position and turns into a healer figure and becomes an independent woman with a chosen profession.

In order to understand the figure of the female healer, the relationship between early modern plague and the image of the witch as two major sources of pollution needs to be briefly explained. The witch's most threatening skill, her so-called "diabolic sensorium" (Classen 71), that is, superhuman perception, traditionally goes back to everyday domestic tasks associated with women: tasting when a food is off, having a soothing touch, smelling when clothes need washing, etc.. However, towards the Enlightenment era, something changed: "cooking, cleaning, and other housewifely chores were no longer paths to cosmic power and they duly contracted into their 'proper' domestic sphere" (78). This ambiguity is represented by the first, 1548 version of the infamous *Malleus Maleficarum* or *The Hammer of Witches*, a legal document defining witchcraft, which states that there are good and evil witches as well, however, in 1563 it was revised to claim that all of them are essentially bad:⁵²

⁵²The era's plague discourse is associated with misogyny in Thomas Dekker's simile as well, who wrote that "a Harlots tongue is worse then a Plague-sore" (qtd. in Munkhoff 22).

women were more likely to be witches than men because of their inherent inferiority, which manifested itself in several ways. They were “more superstitious, more credulous, and more impressionable”. They were “weaker, they have slippery tongues, and they wish to vindicate themselves through witchcraft. All wickedness is but little to the wickedness of a woman.” Women were also “more carnal than men and since all witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable.” (qtd. in Whaley 178)

The superstitious figure of the witch as the embodiment of threatening female, anti-clerical and anti-scientific powers is symbolically connected with the evolution of secular plague legislations. Women had crucial functions during early modern outbreaks: “following continental precedent, local bodies in times of plague were instructed to conscript a small army variously described as viewers, searchers, keepers, watchers, surveyors, examiners, collectors, providers, deliverers, and buriers.” (Pelling *The Common Lot* 196). Witch trial documents from the era clearly establish a bifurcation of female positions of powerful knowledge, that of *witches* and *searchers*—women entrusted with looking for plague victims in houses: “in examining the parallel between searchers and witches, what seems immediately striking is the antithetical relationships to authority held by these two groups of women: one group is sanctioned while the other is resisted” (Munkhoff 21).⁵³ The searchers’ labour was thus carried out on the polluted margins of the plague, the threshold of the home, the boundaries of normal and abnormal, living or dead, evoking anxieties that were traditionally projected to the witch, as “spying on one’s neighbours, interfering with individual destinies, reading signs that are not always visible, controlling life or death by mysterious means: these are practices usually associated with witchcraft” (61).

⁵³ On the one hand, women had major and typically dirty jobs during outbreaks: “[l]ike witches, searchers deal in a realm where their words have material consequences; like prostitutes, they deal in a realm associated with the corrupt body” (Munkhoff 22). It is also known that “this authority [watchers] was vested in older women, often widows, dependent upon pensions seems particularly odd given the cultural bias against the credibility of ‘old poor women’. Yet precisely because their authority was transient, searchers became expendable—physically, symbolically, historically—once their duties had been performed” (1-2). It was far from being easy to take this responsible job: “in threatening ‘Corporall payne’ the Orders suggest that the searcher’s body must be exchanged for the falsely reported plague body; thus the corruption of the diseased body becomes figured in the ‘corruption’ of the searcher” (14). In contrast, as “warder” or “watch-man”, men “remained in the metaphoric role of policing access to a quarantined house, rather than coming into direct contact with contaminated bodies. Yet entering the infected house is precisely what the searchers were hired to do, and if they did not have the responsibility to ‘Cure ... the Contagious’, they did have the very difficult task of determining officially what disease was present” (12).

It seems that Anna escapes the plague partly because she is not subsumed by either the supernatural or the civic discourses of plague. However, her unflinching curiosity⁵⁴ and knowledge of the human body is still threatening, at least to the barber surgeon whom she confronts after misdiagnosing an early plague victim by relying on her own, pragmatic experience of the disease: “[i]gnorant woman!” he said, wheeling his horse carelessly so that a damp clod from the late reins flew up and struck me, splattering my skirt. ‘Are you saying I don’t know my profession?’” (Brooks 75). This arrogant, patriarchal response brings back her painfully traumatic memories concerning male medical authority: as a child, she saw her mother die of giving birth because the surgeon used a thatcher’s hook (!) to get the baby out of her. Initially she is not strong enough to take on all the responsibility her new profession requires and even starts to develop an addiction to poppy drops she finds in the abandoned home of the previous cunning women. However, as time goes by, she grows increasingly confident in her knowledge of the “physic garden” and with the process of becoming “next in the long line of women that Anys has once spoken of” (268). While Anna’s self-education provides her with a social protection against plague, her affair with the pastor after Elinor’s violent death functions like an emotional inoculation against it. She strictly separates herself from Mompellion when shortly after the affair starts she learns that he intentionally never had sex with Elinor to cleanse her of her filthy lust and to force her to atonement: as the young daughter of a nobleman, she eloped with a dishonest man who ruined her, she got pregnant and almost died of a self-induced abortion. Eventually, Mompellion himself also becomes a polluting figure both for Anna and the village-dwellers: he stays behind in the village as an empty, depressed shadow of his previous self, a mere ghost of his former self, something of a scapegoat figure in his flock’s eyes. As Anna puts it, “[t]o others, he was simply the bitter emblem and embodiment of their darkest days.” (269).

The Epilogue of the novel is a feminist utopia after the destruction of plague. It shows Anna in a faraway country as the lawful wife of a local doctor in Oran, but her marriage actually binds her to learning, not sexual servitude and possession: “I am one of his wives now, in name if not in flesh” (301), she says. This is a major step: after her humiliating history with her father, the tragic loss of her miner husband in an accident, the plague death of the taylor lodger and her the disappointing affair with Mompellion, finally she can feel safe and develop in a relationship. Anna is proud to read Ibn Sina in the original, happily wears a veil in the street as a sign of her hybrid cultural identity, being always able to adapt to her environment to survive.

⁵⁴ A modern feature that links her to the unnamed narrator of Defoe’s Enlightenment era plague text, who repeatedly explains his visits to the infected parts of London with his curiosity (59, 80, 106), and that even at the highest point of the outbreak says that “I went about my Business as usual” (14).

She becomes a respectable midwife and quotes a female poet to conclude her *herstory*. The only thing she misses is the beautiful, green, pastoral English countryside, but she has a green-covered Arab medical book instead by her bed. As opposed to the claustrophobic quarantine experience of the Eyam plague, the city of oriental Oran thus serves as an expansive spatial counterpoint, when we see the cunning woman with her children (one from Mompellion) to excitedly “plunge into the jostling swarm of our city” (304). Anna’s *Bildung*, her intellectual and sexual liberation offers an openly idealized wishful reading of the past, reflecting present-day gender anxieties about professions for women and Woolf’s oppressive, pure phantom, the angel in the house—in many ways the product of the Victorian discourse on polluting boundaries.

Medieval and early modern images of plague



Fig. 2: Josse Lieferinxe, *Saint Sebastian Interceding for the Plague Stricken* (c. 1497)



Fig. 3: Carlo Crivelli, *St. Roch* (1493)



Fig. 4: Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Triumph of Death* (c. 1562)



Fig. 5: Matthias Grünewald, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (c. 1512)



Fig. 6: The Great Plague of London (1665)

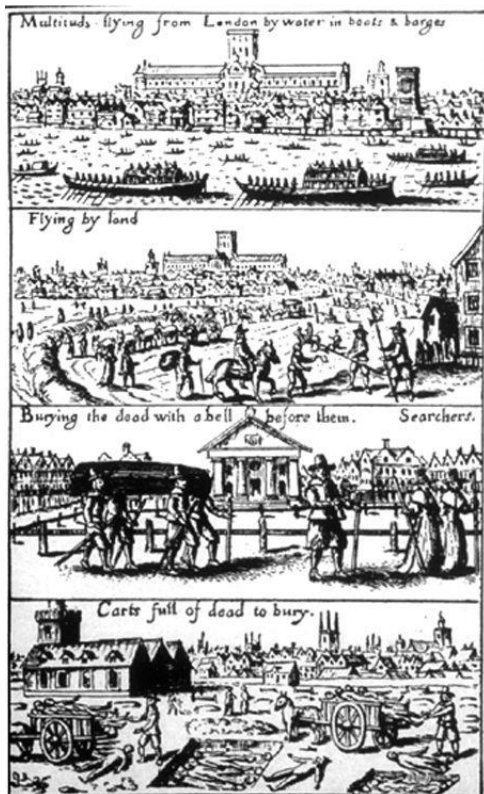


Fig. 7: The Great Plague of London (1666)

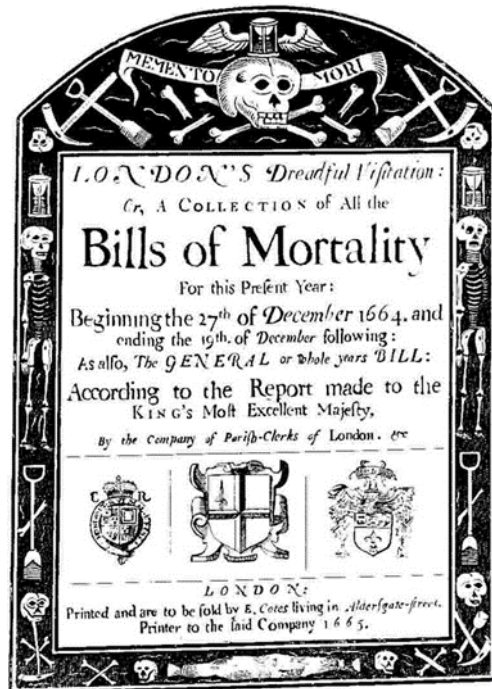


Fig. 8: Bills of Mortality (1665)

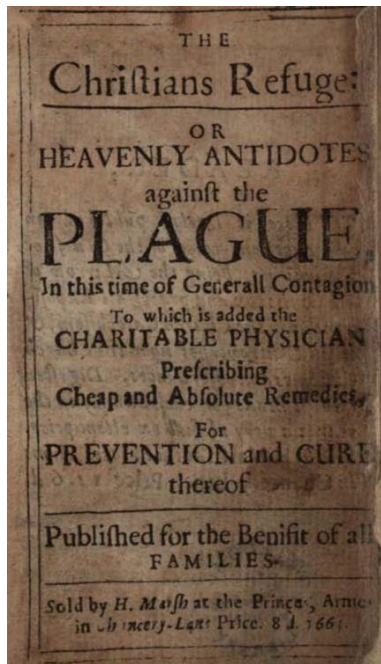


Fig. 9: a plague doctors's advertisememet (1665)



Fig. 10: a plague doctor



Fig. 11: a plague pit



Fig. 12: William Blake, *Pestilence* (c. 1805)



Fig. 13: Arnold Böcklin, *Plague* (1898)

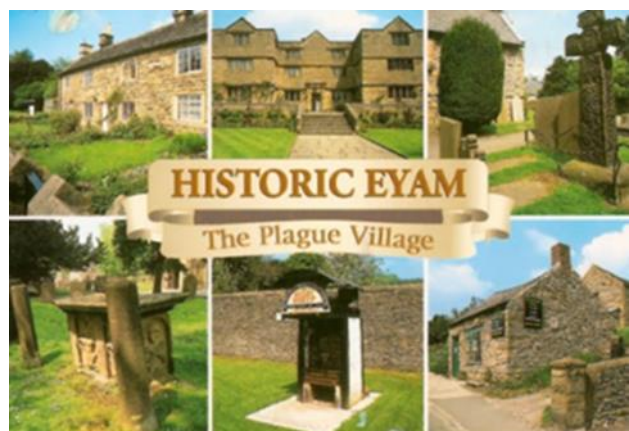


Fig. 14: an Eyam postcard

Cleanliness as Godliness: Cholera, Colonisation and Victorian Spaces of Pollution in Matthew Kneale's *Sweet Thames* and Anne Roiphe's *An Imperfect Lens*

“[Cholera is] the epidemic best served by historians” (Mukharji 305)

This chapter will read the depiction of 19th-century cholera outbreaks in Matthew Kneale's *Sweet Thames* (1992) and Anne Roiphe's *An Imperfect Lens* (2006) from primarily a space-centred point of view, focussing on the macro-system of London's underground sewage system and Alexandria's contaminating otherness seen through the images of the microscope lens. I claim that, in Kneale, metropolitan London's notions of filth, the sewers, the economic metaphors of circulation and sexual politics explore the most pressing urban and gender anxieties of the Victorian era; while in Roiphe, the colonial chaos of Alexandria, the European laboratory scientists' microscopic gaze, the presence of oppressive international politics, and the scapegoating of Jews point out the mutual determination of scientific and imperial ideological practices. My interpretation ultimately attempts to link these novels to 21st-century Western biopolitical notions of health, filth and the policing of public (and private) liminal spaces in the perennial quest for medical, sexual, racial and political “cleanliness”.

Kneale and Roiphe both set their stories in 19th-century metropolises, London and Alexandria, indicating that the medical and popular depictions of cholera display an atavistic fear of pollution and invasion, and that the “filth-centered view of epidemic disease and its increasingly dehumanizing representation of its victims can be understood as a product of the sociopsychic trauma of urban-industrial modernity” (Brown 519). In the light of this insight, it is certainly not an accident that the psychological-spatial reflections on cholera are major themes in the texts, suggesting that for the 20th and 21st centuries, 19th-century cholera is primarily a historical lesson in the evolution and biopolitical control of urban-imperial spaces. The very fact that several neo-Victorian novels thematize cholera seems to support this argument, for instance, Steven Johnson's *The Ghost Map* (2006) is a quasi-documentary of the 1854 London cholera outbreak, Clare Clark's *The Great Stink* (2005) is set during the summer of 1858, also focussing on the filth of Victorian London's underground realm, while Beryl Bainbridge's 1998 *Master Georgie* depicts the disease in the colonial scenario of the Crimean War.

In the light of Kneale's novel portraying upper, middle and working class characters as well and Roiphe's treatment of racial tensions one can claim that—on a cultural level—cholera activated simultaneous anxieties about the contaminating colonial natives and the mother country's underclasses (as well as female gender roles, with regard to “filthy” prostitutes),

disturbingly upsetting the ordained “official order” (Anderson 94). Ultimately, all these ideological tensions boil down to the comprehensive problem of boundaries, insofar as cholera’s essentially abject nature⁵⁵ is to do with somatic and geographical transgression, since in the 19th century “disgust was the assertion of a boundary” (Bewell 252). The cholera outbreaks of London and its biopolitical control extended to the colonies as well have thus become crucial elements of British cultural identity in the collective traumatic memory of the Victorian era, posing a model and a challenge for today’s somato-spatial surveillance practices.

Cholera as the filth disease of 19th-century imperialism

In the light of the medical, political and literary responses cholera has elicited in the past two hundred years, it does not seem to be an exaggeration to argue that as a horrifying reality and a potent metaphor of urban and colonial anxieties, “Asiatic cholera has a good claim to be regarded as the classic epidemic disease of the nineteenth century, above all of Europe in the age of industrialisation” (Evans, Richard “Epidemics and Revolutions” 151). Even though there is firm historical evidence that cholera was first described by Hindu physicians around 400 B.C. (Clark, David 71), the disease gained a special significance for the West in the rapidly developing century of industrialization and colonization. Cholera riots all across Europe⁵⁶ also called attention to the political stakes of the epidemic: “[i]n the contact of the nineteenth century’s twin terrors—epidemic disease and revolution, the disintegration of the physical and the social body—these metaphors took on a particular role, one in which they were able to body forth the Victorians’ fear of biological and social dissolution.” (Gilbert, Pamela K. *Disease, Desire* 18). In this accelerating era of revolutionary crowds and laboratory science, the very word contagion gained ideological connotations, since “ideas, sentiments, emotions, and beliefs possess in crowds a contagious power as intense as that of microbes” (Le Bon 76). As one of the so-called “filth diseases” of the period—the others infamously being typhoid, typhus and polio (Bewell 251)—cholera threatened the very core of Western order, especially in the context of the British Empire, where, apparently, “an imperial age produced an imperial disease” (243).

Britain suffered repeated outbreaks of cholera in 1848-49, 1853-54 and 1866, until the cholera bacillus was finally isolated by the German Robert Koch in 1884, putting an end to

⁵⁵ Cholera is an acute diarrhoeal disease that can kill within hours if left untreated. It is caused by infected fecal matter getting into drinking water. Severe cases need rapid treatment with intravenous fluids and antibiotics but it can be successfully treated with oral rehydration solution. Provision of safe water and sanitation is critical to control the transmission of cholera and other waterborne diseases. (WHO „Cholera”).

⁵⁶ In comparison, cholera was also known as “the plague of the century” in Hungary, striking at least five times between 1831 and 1915, altogether taking more than a million lives and leading to various riots (Fónagy). The cholera riot of Sátorajújhely also appears in a recent historical novel of the period, Gergely Péterfy’s *Kitömött barbár* (The Stuffed Barbarian, 2014), even the Hungarian writer, Ferenc Kazinczy died of cholera.

devastating epidemics both on the British Isles and the colonies, initiating the era of laboratory research. In the meantime, various parliamentary commissions tried to create order in the sanitary chaos of London's modern metropolis: the passing of the Public Health Act (1848), the establishment of the Epidemiological Society (1850), The Sanitary Institute of Great Britain (1876), and the controversial Contagious Diseases Acts of the 1870s are just a few efforts that failed to solve the hygiene problems of the ever-growing capital and its remote colonial possessions.⁵⁷ Ironically, in Britain "cholera seemingly took advantage of the new conditions of industrialized England—entering through the seaports, traveling inland along the new highways and railroads, and attacking first the most densely populated and unsanitary abodes of the desperately poor" (Vinten-Johansen 170), dramatically drawing attention to the costs of the nation's massive geographical, demographic, technical and imperial expansion. The traumatic transgressions of the cholera epidemic were manifold, since it was a pestilence that "crossed God's 'moat', which was supposed to protect England from invasion" (Carpenter 35), denting the national façade of imperial pride and superior insularity.

As a result, the notion of public health got centre stage, displaying two contradictory tendencies: the philanthropic-missionary and the governmental-political ones (Bashford *Imperial Hygiene* 7). The new-born rhetoric of sanitary science, the endeavours of the social hygienists initiated an overarching cultural climate of shame and blame, constructing a medico-moral complex which still dominates Western notions of health, the welfare state, and normality, as the AIDS chapter will argue. In Britain, the major controversy evolved between the germ theorists, the forerunners of the microbe revolution at the end of the century, championing a scientific, laboratory-based, supposedly objective approach; and the sanitarians, who mostly relied on bureaucratic, unscientific, politically motivated attitudes (Bashford *Imperial Hygiene* 16). These struggles had lasting effects, as "[t]he ultimate results of the

⁵⁷ The history of the sexual and sanitary politics of the Victorian era is a widely researched field, see for ex. Mort, Haley, Vrettos, Bewell, Carpenter, Christensen, and Cohen. However, the most informative summary of the epidemic is provided by Pamela Gilbert who explains how cholera became a sanitary issue from a crisis of the class system: "[w]hen cholera was first discussed by the British public, as it marched across the continent in 1831 and 32, Britons were already preoccupied with a big political topic: Parliamentary and voting Reform. [...] After long discussion, it was passed in Commons and then defeated in the House of Lords in 1831. [...] When it finally passed, on 7 June 1832, it gave more representation to large cities that had gained population as a result of the Industrial Revolution and eliminated representation for areas where the population had diminished to the point that a Member of Parliament was often elected by only a handful of landowners. [...] Middle-class and working people who hoped that Reform would bring them representation in Parliament suspected that the talk of cholera was being used to distract the populace from Reform in the interests of the elite retaining control of political power. [...] By 1848, continental Europe was experiencing a great deal of political unrest and revolutionary activity. Britain had also suffered an economically difficult decade, and the working classes who had not seen increased representation under the 1832 Bill were agitating in the late 1840s for a "People's Charter" that would guarantee them more direct political representation. [...] After the earlier disasters, the 1866 epidemic was relatively small and historically unimportant by comparison. The mechanism of contagion was more clearly understood and modern sewerage was functioning in the large cities ("On Cholera").

sanitary reform movement—publicly-financed water supplies and sewerage in cities, disposal of garbage, and a public health infrastructure—produced profound public health benefits” (Vinten-Johansen 1). However, the moral implications of the cholera battle’s heritage are just as influential, as my reading of the two novels will show.

The historical struggle against the powers of miasma and/or germs was assisted by various politicians and doctors, such as the social reformer Edwin Chadwick, Reverend Charles Kingsley and the journalist Henry Mayhew. This short list of the cholera crisis’ *dramatis personae* already demonstrates the pervasiveness of the epidemic discourse among the professional classes. Still, the most important among them seems to be Dr John Snow⁵⁸, also repeatedly referred to in *Sweet Thames*, the renowned anaesthetist and epidemiologist who was the first to theorize the fecal-oral route of transmission, and propagated the “single-factor” (Pelling *Cholera, Fever* 299) transmission of the infection. He is also the inventor of the epidemiological dot map, the result of his relentless walks in the disease-stricken parts of London, undertaken in order to localize the index case and the source of cholera. The cartographic method of Snow’s shows how the epidemic transformed the cityscape and its medico-cultural readings. The spatial aspects of the cholera quest also markedly appear in the novels to be discussed, suggesting that the fear of this disease is primarily informed by urban and colonial notions of space and boundaries. Dr Snow’s embarrassing (and correct) discoveries about the waterborne nature of cholera and its connection with the representatives of “offensive trades” (such as bone boilers, gut spinners, dye makers) of the capital eventually made him a *persona non grata* both with miasmatists and government officials alike, as “[t]he most unpleasant aspect of Snow’s thesis—that the mass of cholera victims were swallowing other people’s fecal matter—made him appear to the *Lancet* to be like an offensive tradesman himself” (Vinten-Johansen 11). Beside the *Lancet* articles, the journalist Henry Mayhew’s legendary series of articles, later published in one volume as *London Labour and the London Poor* also provides unparalleled investigations into the underworld of the city, and appears as a major source of Kneale’s novel. What is really revealing in the novels today about this national obsession with cleanliness is the seemingly self-contradictory insight that “public health was in

⁵⁸ Dr Snow was a key figure of both ground-breaking medical revolutions of the century: anaesthesia and disinfection. These two new procedures radically subverted the (philosophical and theological) ideologies of fixed 18th-century images of the human body. The new body could be surgically opened up, cured and transformed, which led to objectification and alienation from the ethos of man. In 1847, Sir James Young Simpson was the first doctor to apply chloroform during childbirth, the first baby delivered this way was called Anaesthesia. At the same time, the church attacked the technology with biblical evidence: the pains of labour were supposed to be Eve’s punishment for the original sin. Dr Simpson, however, also relied on the Bible when claiming that God made Adam fall asleep when he removed his rib to create Eve, that is, he did not need to experience the bodily pain of Eve’s “birth”. In 1853, Dr Snow applied chloroform to deliver Queen Victoria’s 8th child, Prince Leopold, making the career of anaesthesia unstoppable. I thank Dr Katalin Bódi for her valuable comments.

fact intensely private, aiming to shape and form personal habits and conduct” (Bashford *Imperial Hygiene* 187), especially in the depiction of prostitution in *Sweet Thames*. That is, the realization that popular and scientific notions of health and purity were and still are deeply rooted in dominant ideologies of gender, class and race.

Situated on the boundary of the public and the private, the popular images of the disease uncannily resemble today’s sensationalist medical news. In 1853, four years after the 1849 epidemic that is narrated in *Sweet Thames* (claiming altogether 14.000 lives), the *Lancet* magazine’s sarcastic question still shows an utter lack of knowledge and a kind of popular fatalism about the source of the contagion: “[i]s it a fungus, an insect, a miasma, an electrical disturbance, a deficiency of ozone, a morbid off-scouring from the intestinal canal?” (Mort 22). Looking at newspaper illustrations of the cholera threat from these decades one can trace the shift from the central metaphor of the “cholera mist” (Mukharji 304), a trope going back to 18th-century climactic theories of disease (and eventually, Hippocratic humoral theory) gradually giving way to Victorian germ theory, i.e., the laboratory revolution, which transformed epidemic management once and for all. *Sweet Thames* and *An Imprefect Lens* portray precisely this paradigm shift: Kneale’s novel focuses on the mid-century germ scare, while Roiphe features the European laboratory scientists of the late 19th-century.

On a deeper cultural level, the mid-Victorian discourse on cholera provides a blueprint for the dominant sanitary and sexual ideologies of the day, which become visible from the present-day, cultural studies-oriented perspectives of the novels. The cholera crises of the 19th century are tied up with all of the above mentioned social-intellectual tensions as well as the idea of the decently demarcated Victorian “separate spheres” of the sexes. That is, the ideology based on biological determinism that prescribes separate spheres for women and men: while men should inhabit the public sphere, the world of politics, economy, commerce, and law; women, the angels in the house (an iconic image going back to Coventry Patmore’s poem of the same title), belong to the private realm of domestic life, child-rearing, housekeeping, and religious education. The schism of evolution and religion, the emergence of spiritualism and the vivisection debate (Meadows 183) as major intellectual crises of the era are all reflected in the changing cholera discourse, gradually justifying a new, civic belief in invisible germs as the invasive enemies of individual and collective bodies. Thus, the Foucauldian strategies of disciplinary urban control mentioned in the previous chapter strengthened and gained metropolitan-imperial significance in the 19th century.

Victorian Spaces and Waste Management in Matthew Kneale's *Sweet Thames*

“The impurities of man come from within; the cleansing power of man also comes from himself. Disease is only filth.” Sir John Fife: *Manual of the Turkish Bath*, 1865 (qtd. in Haley 17)

Sweet Thames, Matthew Kneale's 1992 novel, is the fictional recreation of the devastating 1849 London cholera epidemic, narrated in the first person by an up-and-coming young sewer engineer, Joshua Jeavons. The opening paragraph grasps various explicit and implicit tensions stirred up by this iconic mid-Victorian crisis:

[t]he glory of a London unobstructed by effluent. This was the vision of the future that flashed into my imagination as I stood above the sewerage outlet on the north Thames bank. Our metropolis free from noxious odours affronting the nostrils, from unsightly deposits, from the miasma cloud of gases hanging above the rooftops. I grew lightheaded at this dazzling prospect. Until I realized, surprised, that juices were stirring in my loins. (11)

Joshua reimagines the modern metropolis of great expectations from the elevated position of a learned man of science, while his physical position is anything but superior: he is gazing at the city from above the filthiest point possible, a major sewerage outlet. Besides experiencing his spatial and professional sense of superiority, the temporality of his futuristic and messianistic vision also distances him from the stinking materiality of the present moment. While indulging in the prophetic spectacle of the sublime and clean future, the dirtiness and obstructedness of the Thames drag him down to the level of ambiguous stirrings in the sanitary as well as sexual registers of the social and individual bodies he inhabits. Paradoxically, the sexual excitement and its effect, the tumescent reminder of his physicality and sexuality are brought on by his “phallic” flight of fancy, his dream of control over the threateningly shapeless materiality of the “miasma cloud” and the ambiguous “deposits”—both major cultural metaphors of Victorian anxieties. Thus, the body politic of the city and the physical body are shown to be both metonymically and metaphorically connected from the start: both produce ambiguous excess that needs to be sanitized and policed. This grotesque, ambiguous opening passage can also be read as a *mise en abyme*, since the present reading argues that it is the interweaving of somatic, spatial, economic and erotic discourses of the Victorian era that makes *Sweet Thames* a markedly 21st-century (re)vision of a 19th-century London health crisis.

It is as a result of this historical perspective that, even though Kneale's novel is organised around a plot that evokes the sensation novels of mid-Victorian fiction, the metropolitan city and Asiatic cholera seem to be the real protagonists of *Sweet Thames*. For Agamben, the term metropolis designates "the new urban fabric that emerges in parallel with the processes of transformation that Michel Foucault defined as the shift from the territorial power of the ancient regime, of sovereignty, to modern biopower, that is in its essence governmental" ("Metropolis"). The metropolis as an urban text marking the birth of modern biopower is thus the point of departure for biopolitical practices, the administrative, ideological inscription of power onto citizens' bodies. Agamben adds that "in Greek, metropolis means Mother City and refers to the relationship between cities and colonies," making the notion all the more relevant in reading imperial London and its constant fear of colonial pollution and invasion. Athena Vrettos claims in a similar vein that "[t]he ubiquity of contagion as master narrative in Victorian culture can be attributed to its conceptual fluidity and its capacity to express and embody ideological conflicts, investing them with the imaginative immediacy of physical threat" (178). Cholera is the prime contagious narrative of the era, as it was regarded the filthiest of the filth diseases for reducing the victims to their own bodily filth with a breathtaking speed and stench, seems to be a suggestive metaphor of the Victorian obsession with cleanliness, both in a metropolitan and colonial context.⁵⁹

What makes the recreation of the Victorian cholera discourse recognizably contemporary in *Sweet Thames* is the consistent correspondence between embodiment and spatiality. Both surface and underground Victorian city spaces appear as contaminated and anthropomorphised, subverting the boundaries between the metropolis and its dwellers, a typical trope of epidemic narratives: "[t]he social management of contagion involves processes of differentiation and identification which are often conceived spatially: as a quarantine, as isolation, or as containment within one's bounded body where skin is the protective barrier and the movement of bodily fluids through that barrier needs heavy regulation" (Bashford *Imperial* 9). The sewage system is the major spatial metaphor in *Sweet Thames*, something supposed to safely isolate, contain and expel abject contents (and as such the symbolic continuation the quarantine in *Year of Wonders*), but, despite its architectural grandiosity, still spectacularly fails to achieve that aim.

⁵⁹ When comparing cholera with smallpox (the real big killer of the century, although much less popularized), Susan Sontag also points out that "the most terrifying illnesses are those perceived not just as lethal but as dehumanizing" (*Illness* 124).

London drains⁶⁰ also open up a medico-moral field of reading Victorian body politics, insofar as “in the secularized, nineteenth-century version of providential vision, as Peter Baldwin notices, ‘filth’ substitutes for ‘sin’ and ‘sewerage’ replaces ‘atonement’” (Christensen 57). Moral failure and contagion are often metaphors of each other for Joshua, as in a scene very much like the lengthy description of the Paris sewage system in Victor Hugo’s *The Miserables*, he finds out about the master plan of cultural sedimentation for Victorian London. Filth, waste and excess are central metaphors of Kneale’s text, suggesting that “what is socially peripheral is often symbolically central” (Stallybrass and White 20). Kristeva also claims that “there is a residue in every system—in cosmogony, food ritual, and even sacrifice, which deposits, through ashes for instance, ambivalent remains” (*Powers of Horror* 76), while for Mary Douglas all social and bodily margins are potentially filthy and polluting (*Implicit* 79). The novel’s Victorian sewage system is thus a heavily loaded cultural space, both literally and symbolically, secreting ambiguous material while also reflecting social fissures. As Christopher Hamlin elaborates on the Victorian meanings of the word not fully accessible today: “in the nineteenth-century sanitary literature, ‘filth’ would require no translation; the value of the term was to package description and evaluation; accusation and conviction; and corrective action into one term” (78).

Filth, then, suggests a close connection between the medical and the ethical aspects of cholera, which is represented by Joshua Jeavons’ double quest in the novel, aimed at locating the cause of the epidemic and his mysteriously disappearing, supposedly hysterical wife, the wealthy Isobella. His narrative is motivated by the simultaneous presence of the “pestilence” in the metropolitan slums and the absence of the “angel in the house” from their middle class home. At the same time, both problems remain uncannily intangible: the cholera itself is invisibly lurking “down there” in the sewage system, while the missing wife’s traces and cryptic messages never let her fully slip away “out there” in the streets. Cholera and hysteria appear in *Sweet Thames* as the culturally central maladies of the day, as pathological projections of the Victorian underclasses and bourgeois femininity. Joshua’s wandering through the cholera-stricken city also poses questions about Victorian prostitution, which, by featuring the other pole of available female subject positions, provides a further counterpoint to contagious filth. The central dichotomy of cleanliness and filth finally collapses when it turns out that the seemingly impeccable Isobella has been sexually abused by her father for years, and she

⁶⁰ The sewage system is also an expressive metaphor of a recently emerging trend in neo-Victorian fiction, demonstrated by Clark’s *Great Stink* and especially Johnson’s *The Ghost Map* (2006), which claims that “epidemics create a kind of history from below” (32). This somewhat obsessive neo-Victorian interest in 19th-century sewage can also be approached from the perspective of E. P. Thompson’s identical notion of “history from below” mentioned in connection with de Certeau’s works (Highmore 96).

desperately tries to escape her traumatic, incestuous past (and the sexual advances of her husband) by escaping to the streets and turning into a prostitute, an openly “other Victorian” as Steven Marcus identifies the norm-breaking bodies of the period.

My central claim is thus that contagion and pollution are present in four confluent metaphoric realms in the novel: contagious disease (the Asiatic cholera epidemic), urban spatiality (the metropolitan sewage system), economic exchanges (the capitalist logic of the accumulation and the circulation of commodities) and sexual taboos (the violation of the incest taboo and prostitution). These cross-contaminating chains of signification challenge and subvert popular stereotypical dichotomies of understanding the Victorian period, such as high-low, healthy-diseased, or male-female. *Sweet Thames* shows up the era’s anxiety about the meticulous separation and taxonomization of gendered, classed, racialized and diagnosed bodies as well as the contemporary, neo-Victorian obsession with this period so uncannily reflects postmodern dilemmas of security and borders.

An imperial epidemic and Victorian notions of abjection

When Joshua Jeavons describes cholera, he often quotes contemporary newspaper headlines resembling the above quoted *Lancet* example, calling the epidemic “King Cholera” (Kneale 257) or “Cholera Hysteria” (224). These capitalized personifications reflect the contradictory images of power and irrationality attached to cholera in the popular mind. Also known as the “blues pest”, “the blue terror” (Carpenter 39), and, as it has been already referred to, a “filth disease,” cholera was a simultaneously revolting and fascinating object of horror and scrutiny for the “civic gospel” (Hamlin 94) of Victorian health ideologies. Revealingly, one of the most striking Victorian theories of cholera was that of *pythogenesis*, that is, the spontaneous generation of the disease from filth (Haley 10). Still, this disease only takes control over the body, leaving the rational capacities of the patient excruciatingly untouched; as Joshua Jeavons puts it: “[a] singular feature of the Asiatic Cholera is its utter lack of fever. How different from typhus, influenza, scarlet fever, smallpox, and most of the other fearful maladies that afflict us. These reduce the sufferer to a state remote from the world [...] Cholera, by contrast, leaves its victims alert, rational” (Kneale 237). As the ultimate imperial disease, inseparable from the creeping colonial stain, the desire and anxiety of imperial expansion, cholera also carries connotations of foreignness and atavistic fears of invasion and the loss of identity.

Thus, cholera appears as a lethal biological and symbolic chain of transmission between the imagined communities of Empire, Nation, Capital, and Home, even in the eyes of a professional man of science. The cholera scare of the metropolis was rooted in colonial anxieties, since “cholera crossed many of the boundaries—cultural, geographical, and

climactic—they were thought to exist between Britain and its colonial possession” (Bewell 244). The novel puts special emphasis on Joshua’s encounters with the horde of liminal species, the subaltern natives of the metropolis’ margins: scavengers, bone-pickers, rag-gatherers, pure-finders, dredgermen, mud-larks, sewer-hunters, dustmen, night-soil men, bunters, toshers, and shoremen; that is, the invisible but ubiquitous London underclasses, who appear as essential elements of the metropolitan ecosystem, inhabiting the contaminating boundaries of mentionable and underground spaces.⁶¹ When looking for his disappeared wife, Joshua meets these various parasitic figures, the scavengers or the “floating population” (Law 53) of the Thames who are also essential in the organism of the city. The scavengers are all immune to cholera: “the whole profession unaffected” (Kneale 209), remarks Joshua with a slight Darwinian tone, suggesting a seemingly contradictory survival of the filthiest. In physical terms, the managers of early Victorian filth were especially the ones managing human waste: “the night-soil men worked at the very edge of the legitimate economy”, called rakers in the Middle Ages, who worked the “graveyard shift” (Johnson 9), since they could be invisibly active at night. However, by the middle of the century the city “was drowning in its own filth” (Johnson 13), as the Great Stink ultimately proved, necessitating a sewerage reform.

Sweet Thames is thus more concerned with the topography and boundaries of the city and the body than with the colonial stain. It is not only the disease itself that entails the transgression of (bodily) boundaries but also its proposed cures. The novel contains various quasi-fictional newspaper clippings offering different wonder cures for cholera, such as the Snowian “chloroform cure” (Kneale 93), puncturing the tongue with a knife, eating ice and salt, or drinking olive oil as well as staggering explanations of the disease as a result of ozone, volcanic activity, fungi, and of course miasma (102-3).⁶² Kneale reliance on Victorian intertexts demonstrates that cholera cures in the nineteenth century were especially gruesome processes:

[i]n the whole of the history of therapeutics before the twentieth century there is no more grotesque chapter than that on the treatment of cholera, which was largely a form of benevolent homicide. To counter persistent vomiting, the physician came to the aid of nature by administering emetics, and he exacerbated the intractable diarrhoea that was

⁶¹ A Victorian anecdote about a gentleman surveyor visiting a densely packed household, asking the woman how they got about, is telling: “‘Well, sir,’ she replied, ‘we was comfortable enough till the gentleman come in the middle.’ She then pointed to a chalk circle in the centre of the room, defining the region that the ‘gentleman’ was allowed to occupy” (Johnson 28).

⁶² These strange cures quoted by the novel are far from being merely fictional, since “the tragicomic history of cholera therapy” (Gill and Khodabukus 112) or the “kill or cure mentality” (Holland 342) of 19th-century cholera treatments consisted of administering calomel, opium, emetics, brandy, ether, enema, bleeding, purgation and finally, after several decades, saline resuscitation was invented.

rapidly dehydrating the sufferer of his vital fluids by drastic purgatives.” (Gill & Khodabukus 108)

For all their grotesqueness, these theories at least mark a move away from the Enlightenment era concern with climate and a shift toward a nineteenth-century emphasis on filth (Brown 541), also increasing the role of personal responsibility and cleanliness.⁶³ While the racial ideologies connected to contagion remain more or less latent and irrelevant in *Sweet Thames*, the class consciousness of the bourgeois engineer protagonist makes a grotesque appearance in the scene when he wants to impress his influential dinner guests with his magnificent Drain Plan (to be elaborated on in the next section), but his overweight, much hated and rude working class cook, Miss Symes, happens to vomit all over the feast in the kitchen before serving it. Convinced that she is dying of cholera in front of his guests’ eyes, Joshua enthusiastically applies all the above mentioned magazine cures to save the servant from her fatal condition⁶⁴, which turns out to be a simple case of indigestion caused by overindulgence while preparing the feast. This quasi-allegorical scene is also a metalepsis-like connection between contemporary popular theories of cholera and the servant’s character. The professional man is administering remedies in order to remove the potentially contagious working-class stain from the world of his upper-class superiors, indicates that cholera brings to the surface various social ills of the Victorian socio-economic hierarchy; for instance, a symptom of cholera-caused dehydration was widely known as “washer-woman’s hands”. The same is true for 19th-century medicine as such, when “[d]isease became constituted in the social body rather than the individual body, and deviant types were identified as needful of control for the sake of the health of the whole population” (Lupton 31). These so-called deviant types can be primarily linked to the working classes, however, just like in the case of Miss Symes, these stereotypes often fail in the novel, as Joshua’s panicky, guilty treatment of the vomiting servant also shows that “[i]f the upper-middle-class woman had health problems, the working class woman was a health problem” (Lupton 137). Miss Symes becomes the stereotypical excessive servant stealing from her master, as a result, her

⁶³ The image of the cloud as an aerial source of miasma is markedly present in the first half of the century both in high art and folk memory: “[i]n the 1832 painting of Canadian Joseph Légaré titled ‘Cholera Plague’ a dark, ominous cloud, shaped almost like an advancing black hand, covers more than half the canvas. [...] Between 1821 and 1822, John Constable, arguably the best British painter of the times, painted an entire series of cloud studies” (Mukharji 329, 331). Also, “[t]he sea mist was considered an ominous portent among seafaring people throughout the nineteenth century.” In 1831 the fishing village of Nigg, on Scotland’s North Sea coast, collectively fought a cholera cloud approaching from the sea with a net and buried it in a bag in the churchyard. To be sure, they also placed a special stone on it, the so-called “cholera stone” 310).

⁶⁴ I thank Professor István Rácz for this insight, among many others.

labour fails to be invisible as desired, while contaminating the fancy event with her unpleasant materiality. Miss Symes' polluting behaviour points out the interconnection between dirt and class: "[d]irt is what is left over after exchange value has been extracted. In Victorian culture, the bodily relation to dirt expressed a social relation to labor" (McClintock 153); and it is especially the female servant who embodies this embarrassing metaphorical identification: "female servants in Victorian households came to be figured by images of disorder, contagion, disease, conflict, rage and guilt. For this reason, I suggest, domestic space became racialized as the rhetoric of degeneration was drawn upon to discipline and contain the unseemly spectacle of paid women's work" (165). The ideology of degeneration will be also present in the novel's discussion of incest. As opposed to the polluted and polluting, marginal working class female bodies of Miss Symes and Katie, the prostitute, the wife's Isobella's "health problems" show another face of filth in the novel, that of sexual and moral contamination right in the centre of the cult of bourgeois domesticity.

Even though the polluting orifices of Miss Symes' female working class body turn out to be non-contagious (at least in a sanitary sense), the metabolism of the social body, especially the sewage system as its prime metaphor, is depicted as the locus of contagion in *Sweet Thames*. Joshua is proud of the city of London which deserves "the envy of the modern world" (Kneale 90), but the era of the Industrial Revolution also had its underside in the popular imagination: "[u]rbanisation had produced a cultural miasma; for public health reformers dirt stood as the grand metaphor for all forms of urban disorder" (Mort 31). Thus, the cloacal imagery of the sewage system's hidden cityscape suggests that sexual and sanitary politics are first and foremost written onto an underground and unmentionable domain of metropolitan city space: the sewage system. The desirable invisibility of urban waste management had been proposed by Leon Battista Alberti as early as the sixteenth century; and Mark Wigley in his essay "The Housing of Gender" also notes about the history of urban architecture that "social order needs to be cleansed of the body. Architecture is established as such a purification. The body itself emerges as a threat to the purity of space" (344). This somato-spatial problem of polluting practices comes to the forefront in the case of modern, metropolitan Victorian London's cholera crisis as well.

The fact that the novel's protagonist is an engineer suggests that Victorian sanitation was not only a medical problem. Interestingly enough, it took quite a while for London⁶⁵ to learn to manage its own waste: "[i]t is certainly the case that the embankment of the river did

⁶⁵ Britain was not the only country with this problem: "[i]n 1910 American President Teddy Roosevelt told a group of Buffalo businessmen that 'civilized people should be able to dispose of sewage in a better way than putting it into drinking water'" (Rose 162).

not present any technical or engineering challenges that could not have been solved as easily in 1840 as in 1860” (Law 50). However, when it was finally built, the London system of underground channels was a real engineering miracle: “[a]ccording to the *Daily Telegraph*, the main drainage system was a project alongside which even the Pyramids of Egypt and the sewers of Rome ‘paled in the comparison’” (Dobraszczyk 21). Also, “[i]n 1868, the *Marylebone Mercury* made similar comparisons: the main drainage system is described as the ‘representation of a mighty civilization’—a civilization nobler than ancient Rome because it lacked its ‘despotic power’” (13-4).⁶⁶ Regarding the sewer, the underworld can be literally interpreted as “the rock bottom of symbolic form” (Stallybrass and White 3).

Ever since Mary Douglas defined dirt as “matter out of place” (*Purity and Danger* 165), such achievements of Victorian urban planning as the Main Drain or the Embankment of the Thames can be interpreted as projects that decently demarcate public spaces and private matters. They create a vertical line of correspondence between the dirt of the individual and that of the social body, as “the human body, psychic forms, geographical space and the social formation are all constructed within interrelating and dependent hierarchies of high and low” (Stallybrass and White 2). The intersections of somatic and spatial discourses permeate the novel, and the Leitmotif of filth is embedded in an intricate system of euphemisms describing the ambivalent contents of the drains and the personification of the city via somatic metaphors, such as “the gaping mouth of one of the largest sewer outlets” (Kneale 267), a “Venice of Drains” (183), “Thames mud” (112), “vile slime” (112), “Thames slime” (206), “effluential evil” (18), “A System of Grand Artificial Rivers” (88), “drain arteries” (105), the “digestive system of the city” or “urban skeleton” (314).⁶⁷ However, blood is a more mentionable bodily fluid than excrement, and the same is true for their vessels in the (social) body. The uncontrollable waste material and the unwanted cultural residues of the city and its citizens unstoppably feed into each other in Kneale’s novel, once again reinforcing the symbolic strategy whereby “the symbolic axes of the bourgeois body” are “analogically mapped by the city’s topography” (Stallybrass and White 144), evoking Michel de Certeau’s remarks on the psychoanalytic reverberations of city spaces:

⁶⁶ Matching the grandiosity of this engineering achievement, celebrations were organized, emphasising the acceptable kind of visibility of the channels: “[t]he architectural features of the pumping stations were tailored to accommodate the giant steam engines that made this pumping possible. However, the flamboyant decoration of Crossness and Abbey Mills points to another important function of these buildings: as central sites for the promotion and presentation of the new system to the public - places” (Dobraszczyk 10).

⁶⁷ In the other major underground achievement of the Victorians, the Tube, the imagery of urban expansion and circulation has more positive connotations: “[t]he Underground, it is true, served both has an artery and a vein” (Sennett 334), while “the sewer as the city’s conscience” (Stallybrass and White 141).

[n]ormally, strange things circulate discreetly below our streets. But a crisis will suffice for them to rise up, as if swollen by flood waters, pushing aside manhole covers, invading the cellars, then spreading through the towns. It always comes as a surprise when the nocturnal erupts into broad daylight. What it reveals is an underground existence, an inner resistance that has never been broken. This lurking force infiltrates the lines of tension within the society it threatens. Suddenly it magnifies them; using the means, the circuitry already in place, but reemploying them in the service of an anxiety that comes from afar, unanticipated. It breaks through barriers, flooding the social chamber and opening new pathways that, once the flow of its passage has subsided, will leave behind a different landscape and a different order.

(*The Possession at Loudun*, qtd. in Highmore 51)

This uncanny surfacing of repressed materials is actually what *Sweet Thames* is about: cholera makes the “strange” contents, which are “normally” hidden, come to the surface, questioning and subverting the naturalness and transparency of reality, leaving behind an irrevocably different world order. When approaching the notion of filth in Victorian culture, one might define it as the desire to separate basic dichotomies such as society and nature.⁶⁸ The ambiguous waste matter floating in the drains appears simultaneously as something natural and cultural, while the constant transformation makes it high-risk material, since “not only marginal social states, but all margins, the edges of all boundaries which are used in ordering the social experience, are treated as dangerous and polluting” (Douglas *Implicit* 56). Kristeva also points out that “[e]xcrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that come from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death (“From Filth to Defilement” 260), calling attention to the necessary othering and abjection of the non-me in order to create the self and a sense of order, the clean and proper body.

Joshua Jeavons’ figure initially stands for the opposite of this overwhelming realm of filth: “I’m here to measure that filth” (Kneale 84), he claims when, in one of the early scenes of the novel, we see him using a phallic device, “measuring stick” to give an exact account of

⁶⁸ This was really no laughing matter: “[w]hile crossing the river at Deptford in June to inspect a new ship, Queen Victoria had to hold her bouquet to her nose” (Ribner 38); which is no wonder, since by 1857, some 250 tons of faecal matter entered the Thames daily. To make matters worse, public conveniences were sparse: “The Report on the State of Large Towns and Populous Districts (1845) states that ‘in one part of Manchester in 1843-44 the wants of upward 700 inhabitants were supplied by 33 necessities only—that is, one toilet to every 212 people’” (Mumford 462).

the depth of the city's filth. Insofar as "underground sewers were not an emblem of the repressed but the repressed itself, a burying of dangerousness, the sewers become the new Hell" (Miller *Disgust* 78) in the 19th century, revealing an interface of architectural, sanitary and sexual challenges faced by the imperial metropolis. The narrative figure of *katabasis* calls attention here to the metaphorical identification of underground spaces with hell, and adds a moral-ethical layer to the sanitary crisis: "I found myself glancing upon to the sky with concern, watching for the miasma; the cloud of effluvia gases hanging above the buildings of London, disgoring sickness. I began to discern it quite clearly, and see its shifting evil" (Kneale 21); or "I sensed the odours as in some way feeding the criminality above, acting as a fertilizer of evil, luring me to misadventure. I held my handkerchief to my nose" (24). However, Joshua's efforts inevitably produce failures on the plot-level and oxymorons on the rhetorical level of his narrative, since he is actually trying to produce rationalized waste and to find the way to health amidst an especially filthy disease. His personal *Bildung* is eventually based on his undoing as a middle class professional and bourgeois husband to hit the social and symbolic bottom, nearly dying of cholera in a slum privy—the filthiest death imaginable.

All these issues connected to waste materials are tied up with the notion of disease, especially cholera. As Edwin Chadwick famously said: "[a]ll smell is, if it be intense, immediate acute disease; and eventually we may say that, by depressing the system and rendering it susceptible to the action of other causes, all smell is disease" (qtd. in Johnson 114).⁶⁹ In effect, this is the mode by which "others" become "shit" (Waldby 69). The title of the novel, similarly to Mr. Harold Sweet's name, is thus highly ironical, since in 19th-century naval language "'sound' meant, among other things, 'free from decay,' while 'sweet' indicated something that was 'free from offensive or disagreeable taste or smell' or 'not corrupt, putrid, sour, or stale'" (Barnes 86). *Sweet Thames* is thus the epitome of wishful thinking both on sanitary and symbolic levels.

Polluted Exchanges: Economic Metaphors

Similarly to *Pestilence*, there seems to be another link beside space between the novel's two central metaphors of filth and cholera: economic circulation. The text's money metaphors and their other references to the logic of capitalism are equally crucial in connection with the

⁶⁹ *Village Work* argued in a similar fashion that "[i]t is not difficult to know / What works us hurt and harm; / God warns us by the sense of smell / When we should take alarm." (Williams 88). Francis Newman also wrote a poem entitled "Cleanliness" on the drainage of the capital: "[t]hus underneath our cities, by curious and perishing art, / A new city is built, of Tartarean loathsomeness, / A network of brick-bowels, which perpetually decay." (Miller 79). Or, as Clare Clark's 2005 neo-Victorian novel, *The Great Stink* puts it: "the smell was solid and brown as the river itself. The water didn't know anything of any modesty or shame" (12).

depiction of cholera, since both the medical and the economic realms of meaning are based on uncontrollable circulatory systems and polluted acts of exchange. Economy appears on the plot level in Joshua's magnificent Drain Plan, and he also creates a business plan to carry out the sanitary and engineering reform. He wants to establish so-called "Effluent Transformational Depositories" to eliminate filth once and for all by turning it into "clean" profit and transporting London nightsoil to the countryside and using it as fertiliser in the fields. This is a capitalist approach of transforming waste into product (and profit), where nothing can remain outside the closed economic system of the Industrial Revolution, everything has to be part of the final product, and even the filth of the nation can easily be recycled for financial profit. When Foucault discusses the political, economic and sexual interconnections of cholera and prostitution, he is implying that cholera as a medical crisis can be read as a potential excuse for exerting even stronger economic control over the lower classes:

[c]onflicts were necessary (in particular, conflicts over urban space: cohabitation, proximity, contamination, epidemics, such as the cholera outbreak of 1832, or again, prostitution and venereal diseases) in order for the proletariat to be granted a body and a sexuality; economic emergencies had to arise (the development of heavy industry with the need for a stable and competent labour force, the obligation to regulate the population flow and apply demographic controls); lastly, there had to be established a whole technology of control which made it possible to keep that body and sexuality, finally conceded to them, under surveillance (schooling, the politics of housing, public hygiene, institutions of relief and insurance, the general medicalization of the population" (*History of Sexuality I* 127-8)

Thus, Joshua's plan can also be interpreted as an extreme example of monitoring and disciplining the subaltern body, when it is not only the body but also their waste is under strict surveillance by the system. That is, the bodies of the underclasses have to be disciplined, turned into docile, productive entities in a sexual, medical and economic sense as well, while cholera was both an initial reason and a politically utilized consequence of the labouring classes' subjection—just like in the case of plague and AIDS, as the third chapter will show.

On a metonymic level, the capital, London, thus produces capital in the economic sense by literally turning shit (urban waste) into gold (money).⁷⁰ If we approach the sewage system

⁷⁰ One of the protagonists' of Clark's *Great Stink*, Longarm Tom, a tosher (trading with waste materials), seems the absolute master the capitalistic logic of his time: "[a]s a younger man Joe had been a pure finder, gathering dog dung for the tanneries. Good at it, he'd been, knowing the yards that liked it moist and dark and the others that preferred the chalky kind and would be prepared to pay the extra for it. He had himself what was almost a little

from an economic aspect, Sándor Ferenczi's psychoanalytic idea on capitalism seems to be as good a starting point as any, since he tried to "explain capitalism in terms of coprophilia, that is, the erotic enjoyment of heaping in and gathering up gold and other money pieces, which are "seen to be nothing other than odorless, dehydrated filth that has been made to shine" (Goux 117). That is, there seems to be a connection between the anal phase of psychosexual development and the love of money. A similar psychoanalytic connection between material goods, bodily waste products, social class and the logic of contagion was identified by Freud in *Three Essays on Sexuality* and Stallybrass and White as well:

"[c]ontagion" and "contamination" became the tropes through which city life was apprehended. It was impossible for the bourgeoisie to free themselves from the taint of "the Great unwashed" (an English expression which emerged in the 1830s for the underclasses). Even money bore their stain. The following anecdote from the history of psychoanalysis, described in Freud's case study of The Rat Man duly illustrated this: one government official paid Freud in paper florins, which had been ironed out at home. (Stallybrass and White 135)

Money could be dangerously contagious in its materiality as well, as the circulation of money does not respect social boundaries. The very materiality of money (banknotes and coins) goes against the age-old saying that money does not smell, while the capitalist logic of abstract accumulation clashes with the stinking tangibility of money. Even though the filth of the city is primarily blamed on the underclasses, the waste material is still not polluting enough for the bourgeoisie to prevent them from wanting to make profit out of it (just like *Pestilence*, which concludes with the invention of a capitalist approach towards production and labour). Lower middle class Joshua is the perfect example of this economic-moral double standard, for he is also proud to be a true philanthropist due to his Drain Plan, which is supposed to heal the city.⁷¹ In *Sweet Thames*, however, Joshua disapproves of morally insane, selfish businessmen, "blind

workshop, mixing up the trophies he bagged with mud or mortar, depending on the customer, and rolling it out into fat little cigars or looser lumps to produce whatever blend the tanner liked to declare perfect for the dark glossy morocco of a gentleman's wallet or the delicate calf of a lady's glove." (53). This capitalistic logic implies the accumulation of fake faeces (commodity) and turning it into gold (profit). This spendthrift attitude is also present on a governmental level: "the Board had been established to transform the chaotic clog of London into a city of purposeful movement — of water, air, traffic, people and commodities" (80).

⁷¹ Robert Koch wrote in a letter: "out here in Africa, one can find bits of scientific gold lying on the streets" (Otis 31). The already quoted *The Ghost Map* also points out that "the Victorians were literally flushing money down the toilet," and quotes Henry Mayhew who meticulously calculated the costs of the Empire importing guano from the colonies to use it as fertilizer in rural England (116). Charles Kingsley also argues in his didactic novel *Yeast: A Problem* (1848) that there is in Britain a "waste of manure, waste of land, waste of muscle, waste of brain, waste of population—and we call ourselves the workshop of the world!" (qtd. in Hamlin 115).

entrepreneurs, who, if they see no glint of profit before them, would happily leave our metropolis to turn to a mere swamp of defecation” (Kneale 138).⁷² The Victorian ideologies of industry and temperance are represented by the character of Mr. Sweet, the opportunistic, selfish businessman, whose name relates ironically to the novel’s title.

Connected to the profit potential of pollution, the other aspect of the novel’s filth-economy is centred around sexuality, especially Isobella’s character. She appears as an object of barter or a piece of portable property in the transaction between her father, the rich and influential Mr. Moynihan and Joshua, the young engineer of humble origin. While Isobella’s father is a major investor, Joshua’s father was a simple watchmaker. At first, we are told only that, for some reason, Moynihan strictly separated his work and family life. The separate spheres in Victorian sexual politics had a marked economic motivation as well, since “the division between home and work in a modern society could allow individuals to escape the moral dilemmas involved in a clash between cultural beliefs and economic imperatives” (Michie 6). Men were supposed to bear the guilt of profit-making and production, while the impeccable middle class home was to provide the clean and godly counterpart and legitimization of the real price of industrialization. When we learn that Moynihan “was a widower, and there had long been rumours that he possessed a daughter” (Kneale 56), the choice of the word “possession” is crucial: the images of possession continue into the wedding scene, when the husband proudly claims “Isobella Moynihan, beautiful, graceful, to be my very own” (72). Thus, what happens is actually the use of the barter (Isobella) in the following meaning of a supposedly “healthy” exchange to keep the system in movement: “[b]arter and gift: generous, ceremonial, no private or utilitarian consumption. The father marrying his daughter, the brother marrying his sister would be like the man with a cellar full of champagne who drank it all up by himself and never asked a friend in to share it. The father must bring the wealth his daughter represents into a cycle of ceremonial exchanges” (Bataille *The Accursed Share* 205). Moynihan has to give his product and possession, his daughter away to maintain the circulation of sexual economy, but the barter object is consumed, (ab)used already. Consequently, the marriage of Joshua and Isobella as the other, biological sphere of production beside the economic sphere of business proves an inadequate financial and sexual exchange, since the damaged good, the traumatized bride turns out to be completely frigid and her jealous father offers no dowry either. For Joshua, the incomprehensible, hysterical wife is connected to the health and wealth of the nation, similarly to Bataille’s ideas on unproductive expenditure for men:

⁷² This register of the novel also evokes Dickens’s legendary obsession with Victorian dirt (especially in *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend*).

[i]n fact, in the most universal way, isolated or in groups, men find themselves constantly engaged in processes of expenditure. [...] based on the principle of loss [...] states of excitation illogical impulse to reject useful material or moral goods [...] connected to the losses that are realized this way—in the case of the “lost woman” as well as in the case of military expenditure—is the creation of unproductive values. (*Visions of Excess* 128)

Bataille also adds that “in actual fact, more often than not the economic value of the transferred woman tends to minimize the erotic aspect of the transition and, from this viewpoint, marriage has taken on the meaning of habit, dulling desire and reducing pleasure to nothing” (127), articulating the mutually exclusive nature of erotic and financial fulfilment or spending.⁷³ This also raises the question of Bildung as a typical 19th-century plot structure, for Joshua does not fully abandon the original limiting economic and gender categories he starts out with. At the end of the novel, after reuniting with his wife, he announces in a resigned and proud manner: “[s]he is my only project now” (Kneale 310), and the very last sentence of the novel reads: “[m]ost of all, however, that long season gave me as its gift my own wife” (312). Thus, Joshua seems to slowly and painfully learn to look at her wife as a gift instead of an object of barter, which is a higher level of understanding exchanges in his own life, but she still does not become his equal, she is still a project to be controlled, a prize to be proudly owned. This is not unrelated to the fact that, in the novel, Isobella’s point of view is mediated only through him, except the crucial scene when the desperate Joshua discovers a mysterious message in their abandoned home:

[t]he paper was in the form of mere scraps, formed, it appeared, from some larger piece I had myself discarded and left; probably because some blemish left it unworthy of imprinting upon it my drainage plan. The letters and figures were so small that it was only on a second inspection that I discovered the messages hidden among them; messages doubtless intended only for the writer’s own eyes. Tight wedged between a long division sum of days, shillings and pennies, and amounts of potatoes and swedes was spelled WHY CAN HE NOT LEAVE ME ALONE? (...) KILLING THING. (203)

Isobella’s “hysterical” mode of signification remains fatally insolvent in this patriarchal economy of demanding fathers and husbands. Her petty calculations are literally written on the

⁷³ See John Milton’s line “all passion spent” from “Samson Agonistes”, also the title of a feminist novel by Vita Sackville-West.

polluted margins of her husband's intellectual waste material, the side product of his master plan, making her attempt at self-expression essentially fragmented, liminal, a mere stain on an always already stained paper. Joshua's inquisitive male gaze can hardly make out her traumatic code, she remains essentially unreadable to him. This piece of paper actually comes from Joshua's study, a private intellectual space he as the head of the household unquestionably deserves. This is the space in Western culture that detaches the "theorist-father-husband-artist from the world precisely in order that he can master that world by viewing it through some kind of disciplinary frame, whether a painting, a theoretical manuscript, memoir, or account book" (Wigley 362). On the whole, money and sexuality appear as equally tainted and traumatic realms of social contact. The capitalist logic of commodity circulation is supposed to reflect the ideally unhindered and invisible flow of waste in the city's underbelly, while marriage is designed to be the only acceptable channel of sexual exchange, prostitution being its dark, contaminating double, which can only produce unwanted progeny. The text seems to suggest that there can never be a truly clean form of cultural circulation of any kind, as the act of contact is both unavoidable and necessarily polluting. There is a secret second economy behind official, restricted Victorian economy, serving also as a hidden condition for the system's survival. Cholera is the visible, while incest is the invisible catalyst of the novel's sexual economies, but both are capable of producing equally unwanted waste. Something is obviously rotten in *Sweet Thames'* Victorian social body, and the more power is applied to demarcate its boundaries, the more they seem to cross-contaminate each other.

Sexual politics: incest, prostitution, hysteria

When Joshua poses the question "I wondered—for the first time, but by no means the last—if I had understood my wife any better than the Asiatic Cholera" (Kneale 285), he rhetorically connects the two aspects of his desperate quest. Later he also asks himself self-reflexively: "[a]nd what is my story? Most of all it is of the search for my wife. And where I eventually found her" (22). The irrational behaviour of Isobella and the cholera both appear as examples of puzzling *terra incognita* for the engineer's scientific, supposedly objective mind. The domestic space of the middle class home and the urban space of the Victorian slum both turn out to be tainted. The home of the newly weds is an almost parodically stereotypical Victorian space with the covered legs of chairs and the busts of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert in the hall—wedding presents without an exchange value, as it turns out when Joshua wants to pawn them. The description of the house is yet another example of this neo-Victorian novel taking Victorian clichés to their extreme and emptying them out ironically. Isobella is also an avid reader of women's magazines which state consummate pieces of wisdom like "a clean house is

a house respected and decent. [...] All surfaces should be kept free of dust and settleings from the atmosphere” (175). The gospel of cleanliness in this era, on the one hand, has a marked class context: “the primary purpose of cleaning within English country houses was to indicate status” (Cox 47). However, Isobella’s cleaning mania goes beyond the general gender and class codes of her immediate social environment. It appears as the exact opposite of cholera’s filth, as in her case cleanliness tells something about her own body in a period when “the domestic metaphor was used in sanitarian discourse as a way of speaking about the body itself; the body as a home for the soul or, ‘the house which the mind inhabits’” (Bashford *Purity* 18).⁷⁴ Besides compulsively cleaning domestic surfaces, she is also obsessed with covering them up with sewing and embroidering. She is constantly decorating the walls of the house with her creations. Joshua is inspecting her output in a scene: “[t]he nine so far completed—now framed and displayed on the walls, fast diminishing in unused space—all took the same form; of a biblical quotation framed by flowers. The latest had not progressed far, and as yet read only, *DOEST NOT...*” (Kneale 31). In the husband’s eye, Isobella’s decorative domestic labour is worthless and pointless, not even mentioning pragmatic use, he even nullifies their decorative value, since they merely sink into the unused vacuum of the walls, her labour as a middle class wife has mere “exhibition value rather than use value” (*Imperial Leather* 162). Arguably, “it is the woman’s confinement to the decorative surface that actually provides the ‘prop’, the ‘infrastructural’ role of space which ‘underwrites’ the patriarchal order and denies her any subjectivity understood as the control of space” (Wigley 387) in their home. The nicely decorated and unfinished Biblical prohibition remains unarticulated and unintelligible to Joshua—just like Isobella’s above quoted cryptic written message. Isobella’s gendered ways of signification are thus either ornamental or fragmented, never authorized and acknowledged, like in the case of Joshua’s Drain Plan. Isobella’s cleanliness and embroidery serve to remove and cover up a stain much worse than the cholera. However, she has a phallic prosthesis that she primarily uses against the sexual advances of her husband: her little pet dog, Pericles, and a paper knife to cut the threads she carries with herself all the time. The dog has a telling name, that of the legendary statesman and orator, giving an animalistic, inarticulate but still small and powerless “voice” to Isobella’s repressed anger, the traumatising pain she herself is unable to

⁷⁴ A revealing metaphor of the Victorian hospital as a home suggests the same: “[i]n an influential report written in 1863, the Medical Officer of the British Privy Council, John Simon, likened hospitals to homes. [...] ‘That which makes the healthiest house likewise makes the healthiest hospital, - the same fastidious and universal cleanliness, the same never-ceasing vigilance against the thousand forms in which dirt may disguise itself, in air and soil and water, in walls and floors and ceilings, in dress and bedding and furniture, in pots and pans and pails, in sinks and drains and dust-bins’” (Bashford *Purity* 1). Another parallel is between decorative and dirty surfaces: “[u]ltimately the domestic ‘dust trap’ replaced the urban fever nest as the primary locus of pollution anxiety within sanitary geographies of the Victorian home” (Cleere 135).

formulate, at least until the very end of the novel. *Sweet Thames* thus dramatizes the way the figure of the “hysterical” woman⁷⁵ is used by Victorian culture as a symptom: what hysteria represents is not the woman’s inherent biological or psychological disfunctionality but belongs to society, and the hysterical woman herself is a social symptom of cultural repression rather than anything else. When Joshua is looking for his wife, he is actually looking for that which is able to contain all the problems of the age. Without the hysterical woman, everything that is condensed in her figure would be floating free, jeopardising naturalized patriarchal boundaries and structures that are predicated on their difference from the hysterical woman. Besides the parallel, there is a more interesting contrast or reversal here: cholera is a “real” disease that acquires metaphorical shades by its polluting nature, while hysteria is clearly a cultural construction that is “looking for” a biological/medical embodiment in the character of Isobella. In a sense, Joshua gradually assumes the wife’s subaltern subject position during his quest in filth, insofar as Isobella functions as a scapegoat figure, a reservoir of Victorian abjection, and Joshua also has to submerge in the city’s filth to eventually find his way out of it as a professional and as a man. The cholera epidemic and the hysterical woman thus embody two major blind spots of Victorian sexual politics and imperial expansion.

Because of Isobella’s sexual unwillingness, Joshua pays regular visits to a prostitute, generating much guilt and self-disgust: “to have allowed myself to be led by base urges, no better than an animal. And in such a place; a threatening slum” (Kneale 24). The character of Katie, the prostitute, stands for the most unmentionable dwellers of the metropolis, who become objects of fascination precisely because of their untouchable nature: “[t]he material of her dress was coarse, oily to touch, but the breast within was warm and soft” (19) -- Joshua describes his first brief encounter with Katie in a dark slum alley, an encounter which, in this novel about contact phobia, is characteristically an encounter of tactility. The always already packaged and sold as well as soiled commodity of the prostitute’s body ambiguously awakens sexual desire in Joshua. Disgust, thus, is essentially the food of his desire: “[d]isgust always bears the imprint of desire. These low domains, apparently expelled as ‘Other’, return as the object of nostalgia, longing and fascination” (Stallybrass & White 191). The slum appears as the perfect opposite of his sexually and emotionally deprived domestic sphere, the den of diseased bodies and Katie are both appearing as contaminating: “in the Victorian era, two kinds of bodies definable as grotesque were the diseased body and the body of the prostitute—often one and the same. Both were defined chiefly by their permeability, and both became the objects of the gaze” (Gilbert

⁷⁵ Isobella seems to be a walking commonplace before the reader finds about the incest: “[f]rigid, neurasthenic and ornamental; wilting in the airless hothouse of Victorian domesticity; fretfully preoccupied by trifles; given to irrationality and hysteria; languishing in ennui; incapable of constancy, decision or stature, the middle-class woman was, until recently, consistently disparaged” (*Imperial Leather* 160).

Disease, Desire 17). The cholera-stricken and the prostituted bodies are permeable as the signs of social and sexual repressive behaviours. Thus, cholera and Katie occupy the same semantic field of filth: “the prostituted body and the diseased, contagious body have much in common; both are grotesque, that is, defined by their openings, their lower bodily strata, their discharges” (41). The prostitute, just like the dirty street urchin (another evocation of *Bleak House*), is an overt embodiment of urban deprivation and filth, a disposable but still ever-present by-product of industrialization, while Isobella’s victimization remains covert for much of the novel. The engineer inescapably desires to submerge into this filth, and lose himself in it—as it does eventually happen, an experience which serves as his secular baptism and moral defilement at the same time. His willing suspension of bourgeois cleanliness is paradoxically his only way out of his sexual and class confines.

In spite of the sharp distinction between their social standing, Katie and Isobella can be read as each other’s doubles, which is not surprising at all, since “it is also the case that in Victorian culture the dichotomy of purity and pollution cohered around, and produced the meaning of ‘woman’ with particular intensity” (Bashford *Purity* Xii). The two women are both used as objects of barter in financial and sexual exchanges, as Georges Bataille claims: “[c]ertain women become objects in marriage; they are instruments of domestic work, of agriculture particularly. Prostitution made them into objects of masculine desire; objects which are at any rate heralded the moment when in the close embrace nothing remained but only a convulsive continuity” (*Eroticism* 132). The objectification of the two female characters seems to follow the logic of economic and sexual exploitation. Prophetically, even before meeting her, Joshua fantasizes about the mysterious daughter of his boss in rather indecent ways: “she might be mad, ugly, black, white livered, drinks” (Kneale 57)—he is thus imagining her exactly as the degraded sexual object of the Victorian streetwalker, and later she does earn the name “Isobella the dirty” (172) in his mind. Isobella escapes into marriage from her father’s incestuous abuse and then escapes into prostitution from her husband in a kind of repetition compulsion: reliving her victimization on more and more publicly degrading levels seems the only way for her to externalize her trauma. She becomes what William Acton, the Victorian doctor calls a “transient prostitute” (Marcus 6), a woman who becomes a prostitute only temporarily. However, she does not escape to the safe harbour of marriage from prostitution, but the other way round. The symbolic interface of dirt, exchange and sexuality is explained by Anne McClintock in the following way:

[d]irt, like all fetishes, thus expresses a crisis in value, for it contradicts the liberal dictum that social wealth is created by the abstract, rational principles of the market and not by

labor. For this reason, Victorian dirt entered the symbolic realm of fetishism with great force. As the nineteenth century drew on, the iconography of dirt became a poetics of surveillance, deployed increasingly to police the boundaries between “normal” sexuality and “dirty” sexuality, “normal” work and “dirty” work and “normal” money and “dirty” money. (154)

Based on this perverted logic of dirty and clean sex/money, Joshua and Moynihan show several similarities, since both of them want to exclusively possess Isobella. Thus, in terms of sexuality and hygiene, Isobella and Katie represent the ultimate ambiguity of Victorian class and gender roles:

[i]f the labouring classes were portrayed as possessing an immoral sexuality, then the cultural identity of the bourgeoisie was formed around its opposite, in relation to the linked themes of health, hygiene, procreation and inheritance. [...] The medical profession acted as powerful ideologues for the professional gentry and sections of the industrial bourgeoisie, laying claim to a middle class monopoly over the issues of health and hygiene. They endowed these groups with a distinctive cultural repertoire, separate both from the perceived debauchery of the aristocracy and the disease-ridden working class. (Mort 33-4)

Katie as a prostitute subverts this central Victorian gender dichotomy: she is truly affectionate with Joshua, while Isobella is the victim of perverse, unproductive bourgeois sexuality.⁷⁶ The incestuous plot twist is deeply rooted in the era’s sexual anxieties: “incest was the most common source of moral anxiety, precisely because it dramatically disrupted middle-class norms of family propriety” (Mort 31). Similarly to prostitution, the filth of incest was the Other of bourgeois sexuality, projected onto the uncivilized underclasses to keep the boundaries of middle-class identity intact. However, incest was equally associated with the aristocracy, thus, incest is not only the epitome of barbarity also that of decadence and degeneration. The subtext of incest in the novel is closely connected to the rhetoric of disease, especially because incest as the ultimate sexual taboo strongly evokes the mixture of repugnance and obsession: “the taboo does not alter the violence of sexual activity, but for disciplined mankind it opens a door

⁷⁶ Based on Henry Spencer Ashbee’s pornographic novel, *The Amatory Experiences of a Surgeon*, Steve Marcus claims that the representation of incest was a taboo even in Victorian pornography, as there were two ways of treating it: either as great fun, or great fun with a new character entering picture, which shows “how the literary convention not only expresses certain fantasies but how it also works as a defense or screen against the unpleasant implications of the very idea it is expressing” (245).

closed to animal nature, namely, the transgression of the law” (Bataille *Eroticism* 219); but it is also “the threshold of culture, in culture, and in one sense, as we shall try to show, culture itself (Lévi-Strauss “Incest” 12). The final revelation scene at the end of the novel combs all the previously mysterious plotlines together, when we see Isobella’s ultimate act of revenge through Joshua’s eyes:

[i]t was she my eyes lit first upon. She was seated upon the bed, back resting against the wall, and, even in the instant that I observed her, I can remember being struck by how strangely comfortable she looked [...] Her clothes were a shock; a cheap scarlet dress — all cleavage and such — of the kind that Katie might have worn. Worse were the marks of bruises on her face. [...] There is something most troubling about the sight of older people in their nakedness, and that was the first shock to me [...] The second shock, of course, was his throat. With his head thrown back this was all too clearly seen, gaping red beneath his jaw; like a second mouth, hungrily open [...] That stain. [...] There it crept, over the sheets to the far side of the bed, to my wife [...] So it was he. Had always been he, from the first [...] part of me had known all along. (Kneale 304-305)

The incest scene evokes the symbolic link between the 19th-century ideologies of degeneration, the breeding of an imperial race and “domestic discipline and decorum”, which is explained by Anne McClintock in the following way: “[p]anic about blood contiguity, ambiguity and metissage expressed intense anxieties about the fallibility of white male and imperial potency. The poetics of contagion justified a politics of exclusion and gave social sanction to the middle class fixation with boundary sanitation, in particular the sanitation of sexual boundaries.” (47). Joshua’s gaze, just like in the first paragraph of the novel, is visionary here, but this time he sees suddenly into the past rather than the future. For him this quasi-primal scene also provides the taboo sight of the naked, exposed father figure, just like in the biblical story of Noah’s son, Ham, who is severely punished for the transgression of seeing the father’s reproductive organs, that is, the masculine locus of his own genesis. Even though “the surveillance of women concentrated upon three specific areas: the mouth, chastity, the threshold of the house” (Stallybrass “Patriarchal Territories” 126), it was precisely the threshold of the home that could not protect Isobella from violation. On a symbolic level, the abject sight of the father’s naked, mutilated corpse is also identified with the sewer, the image of the mouth recalls the filthy upsurge of stained fluids, as Bataille also symbolically identifies sexual outlet with waste management: “[t]he sexual channels are also the body’s sewers; we think of them as shameful

and connect the anal orifice with them” (*Eroticism* 57). For Isobella, the ritual of revenge killing becomes the only way of communicating the contagious contact she was subjected to. Her cheap dress, her becoming a prostitute is a re-enactment of what had been done to her, making the unmentionable defiantly visible at last, at least. The experience of abuse is the main link between Katie and Isobella, being used by “spending” men of patriarchal and financial power, they cannot fulfil their reproductive mission as women because they have been abjected by social system that expects them to provide its continuity:

the prostitute never makes this transition from exchange to production [as wife and mother]; she retains her commodity form at all times. Like money, the prostitute, according to ancient accounts, is incapable of natural procreation. [...] What multiplies through her is not a substance but a sign: money. Prostitution, then, like usury, is a metaphor for one of the ancient models of linguistic production: the unnatural multiplication of interchangeable signs. (Gilbert 24)

Joshua and his wife leave behind the stained house and name of the father, and the newspapers reporting the cruel murder can only mention that an unknown “vagrant” and a “prostitute” (Kneale 309) were seen in the streets. Their escape is guaranteed by their melting into the filthy underworld of London. In the novel, husband and wife survive precisely by abandoning their well-defined middle class identities and joining the subaltern, marginal professional classes. Sexual exploitation turns out to be not only the dark secret of the Victorian slum but corrupts the very core of the bourgeois home, the parental bed, just like cholera dwells not merely in the city’s lower body, its unspeakable metabolic system, it masquerades as sweet water running from the public pump, invisible to the naked eye. *Sweet Thames* thus refers to the idealized uncorrupted river as an imperial, national image, void of any contamination—which in the novel remains a mere national fantasy, since during the Great Stink a few years later, “a national symbol had been defiled, precisely at a time of perceived threat to imperial authority” (Law 53).⁷⁷ This is why cholera appears as an only implicitly, indirectly colonial disease and sign of defilement in *Sweet Thames* and an explicitly imperial catastrophe in *An Imperfect Lens*.

⁷⁷ Politically, it is also crucial that the Great Stink coincided with the sepoy uprising in India, causing a double destabilizing and humiliation of imperial authority (Cohen *Embodied* xiv).

Imperialism and the Microscopic Gaze in *An Imperfect Lens*

“‘Faith’ is a fine invention
When Gentlemen can see—But
Microscopes are prudent
In an Emergency.” Emily Dickinson: #202

While *Sweet Thames* is preoccupied with the gigantic spaces of the underground London sewage system, *An Imperfect Lens* by Ann Roiphe (2006), having an equally ironic title, has the microscopic gaze as the narrative’s central spatial metaphor of contagion. My reading of this novel is intended to serve as a counterpart to the reading of *Sweet Thames*, looking at a different 21st-century interpretation of 19th-century discourses of cholera: while Kneale’s novel is concerned with the European metropolis, Roiphe offers a postcolonial rewriting of the Victorian politics of pollution. *An Imperfect Lens* depicts the disease in the teeming city of Alexandria, offering a reading of colonisation itself as a contagious practice, a “biological Pandora’s box” (Bewell 30), implying that “the study of infectious disease historically is also to question and make visible the processes and concept of colonisation, for like contagion, colonisation is about ‘contact’, self-multiplication and, not infrequently, destruction” (Bashford *Imperial* 6). In the broadest socio-political sense, the epidemics of the era point out the paradox of expansionist imperialism, as “the nineteenth-century notions of the independent, distinctly bounded cell, individual, and nation began to crumble with the advent of imperialism. The imperialist fantasy is to penetrate without being penetrated, to influence without being influenced” (Otis 168). The period in which the novel is set was also the heyday of racial theories (such as Cesare Lombroso and Francis Galton), even though the novel does not explicitly refer to them, the rhetoric of disease and war did tangibly permeate most of the intellectual discourses of the second part of the 19th century.

From the point of view of medical history, cholera is inseparable from 19th-century colonization, and the very language of epidemiology born in this era is permeated by metaphors of colonizing. When interpreting the cultural constructedness of the geo-body of a nation, it has to be noted that “as humans colonized the globe, they were themselves colonised by pathogens” (Porter *Blood and Guts* 2), thus the rhetoric of colonial and microbial invasions mutually infect each other. Within postcolonial studies, the roles of tenor and vehicle in this contagious metaphor even seem to have changed place: “[i]f, in cholera, we can see an exotic contagion metaphorized as a form of colonialism, contemporary theories of colonialism frequently do just the reverse, using contamination as a trope for the colonial encounter” (O’Connor 55). On the

one hand, subaltern subjects are by definition abjectly contagious: “[t]here are two sides to the connection between colonialism and disease. First of all, simply the fact that the indigenous population is disease-ridden is itself a justification for the colonial project” (Hardt & Negri *Empire* 135), but at the same time, the superiority of Europe is easily threatened by the dirty darkness of the colonies: “[t]he horror released by European conquest and colonialism is a horror of unlimited contact, flow, and exchange—or really the horror of contagion, miscegenation, and unbounded life” (135-6).

An Imperfect Lens is in many ways the product of such 21st-century critical insights, and was partly inspired by colonial and postcolonial fiction. Ann Roiphe (whose brother, a hematologist, died of AIDS), similarly to Kneale’s Afterword, mentions in the Acknowledgements section several fictional and scientific sources that inspired her, for instance Thackeray’s piece on his Egyptian journey, E. M. Forster’s *Alexandria*, L. Durrell’s *The Alexandria Quartet*, Cavafy’s poems and other quasi-academic titles like *Plagues and Peoples* and *Man and Microbes*. She also adds that “a novel is not a record on reality but a comment on it,” articulating an *ars poetica* preoccupied with the writing of historiographical metafiction in the Hutcheonian sense. The list of literary predecessors could go on, especially if we compare *An Imperfect Lens* with the popular 2006 film version of W. Somerset Maugham’s *The Painted Veil* (1925), another cholera story set in China and revolving around an outbreak and the racialized bodies of the filthy natives. The supposedly uncontaminated but still scapegoated white male scientist protagonists both die, while their beloved ones survive the deadly initiation and move (back) to Europe, the locus of safe and sterile purity. In both texts, the microscopic gaze of the European male scientist appears as the manifestation of an ambivalent desire to keep a medical and cultural distance from polluting, contagious colonial spaces on the one hand, and to dissect and triumphantly conquer them on the other. Roiphe’s novel is thus part of a cluster of contemporary neo-Victorian novels concerned with cholera in a colonial context: Beryl Bainbridge’s *Master Georgie* (1998) has already been mentioned as it is set during a cholera epidemic at the time of the Crimean War, J. G. Farrell’s Booker Prize Winner 1973 *The Siege of Krishnapur* is about the Indian Rebellion of 1857, also featuring a cholera outbreak, while Patricia Duncker’s *James Miranda Barry* (1999) narrates the life of a legendary, supposedly hermaphrodite Victorian doctor fighting cholera in South Africa.

However, *An Imperfect Lens*’ international cast of characters and its microscopic narrative gaze make it an especially revealing counterpart to *Sweet Thames*’s exploration of engineered Victorian spaces. As opposed to Kneale’s focus on social class and gender, Roiphe’s novel concentrates on cholera’s colonial, international, interracial and scientific contexts, featuring competing German and French teams of devoted scientists in their quest for the

microscopic enemy, the scramble for the microbe—taking place not for but in Africa. Thus, East and West again appear in *Sweet Thames* and *An Imperfect Lens* as two cultural-spatial sides of the same contagious coin, similarly to the case of the Welsh village and Cairo in *Pestilence*.

The blind city: the filth of Alexandria

Egypt as a setting is all the more meaningful as its ambiguity as part of dark Africa and the cradle for European civilization makes it a rich, liminal scenario for several Victorian writers (H. Rider Haggard, for instance). Egypt had a key role in colonial history for various reasons, and the story of Suez was only one of these. Egypt did not belong to Black Africa, it was rather a part of the Arab world and the orientalist discourse. While Black Africa was imagined in Europe as an uncivilized non-urban space, the Arab world evoked active, urbanized, blossoming cities (just like the culture of Oran serves as a positive oriental counterpoint at the end of *Year of Wonders*) with their chaotic, dirty, dangerous corners full of potential sexual and sanitary sources of contamination. Furthermore, the archeological discourse symbolically fits here, too, i.e., the realization that the cradle for European civilization is to be found on the African continent, cultivated by coloured people. When in *Sweet Thames* Joshua expresses his admiration and respect for a priest who is brave enough to visit slum victims, he compares him to “missionaries sent to darkest Africa” (Kneale 191), and the engineer obviously does not mean Egypt. By this Joshua creates the London underclasses as subaltern subjects straight from the heart of darkness, belonging to the mass of what Bewell calls the “tropicalized bodies of the urban working class” (Bewell 26). Joshua’s expression is actually a complex intertextual allusion to Mary Kingsley’s popular travelogue, *In Darkest Africa* from 1890, which was adapted both by slum-fiction and contemporary sociography and later served as a fertile metaphor of colonial otherness.⁷⁸

In many ways, Roiphe’s Alexandria and Kneale’s London are dark doubles of each other, just like in a more general sense “colonial disease darkly mirrored English social space: “the ‘foreign’ diseases that the British were encountering outside their island seemed to reflect a foreignness within” (51). Accordingly, *An Imperfect Lens* opens with a vivid recollection of the international milieu of the city’s busy harbour, where flags of the British Empire, the United States, the Ottoman Empire, and of course, the French tricolour are flying high side by side. The prologue starts with a boy bringing cups of drinking water to thirsty sailors, who sweat

⁷⁸ The founder of the Salvation Army, William Booth wrote a sociography entitled *In Darkest England* (also from 1890), while Margaret Harkness’ slum novel is called *In Darkest London* (1889). Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* published in 1900 thus capitalized on the metaphorical identification with racial or class subalternness with darkness.

heavily while working on the ship's masts, and then on the next page we see the little boy, the colonial equivalent of the London street urchin in *Sweet Thames*, Alexandria's synecdochic flower of evil, die alone in the streets in his own and the city's filth. The complex, panoramic imagery of trade, ships, death, waste, stain, dust, mud and dirt is condensed at the start of the text, similarly to a laboratory experiment used to breed different cultures of disease. All through the story, Alexandria appears as a kind of historical palimpsest, a rich web of political, scientific, racial and religious diversity, cut open along its fault lines by the outbreak. Consequently, this liminal city between Europe and Africa is rendered as the ultimate colonial setting for an invasion narrative, easily penetrated by various foreign enemies—be they colonial or microbial. Just like the London of *Sweet Thames*, the city of Alexandria itself becomes the real protagonist, suggesting that the city-body is the spatial metonymy of its inhabitants, while its infected people are *pars pro toto* standing for the permeability of the entire urban structure, a typical feature of the colonial discourse: “[p]eople are read through the landscapes they inhabit, while landscapes are seen as the physical expression—the topographical indexes—of the moral discipline and technological power of those who inhabit them” (Bewell 44). Built spaces, the culturalization of the natural (body) is thus a central trope of the two interpreted city novels, the fascinating visuality of urban description being countered by the representation of staggering smells and the tangibility of filth.

In *An Imperfect Lens*, visual metaphors are especially ubiquitous, as the sharp, objective and still orientalist microscopic gaze of the white male European scientists is consistently contrasted with the symbolic and biological “blindness” of the city, both in the sense of commenting on widespread eye diseases and the lack of a “civilized” European perspective. In one of the open air city scenes, a British character is watching an Egyptian scribe at work in the market and thinks about the fact that “the blind used his services, and this was a city where the eyes roamed about in the heads of many, unfocused, veiled, useless” (Roiphe 222). The city is blinded, disabled by its own filth, lacking a point of view on its own degraded condition—something the sharp microscopic gaze of the European scientists can provide, vision being their superior skill contrasted with oriental and orientalist, exotic and exoticized veils, illusions and blindness, overpowered by the lower body's pollution. Their gaze shoes both the subaltern and scientific nature of their project, as Homi Bhabha claims about the colonial discourse in general, which “produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once an ‘other’ and yet entirely knowable and visible” (Bhabha 101)

Historically, Alexandria's political and geographical position is especially significant amidst the sanitary crises of the 19th century: “for the Great Powers, as seen above, internationalizing public health meant taking Egypt away from the Sultan in Constantinople”

(Zylberman 33), and, after the appearance of cholera, many people saw Islam as “the stumbling block to a new European sanitary order” (29). The fuzzy status of Egypt as a European or oriental country became basically a question of sanitation, a dilemma of biomedical diplomacy, as “in 1866, when it organized the international conference on cholera, the Ottoman Empire asked the European powers to let it be a part of their sanitary domain” (28). Thus, Alexandria appears as an interface of the distant ancient and the recent colonial past of Europe, as well as a threshold of Western and Eastern cultures, a chaotic cluster of difference and otherness where clear, distinct boundaries are impossible to maintain either in a cartographic or in a medical sense. Egypt can be read as a colonial petri dish itself, where all the polluted and polluting cultures of imperialism can grow and be studied in their “natural” (that is, colonized) habitat and interactions.

All the nationalities present in Alexandria try to impose their authority on the city in their own ways. The greed of the colonizers wears various masks: the British want to control trade (the most important British character is an amoral mercantilist trickster figure), the French want the scientific glory of conquering cholera as well as the Germans, while the Americans simply want to snatch as much treasure as they can from the bowels of the pyramids, since “it’s just sitting there for the taking” (Roiphe 236), as one of the American characters puts it. Interestingly, the British colonisers are not scientist figures,⁷⁹ all of them are military personnel or civil servants, relentlessly immoral, arrogant and aggressive, especially the British tradesman, who, after his betrayal of his local Jewish supporter and saviour, Doctor Malina, is even praised for being “a true Englishman” (223). In the meantime, as a British citizen he is threatened by the Empire’s power: “he was well aware of the fact the Britannia had her foot on his neck”, as he puts it, as well as “on all of Alexandria and most of the known world” (203). Dr. Malina, the Jewish doctor serving as the moral compass of the story, expresses the same in connection with British morals: “the British have no respect for other people’s homes” (124). The educated Jewish physician is later victimized in a cholera-induced pogrom, even though he is the only one who clearly “understood that guilt and innocence in the eyes of the authorities were not moral issues as much as tactical ones.” (240). The absence of any coherent and responsible power structure in the city is indicated by the fact that the logic of scapegoating is virulent: the poor think that the rich are poisoning them with cholera, while the rich believe that the poor should be “cordoned off” (83) to contain the epidemic, but finally everybody agrees that the Jews are to blame. It is not an accident that there are no British doctors in the novel, as

⁷⁹ The British later questioned Koch’s results: “the British were in fact making an effort to deal with the problem; for example, William Guyer Hunter was dispatched to study the cholera in Egypt, also, a paper published in the *Quarterly Journal of Microscopical Science* in 1886, entitled ‘The Official Refutation of Dr. Robert Koch’s Theory of Cholera and Commas’” (Ogawa 673).

the imperial interest of the British Empire went against acknowledging the epidemic and quarantining the city: “Britain, which had acquired a major interest in the Suez Canal in 1875, had wanted to abolish quarantine altogether and make do with medical inspections since at least 1873” (Ogawa 675).⁸⁰ Thus, the treasure hunting of the Americans, the French vs. German microbe hunting, and racist, anti-Semitic head hunting appear as nationality-specific means of taking biopolitical control of the city, and the stereotypical behaviour of the colonisers is eventually just as amoral as the epidemic itself.

The perfect metaphor of cultural-historical cross-contamination is a little carved Ganesh elephant sculpture, a love token given by Dr. Malina’s beautiful and intelligent daughter, Este,⁸¹ to one of the French scientists, Thullier, with whom she falls in love. The young man later carelessly drops the Indian symbol of the arts and sciences in the street mud, and immediately picks it up despite all sanitary precautions he has been meticulously respecting for months, and thus causes his own death by contracting cholera right before the outbreak ends. Thullier becomes one of the very last victims of the outbreak and his death is clearly caused by his romantic emotions shadowing his scientific judgement. The Ganesh sculpture is also symbolic because it can refer both to the Indian origins of cholera⁸² and the channelling, mediating role of Alexandria, the cradle of filth and/as civilization for Europe.

⁸⁰ The French come across as showing signs of the infamous Gallic arrogance: “people should not speak French if they can’t do it right” (Roiphe 166), one of them says. However, Marcus, a member of the French team becomes a male prostitute in Alexandria simply to get rich. In contrast with Marcus’ loss of “civilized” sexual mores and gender boundaries, Robert Koch appears as a perfect control freak both in his personal and professional habits.

⁸¹ Este is not only significant as a Jewish character, her story as a woman is also symbolic. The novel ends with the reader learning that she escapes to Germany with her family and later marries a talented German scientist, has three children with him, and never goes back to Egypt. Her fate is ambiguously resolved: the smart girl, who initially, before her first engagement, does not want to accept that “her story, her life’s story, the only one she would ever have, was reaching its climax” (52); and who takes the father’s books instead of her clothes when the family has to flee Alexandria, becomes a loyal foil to her scientist husband, who regularly “told everyone who would listen that the best ideas he ever had came from his wife” (291). Thus, Este’s story is not a feminist, subversive rewriting of women’s role in the sanitary crises and scientific discoveries of the 19th century, as opposed to *Sweet Thames*, where Victorian female gender roles are depicted in a critical fashion.

⁸² John A. Benson wrote an oedipal, rape-based genesis story of cholera in 1893: “[up from the dark Plutonian caverns of Erebus, up from the clouded Stygian valley, up from the depths of hell, in the early part of this century, arose the Goddess of Filth, and she wandered around over the face of the globe, seeking for a home to her liking. And coming to the delta of the Ganges, in this low, insalubrious and festering locality, where so many noxious and noisome diseases are generated, and where so many epidemics have arisen and so often swept over the earth with most fatal and desolating effects, -- here she met, one dark and stifling night, with gaunt Despair. And surrounding her with his bony arms, Despair threw her on the foul, dark and slimy ground, and had his will over her. And when the day of her reckoning was reached, here in the neighbourhood of Jessore — a town in the centre of the delta — in agony and in shame and in desolation, Filth gave birth to the monstrosity yclept, -- Asiatic cholera. And here she nurtured and fed him, here in this vast pest-house where every conceivable vegetable and animal substance is left upon the soil to rot in the heat and dews of a tropical climate, -- here Filth fed her offspring from her own breasts, and as he grew and vexed strong, and his tusks and teeth appeared so that he would chew and tear at her dugs, she longed to wean him, and one day as he ferociously fastened him upon her, she cast him away on the mud, and as his mouth was forcibly torn from the dug, some of her foul milk was scattered around, and falling into the water of the Ganges, as drops, was at once coagulated by the water, and became—the *Spirilla Cholerae Asiaticae*” (qtd. in O’Connor 21-22)

The love story in *An Imperfect Lens* between the Jewish Este and the French Thullier metaphorically re-enacts the phobic logic of cholera, as the young man's death in Alexandria finally taints him with the yellow of street mud and the blue of cholera death, despite all his scientific and romantic ambitions of discovery and love. Just like the miasma imagery of *Sweet Thames*, the climactic theories of disease are also present in *An Imperfect Lens*, for instance, in the fog image which appears in most city descriptions: "this fog of grief enveloped Alexandria" (Roiphe 251), evoking 18th-century myths about the aerial spread of contagion, like the one appearing in the following medical anecdote: "in Egypt in 1883, not only was 'yellowish haze' noticed at the time of the epidemic's outbreak, but the very name of the disease cholera—'yellow air' (al-rih al-asfar)—was cited as confirmatory evidence" (Mukharji 313). The colour symbolism of yellow is especially meaningful from a colonial point of view, since "yellow, for example, was both the color of the bile whose corruption was thought to cause cholera as well as a color associated with India (i.e., Indian yellow)" (107). At the same time, blue, the other symbolic colour of cholera as the "blue pest", "was the color the victim was thought to turn to in her or his final stages. Blue was also, by the mid-nineteenth century, another color prominently associated with India owing to the indigo trade" (Mukharji 327). Moreover, cholera patients' blood turning "blue" with dehydration was usually seen to "degenerative coloring", and thus "racialized its victims," symbolically subjecting them to miscegenation (O'Connor 43, 51).

Another link to the ancient past of the disease on the Indian sub-continent is the fictionalized, almost mythicized narration of the outbreak itself in the novel, impersonating cholera in many ways: "[t]he year was 1883. cholera has come to Alexandria." (Roiphe 7). This is the last sentence of the prologue, echoing the monk Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* from 664, one of the earliest written sources of the history of the British Isles. Bede, announcing the arrival of the plague in an annales-like, writes in a brief fashion: "[A]nd the pestilence came (et pestilentia venit)" (John Maddicott 171-2149). India as the "factory of cholera" (*Imperial Medicine* 14) is even more "Other" than the city of Alexandria for the European eye. Filth is a colonial issue since cholera was primarily a boundary issue, a sign of people's inability to control their own metabolism: what they take into their bodies is supposedly not the same as what they eject. According to Tamás Bényei, this is the definition of the strictest taboo: once something has left the body, it cannot be reincorporated, like taking the same bite twice in one's mouth (*Traumatikus találkozások* 99). The bodily geography of cholera reinforces a general imperial tendency to associate these foreign climates with inferiority and the register of the low as such, both in physical and moral terms. As Bewell quotes Harold Scott's 1939 text, India

was generally regarded as the abject digestive tract of the imperial body, while the upper body, the locus of human voice and intellect is essentially clean, controllable and European:

[t]he climate of India tends powerfully to the production of disease within the abdominal cavity, while that of Europe tends as powerfully to production of disease within the thoratic cavity. As the two hemispheres are divided, the eastern from the western, by the meridional line so the diaphragm separates the two great cavities of the body, in one of which, the thoratic, is manifested very generally the morbid results of the Western, while on the other, the abdominal, are generally manifested the morbid results of Eastern climates. (250)⁸³

Similarly to the cholera metaphors of *Sweet Thames*, amidst the metaphors of outbreak in *An Imperfect Lens*, we find several passages connecting city filth with contagion: “a swimming monster” (Roiphe 229) is killing its dwellers, while “the invading cholera bobbed along unseen among the day’s refuse” (23). These passages identify cholera with waste material, the ambiguous sediments of everyday urban life. In the end, the city becomes more and more untouchable for the Europeans. There are duly European-looking cafés, restaurants and hotels for the picky white guests, but the streets are full of oriental dirt and filth. While the novel often personifies cholera, describing it as an amoral, immortal monster, at the same time it also dehumanizes the infection: “[n]ow we know these amoral specks are responsible for more human death than all the spears and arrows, all the bombs and explosives tossed tribe to tribe, nation to nation, from time immemorial to the present” (292).

The scramble for the microbe: the French against the Germans

The treatment of the scientists in the novel is decidedly postcolonial: 19th-century colonization appears as a stepping stone for epidemiology, because “modern medicine, or what was understood as such during the early nineteenth century, was a product of the colonies” (Harrison 9). In a broader sense, as Andrew Cunningham and Bridie Andrews put it, “medicine has always been a significant tool of empire” (Ogawa 707). Thus, it is impossible to separate colonial politics from tropical medicine, especially after the arrival of laboratory science. The European

⁸³ The logic was the same when Americans encounters Phillipine cholera: “[t]he colonial state—its repressions and its discontents—came to be delineated on racialized bodies (Filipino or American), intimately reduced to orifices (open or closed) and dejecta (visible or invisible)” (Bashford and Hooker 78); and “medical texts insistently contrast a closed, ascetic American body with an open, grotesque Filipino body, the former typically in charge of a sterilised laboratory or clinic, the latter squatting in an unruly promiscuous marketplace” (Anderson 76).

scientists in the novel are keenly aware of the international competition behind the seemingly purely philanthropic aims of research. In his biography of Alexandre Yersin, Patrick Deville symptomatically describes this rivalry in colonial terms as “the Pasteur crowd in universal competition with the Koch crowd, which must be wiped off the board without delay. There are still blank areas on the map and unknown diseases” (280). In *An Imperfect Lens*, the French and German researchers look upon the city as a scientific frontier. They know they have to go there, following in the steps of Louis Pasteur, who was the first to point out that “the microbe is nothing, the terrain everything” (Crawford 212). From their European point of view, the international scientists’ opinions are obviously heavily judgmental: they repeatedly call attention to the “filthiness” of the city (Roiphe 202, 57). Robert Koch nostalgically sighs when recalling Berlin’s much more pleasant culture and weather conditions: “thank God, Berlin had a decent climate,” and “Berlin did not stink,” moreover, “a person could find an opera company” (51) there.⁸⁴ The scientists all have great respect for their often narcissistic object of study, but detest the climactic and cultural context it requires them to endure. An unnamed Victorian doctor from 1862 elaborates on the repulsive otherness of the cholera contagion in a similar and symptomatic way:

[o]ur other plagues were home-bred, and part of ourselves, as it were; we had a habit of looking at them with a fatal indifference, indeed, inasmuch as it led us to believe that they could be effectively subdued. But the cholera was something outlandish, unknown, monstrous; its tremendous ravages, so long foreseen and feared, so little to be explained, its insidious march over whole continents, its apparent defiance of all the known and conventional precautions against the spread of epidemic disease, invested it with a mystery and a terror which thoroughly took hold of the public mind, and seemed to recall the memory of the great epidemic of the middle ages. (qtd. in Haley 6)⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Arthur Conan Doyle’s description of Koch fits the image of the obsessed scientist, who called his mission a *Vernichtungskrieg* against germs: “[s]omewhere within [those walls] the great master mind is working, which is rapidly bringing under subjection those unruly tribes of deadly micro-organisms which are the last creatures in the organic world to submit to the sway of man ... [Koch] preserves his whole energy for the all-important mission to which he has devoted himself” (Otis 91).

⁸⁵ The American context of 19th century cholera shows similar features; however, the ideologies of divine judgement and xenophobia concerning immigrants were more dominant there, and the epidemic was to be fought with industry and temperance (Christensen 98, 108), while the disease itself was depicted in the popular press through the allegorical figure of a “destroying Angel” (Weiss 99). Also, *The New York Times* wrote in 1866: “[c]holera is especially the punishment of neglect of sanitary laws; it is the curse of the dirty, the intemperate, and the degraded” (Sontag *Illness* 141).

One might even think of the popular image of mad dogs and Englishmen who go out in the midday sun (from the popular 1931 Noël Coward song) when imagining the equally mad Continental scientists who are ready to risk their lives for the glories of scientific discovery.

The international community of scientists evince varying degrees of detachment from the contaminating environment. At a dinner scene, “[t]he Belgian doctors, the Arab surgeon, the Italian anatomist, the Turkish throat specialist, all members of the Alexandrian Academy along with Dr. Malina, ate with full appetite” (Roiphe 175), while the French refuse to touch the food. The microscopic, suspecting gaze is usually associated with the scientists, for instance when Thullier descends the stairs of the hotel sliding his hands playfully on the banister, then becomes conscious of his otherwise normal, but here reckless gesture and goes down again after a thorough handwashing without touching the banister again (24). This self-consciousness is later opposed by his careless, suicidal picking up of the Ganesh statue. A similar scene takes place at another dinner table, when the Frenchman “left his dessert wine untouched. He could not wipe the rim without the risk of staining his napkin with wine” (29).

The microscope’s⁸⁶ lens, also evoked in the title, is the central visual metaphor of the novel, focussing on the tiny microbes but also revealing global moves of power. The microscope does not see whether the epidemic material under examination was cut out from the body of a white or an Egyptian victim, still, the microscopic gaze⁸⁷ is just as biased as the naked eye, but in a more overt way. That is why this gaze is actually a panoptic gaze, covering not only the petri dish; as “Latour declares, ‘no one can say where the laboratory is and where the society is.’” (Bashford *Contagion* 85). With this microscopized narrative focus, *An Imperfect Lens* features a particular moment in medical history, a major paradigm shift, when the Enlightenment theories of climactic, aerial, miasmatic explanations of epidemics, requiring a “telescopic gaze”, rooted in the cosmic world view of the Middle Ages, directed upwards to the skies were replaced by the downcast, “microscopic gaze” of the laboratory scientist (Mukharji 321). While in *Sweet Thames*, set at mid-century, the protagonist is an engineer building vast structures, at the end of the 19th century microbe hunters become the new culture heroes: “[m]icroscopy incorporated the individual observer in a decentralized and self-

⁸⁶ Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* also comments on the visibility of disease when his narrator comments that “we had no Microscopes at that Time” (203), relying on allegories of infection instead when: “the Arrow flies thus unseen” (202).

⁸⁷ The next step in the evolution of the medical gaze was endoscopic vision: “the dissemination of endoscopic imagery has popularised what van Dijck calls ‘the endoscopic gaze’, the surgeon’s view not from the outside into the interior, but from within (van de Vall 6).

correcting virtual sensory apparatus—an apparatus capable of facilitating inspection of visually inaccessible territory with optical precision and detail.” (Cartwright 86).⁸⁸

In spite of all the above mentioned intertextual links, Roiphe comments that the novel was directly inspired by a short note on Pasterur’s men in Alexandria. Thullier was also an actual figure, who died “on the frontiers of scientific discovery,” a “fallen hero,” “a scientist working in the trenches” (Roiphe 293)—as the Afterword puts it, utilizing the military rhetoric of the colonial era. Even though Thullier dies as a result of his romantic involvement, he is given a lot of symbolic capital posthumously as an act of compensation. His death rattle is described in detail, he gets a monument back in France, a street is named after him, even his brother gets a promotion, his body is carried back home a year later, and put into a shallow grave in Alexandria till then—just like so many of the cholera victims’ bodies, but in his case the shallow colonial grave is a sign of his becoming a national hero, a *lieu de mémoire*. He is also the only one who is properly mourned out of all the faceless victims: “[w]hen the numbers jump far out beyond our capacity to feel, they produce a numbness that is not so much protective as genuinely bored” (110), Dr. Malina says, who also makes the racist comment himself “[w]e don’t count the dead, unless they’re Europeans” (29). Thus, a cruel but pragmatic forgetfulness seems to be an anthropological universal of epidemic psychology.

The images of trench warfare (as Roiphe’s above quoted Acknowledgements show) again link epidemiology to military actions and colonization, as a result of which finally “all the civilized world believed in germs” (292), linking medical, military and religious fields of metaphor. In this sense, *An Imperfect Lens* fits the long tradition of the military rhetoric of epidemics:

it has become so customary to apply military metaphors to epidemic diseases to speak of their ‘attacks’ and ‘invasions,’ of the ‘devastation’ they cause or the ‘resistance’ they encounter, and of their ‘conquest’ by medical science that one could easily overlook the literal correspondence between cholera and military power in colonial India” (Arnold 168).

The novel’s references to cholera also tend to use military images. Parallel with this thematic focus on the ambiguous attitudes of the laboratory scientists, a dominant narrative technique of the text is that we often see the city through not only a European but a laboratory-based microscopic lens. The third person narrator’s gaze sometimes spans the city from a panoptic

⁸⁸ It is an interesting historical addition that in contrast with vaccination, as shown in the novel, “inoculation appears historically as a feminine and feminised practice” (Bashford “Foreign Bodies” 51).

perspective (for instance in the already mentioned opening harbour scene), and then it zooms in on microscopic sights: “the invisible invaders moved swiftly, riding into the belly of a child drinking water from a well, or of an adult putting his fingers in his mouth to remove a bit of tobacco stuck between the teeth, settling in the lower intestine, feeding and feeding without thought or regret, without memory of other places, without destiny or hope of redemption” (Roiphe 14); or “the illness took over her body like the army of a colonial power, spread out, killed whatever was in its way, and settled itself in groups, in clumps, in prime territory and began rapaciously to mine the area, to claim the rewards for its troubles.” (69). In another scene, Thullier wonders “could the cholera be an animal without an enemy?” (194). It seems that the visual metaphor of the microscopic lens and the evolutionary metaphor of foreign invasion are both rooted in imperial European attitudes to colonial otherness.

Despite references to great scientist father figures like John Snow (92) and Pasteur, the French still cannot find the bacterium and eventually they switch to the research of less elusive bovine plague. Pasteur also tells his disciples that “failure should teach him something; this he had learned from Dr. Pasteur. No failure was wasted” (127). Similarly to the Germans’ failure, Dr. Malina’s medical knowledge is also humbled by the epidemic, a Coptic priest even tells him when asked about the reasons for the epidemic: “you know very little” (211). Maybe this insurmountable fallibility of science is why the Epilogue starts with an exact classification of *Vibrio cholerae* or comma, listing its exact domain, kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus, species, as if to indicate that it can finally be classified and written into a precise taxonomy and thus safely contained.

The real colonial hero of the cholera is Dr. Koch, even though the breakthrough is not reached in Alexandria: he has to go to India, descending to the even darker cradle of cholera for it. One could argue that “Koch and his disciples were scientific empire-builders, as they demanded hygiene institutes and facilitates for surveillance of micro-organisms harboured by people, animals and natural environment” (Harris 218). Koch’s figure, however, is especially interesting regarding the cross-fertilization of medical and colonial language, and his famous postulates can also be read as cultural documents today: “1. The microbe has to be present in every case of the disease 2. The microbe has to be *isolated* from the patient and grown in *pure culture*. 3. When the purified microorganism is inoculated into a *healthy susceptible host*, the same disease results. 4. Once again, the same microbe has to be isolated from the host infected with the microbe” (Coleman 15, my emphasis). “Isolating” the infectious agent in “pure culture,” and impregnating a “healthy host” with it have strong postcolonial connotations today—as the AIDS chapter will argue in connection with the metaphorical connotations of the

immune system's ability to differentiate between Self and Other.⁸⁹ It is thus obvious that "Koch was doing more than just framing nature, he was both materially and metaphorically reconstructing nature" (Worboys 13). Thus, similarly to the logic of the plague quarantine, the discourse of germs in a petri dish at the end of the 19th century was still organised around the identification and separation of otherness via the modern devices of criminal pathology, eugenics and laboratory science. What Koch rhetoric does is repeating on the microbial level the basic biopolitical ideologies of the day.

The Jew as homo sacer: pogrom and pollution

Racial tensions, just like national otherness, is yet another major symbolic layer of the narrative beside the dichotomies of East and West, human and bacterial. Dr. Malina and his family do collapse these simplistic oppositions, since they remain others wherever they go, and stand for the cultivation of culture as such, despite their being scapegoated after the outbreak in Alexandria. As homo sacri, they seem to be expandable, can be killed without punishment as subject outside the law. The blaming of Jews for epidemics is an age-old custom, also present in the case of the plague as represented in *Pestilence*, and the poisoning of drinking water is the ultimate blame against them. When defining scapegoating, René Girard calls such anti-Semitic pogroms during epidemic collective acts of persecution: "[b]y collective persecutions I mean acts of violence committed directly by a mob of murderers such as the persecution of the Jews during the Black Death. By collective resonances of persecutions I mean acts of violence, such as witch-hunts, that are legal in form but stimulated by the extremes of public opinion." (*Scapegoat* 12). In *An Imperfect Lens*, the work of a Jewish-American author, Jews do seem to be similar to cholera, a contagious disease, but in positive ways: they are blamed for all problems (political, medical), they are on the move all the time, and they seem to be the most adaptive of the cultures and nationalities mentioned in the novel. The French consul also comments on the diasporic presence of the Jews: "these Jews are always travelling from one country to another. They can't seem to set down roots" (Roiphe 271). The very word diaspora is revealing here, as the sporadic spreading of the Jews moves similarly to an epidemic, requiring artificial separation in the form of a quarantine or a ghetto. This is how the exclusionary logic of anti-Semitism becomes readable in terms of the expansionist logic of colonialism against the postcolonial realization of the subaltern. The same prejudice and gut rection surfaces when Achmed, an Arab friend of Malina's son reacts to the Jewish Albert's

⁸⁹ An anecdote about Koch during the Hamburg cholera outbreak can shed more light on his colonial attitude: "when Koch made an official visit to the stricken, squalid areas, he ungloved his exasperation with Hamburg's public officials. His indictment made international news: 'Gentlemen, I forget that I am in Europe'" (Carmicheal 147).

aggression for selling him (Albert) a fake engagement ring by immediately, instinctively by calling him a “Jew, dirty Jew!” (180).

Eventually, the Malina family escapes to Freiburg, Germany, where their long exiled son, Jacob, also joins them, and the family is finally reunited. We also learn that Jacob studies medicine there, and Dr. Malina opens a new clinic and continues his career successfully. Beside this seemingly happy ending for the Malinas, one of the novel’s hidden sentences has sadly uncanny connotations. Dr. Malina tells his wife before the journey that “our family will be safe in Freiburg, our great-grandchildren will live in that civilized country in comfort” (279). The interconnection of epidemics and the Jews is also examined by Jennifer Cooke’s *Legacies of Plague in Literature, Theory and Film*, which devotes a separate chapter to the relationship of Nazi political-medical ideology and anti-Semitism, based on the consistent metaphorical identification of Jews with vermin and plague. Roberto Esposito also comments on this rhetoric from a biopolitical perspective when quoting Himmler himself: “anti-semitism is like disinfection. Keeping lice away is not an ideological question—it is a question of cleanliness” (*Bíos* 117), and then Esposito describes this ideology as “Nazi bio-law” (184), “bio-theogony” (142), and “biocracy” (113). It is not surprising that Hitler even dragged Koch’s iconic name into his argument of reducing Jews to the level of animals, that is, *zoé*: “[t]he discovery of the Jewish virus is one of the greatest revolutions of this world. The battle that we fight every day is equal to those fought in the last century by Pasteur and Koch” (117).

Of course *An Imperfect Lens* never mentions the Holocaust, but still, the novel cruelly satirizes the Jewish family’s innocent belief in the safety and development of European civilization in the face of Eastern chaos. The novel thus indirectly refers to the Holocaust, it appears as a dark foreshadowing element of a future ideological epidemic, the “brown plague”, as Camus metaphorized the Nazi occupation of France. *An Imperfect Lens* this way makes it possible to re-read the interconnections between the colonial-orientalistic discourse and that of epidemiology and immunology. The wandering Jew is continuously exposed to lethal risks while he is being regarded as the risk itself. When Este, referring to bats, wonders in the laboratory whether “[t]here are some creatures that are unnecessary, just mistakes” (Roiphe 147), Thullier’s strong disagreement suggests that even the cholera bacillus has the natural right to live, which can be interpreted as a symbolically anti-eugenic view on biopolitics in the novel, a dilemma also posed by the stigmatising, pathologizing logic of gay men as mere “mistakes”, freaks of nature, sexual waste within the AIDS discourse.

19th-century images of cholera



Fig. 6: Joseph Légaré, *Le choléra à Québec* (1832)

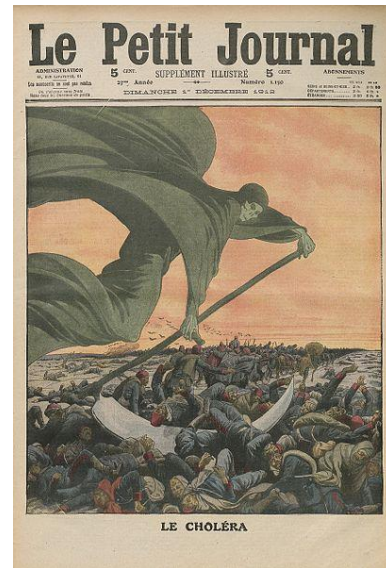


Fig. 7: Death bringing cholera, *Le Petit Journal* (1912)



Fig. 4: March of Russian barbarity and cholera to Europe, France



Fig. 5: Cholera preservative woman, Germany



Fig. 6: A young Venetian woman, aged 23, before and after the cholera

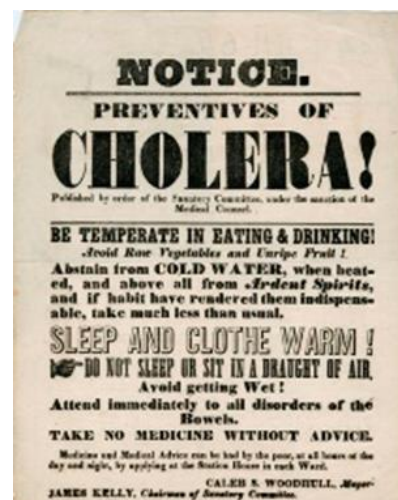


Fig. 7: A 19th-century British cholera poster



Fig. 8: *Death's Dispensary*, 1866



Fig. 9: Robert Cruikshank, *A cholera patient experimenting with remedies* (1832)



Fig. 10: *Monster Soup*



Fig. 11: Isaac Cruikshank, *Indecency* (1799)



Fig. 12: *Faraday Giving His Card to Father Thames*

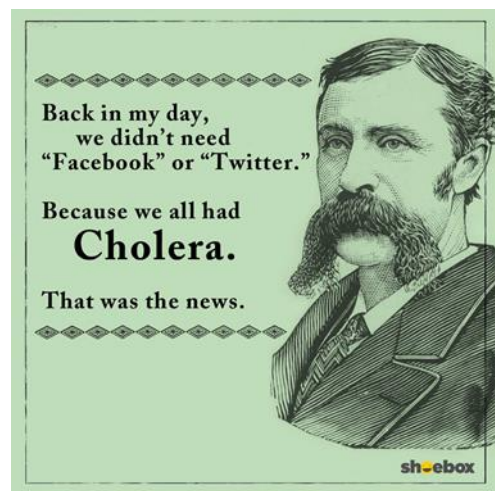


Fig. 13: A contemporary cholera meme

Anti-Bodies in London: AIDS and the Aestheticized Spaces of Immunity in Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* and Alfred Corn's *Part of His Story*

“‘Why aren’t there more cases in England?’—one well-meaning professor asked me in the States. ‘Isn’t it the land of buggers?’” (Dennis Altman: *AIDS and New Puritanism*, 58)

The medical and socio-cultural secondary literature on AIDS tends to overindulge in superlatives when describing the significance of the epidemic in late 20th-century history and biopolitics, calling it the “second millennium plague” (Esposito *Immunitas* 162), “the most studied disease in human history” (Whiteside 133), “the most political of diseases” (Waldby 19), or “perhaps the most culturally constructed” (Aberth 135) one. In the wake of the global AIDS scare starting in the early 1980s, the widely circulated images of sexual contamination, risky lifestyles and the precariousness of homosexuality have become imprinted upon first world citizens’ minds as modern-day memento moris, while Africa was restigmatized as the heart of contagious, animalistic darkness. In the West, the subliminal messages of AIDS-related cultural materials and the representational work carried out by them problematize ideas of (homo)sexuality and the medico-political margins of the self as well as questioning the foundations of sexual and racial anxieties. AIDS-inspired late 20th-century and early 21st-century cultural images deconstruct the subject’s biopolitical comfort zone, applying a host of medical and military metaphors as well as images of pain and shame. However, with the arrival of SARS, H1N1, Ebola, Zika and other recent worldwide threats emerging after the millennium, AIDS, the “gay plague” of our times, seems to have lost some of its medical newsworthiness. It started to gain instead an ever more encompassing symbolic potential, expressive of contemporary global security anxieties: “throughout the 1990s a new consensus gradually took hold of the international political community. The AIDS epidemic was no longer a global public health issue [...] but rather the preeminent security threat of the twenty-first century” (Cooper 51), while Susan Sontag also interprets the HIV virus rather as a cultural metaphor of shifting notions of danger, “evil and mutability” in late 20th-century Western culture (*Illness* 153).

Although this disease is far from being a thing of the past, especially in third world countries, the chapter will focus on the crisis of the postmodern Western social body, the product of the socio-medical discourses discussed in the previous chapters on medieval and early modern plague along with Victorian cholera. Recent AIDS literature does testify to its transition from an acute medical problem to a chronic political and increasingly symbolic one, as the chapter will show by reading AIDS-stricken artist figures. The relative decline of public interest in the disease is also reflected by the changing face of Anglo-American AIDS fiction,

where direct political engagement has gradually given way to increasingly metaphorical meanings. AIDS novels as controversial stories of love and loss, passion and becoming a patient can often be interpreted as case studies of interlinked ethical and aesthetic phenomena in interpreting the epidemic. In line with this tradition, my interpretation addresses AIDS fiction as an allegorical representation of 21st-century mortality and the disease's implications of morality, art and precariousness.⁹⁰

I shall read the texts as examples of loss narratives initiating new patterns of aestheticized, that is, artistically grasped coping mechanisms in the face of death and stigmatized homosexuality. The inseparability of the healthy self and the diseased other in the contagious exchanges of AIDS demonstrates that in contemporary Western biopolitics gay people pose a threat to the safety, the political immune system of heteronormative society, resulting that "certain forms of grief become nationally recognized and amplified, whereas other losses become unthinkable and ungrievable" (Butler *Precarious Life* xiv). The comparative reading of Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (2004) and Alfred Corn's *Part of His Story* (1997) aims to examine how the discursive construction of AIDS takes place and fictional space against the backdrop of aesthete gay men's lives in the Thatcherite London of the 1980s, a watershed decade of neo-conservatism, pre-AIDS liberty and post-AIDS anxiety.

The closing chapter of the dissertation thus returns to the questions of somato-spatial boundaries from a 21st-century point of view, emphasising the age-old logic of scapegoating along with the contemporary AIDS-related crisis of immunity and security. In my reading, the AIDS discourse is the condensation and culmination of previous epidemic signifying practices. While the plague⁹¹ has been discussed as the formative disease of the era when collective biopolitical signs were first written on the putrefying skin of the modern individual, and cholera

⁹⁰ The Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) targets the immune system and weakens people's defence systems against infections and some types of cancer. Infected individuals gradually become immunodeficient, results in increased susceptibility to a wide range of infections, cancers and other diseases that people with healthy immune systems can fight off. The most advanced stage of HIV infection is Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS), which can take from 2 to 15 years to develop depending on the individual. Symptoms can be: swollen lymph nodes, weight loss, fever, diarrhoea and cough, tuberculosis, cryptococcal meningitis, severe bacterial infections and cancers such as lymphomas and Kaposi's sarcoma. HIV can be transmitted via the exchange of a variety of body fluids from infected individuals, such as blood, breast milk, semen and vaginal secretions. HIV has claimed more than 35 million lives so far and there were approximately 36.7 million people living with HIV at the end of 2016. There is no cure for HIV infection, however, effective antiretroviral (ARV) drugs can control the virus and help prevent transmission. Between 2000 and 2016, new HIV infections fell by 39%. (WHO „HIV/AIDS“).

⁹¹ Thom Gunn's poems, for instance, blend traditional plague imagery ("In Time of Plague") with contemporary medical vocabulary (immune cells). His poems also illustrate the way mourning and self-reflexivity are caught up with each other in 21st-century memoirs of AIDS: "[t]heir deaths have left me less defined", runs a line of "The J Car". Beside their intertextual links, there seems to be a compelling genetic connection between the plague and AIDS: a genetic mutant of the plague has been identified that "occured in the order of 4,000 years ago and gave today's human carrier of this mutant (called CCR5) immunity against HIV and therefore AIDS" (Cantor 20).

was seen as the collapse of imperial and class margins in the metabolism of the imperial social body, AIDS appears as the postmodern cultural symptom of security anxiety and the ultimate unmaintainability of the Homo Clausus' discrete self. In my interpretation, the prime metaphor of this cluster of symptoms and anxieties is the immune system. The immunological discourse on AIDS shows significant changes in the spatial conception of contagion:

molecular biology, in conjunction with virology and immunology, has given us ways of conceptualizing bodies in terms of their molecular geographies—in terms of networks and pathways, movements and exchanges—with the sort of detail and complexity unimaginable in fourteenth century Venice, or at the time of Typhoid Mary, or even during the influenza pandemic of 1918. (Rose *The Politics of Life Itself* 15)

I shall then argue that AIDS can be seen symbolically as *the* postmodern condition, doing away with the grand narratives of the modern individual's safe boundaries and borders within an essentially permeable world of biological and informational viruses.

(Homo)sexual identities and the cultural spaces of AIDS

The emergence of the AIDS pandemic demonstrated once and for all that sexuality is coextensive with the political, medical and social realms of life, even though “the most commonly held twentieth-century assumptions about sexuality imply that it is a separate category of existence (like ‘the economy’, or ‘the state’, other supposedly independent spheres of reality), almost identical with the sphere of private life” (Padgug 18). Such insights about the interpenetration of power structures and sexual behaviours have become commonplaces by today in cultural studies, largely as a result of Foucault's oeuvre.⁹² Foucault's ideas on the inescapable politicization of the private body also entail that power practices make the self, as well as its personal space, essentially permeable. As shown earlier, the rigorous demarcation line that, especially since the 19th century, has conventionally divided the private, intimate, sexual, passive, feminized realm of the subject from the public, open, masculine, active, political one was already undermined by the cholera discourse. However, the cultural imagery of AIDS as an epidemic of polluted and polluting sexual behaviours (as Simon Watney's *Policing Desire: AIDS, Pornography, and the Media* also argues), while carrying on the moralising of disease, differs both from the representational history of plague as a collective divine punishment and cholera as the scourge of the filthy underclasses. With the arrival of

⁹² Foucault himself was openly gay and one of the earliest victims of AIDS. His untimely death in 1984 kept him from finishing his groundbreaking research on biopolitics.

AIDS in the early 1980s, the personal thus became more political and sexualized than ever. Especially so for gay people, as Foucault puts it: “[w]hat is interesting about male homosexuality today [...] is that their sexual relations are immediately translated into social relations and the social relations are understood as sexual relations” (interview in “The Subject and Power” 139).

After the liberation movements of the 60s, the still subcultural coupledness of gay people increasingly proved that sexual identity is a social construction, dependent on available subject positions in the given biopolitical context, where “‘homosexual’ and ‘heterosexual’ behaviour may be universal; homosexual and heterosexual identity and consciousness are modern realities” (Padgug 22). These identities are targeted symbolically by the epidemic of (homo)phobic body border control. Notions like “lifestyle choice”, “high risk sexual behaviour” and “men who have sex with men” tell a great deal about the politically hypercorrect and increasingly securitized culture of the West. The backlash against gay liberation clearly showed that queer culture is still habitually scapegoated by the overt and covert heteronormative practices of mainstream society. In the United States, serious debates have arisen concerning the amount of federal money spent on AIDS research, it was even called a “a privileged disease”, however, as early as 1991 it was pointed out that, ironically, AIDS “is now rapidly becoming a ‘post-popular’ cause without ever having truly engaged widespread public support” (*Citizens Commission on AIDS for New York City and New Jersey*, 1991, qtd. in Jonsen 295).

As a result of such ideological tendencies, the HIV positive gay male as the ultimate security threat to the health of the Western social body has become the target of global pollution prevention, partially occupying the discursive position of the syphilitic Victorian streetwalker, already mentioned in the cholera chapter: “on the phallogocentric model male homosexuality is also produced as abject. The gay male body appears from this point of view as a site of permeability and potential leakage, because it is connoted through a cloacal and non-phallic, or not exclusively phallic erotics, that of anality” (Waldby 44). The leaking body of the homosexual urban male is incompatible with the early modern subject learning to define and maintain its boundaries, nor is it identical with the cholera-stricken working class or colonised subaltern body in the late 20th-century discourse on pollution. As a result, gay sexuality became a cultural and sexual taboo once again after the mid-80s,⁹³ as Susan Sontag also argues: “cancerphobia taught us the fear of polluting environment; now we have the fear of polluting

⁹³ Postmodern queer studies are not the focus of the present research, see for instance Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Lee Edelman’s *Homographesis* (1994), Diana Fuss’s *Inside/Out* (1991), David Halperin’s *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Saint Foucault* (1989), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet and Tendencies* (1993), and Michael Warner’s *Fear of a Queer Planet* (1993).

people” (*AIDS* 159). All epidemics conjure up culturally changing notions of pollution and the necessary separation, economization of self and other, inside and outside. The cultural symptomatology of AIDS can be especially useful in identifying the mechanisms that influence the creation of such political, economic and medical boundaries, since “AIDS, like an earthquake, moves along the fault lines of our society, and becomes a metaphor for understanding that society” (Mary Catherine Bateson and Richard Goldsby: *Thinking AIDS: The Social Response to the Biological Threat*, qtd. in Feldman 239).

AIDS as the epidemic of always already polluted and “diseased” homosexuals⁹⁴ (and poor, unhygienic, miscegenation-stricken Africans) was constructed as a direct result of what was seen as excessive and non-productive sexual overconsumption in the era of late capitalism, a metaphorical closed circuit of contaminated exchanges: the sexual sphere is considered the realm of consumption, the public sphere that of production; the former is sometimes viewed as the site of use value and the latter as that of exchange value. Sexuality is the realm of “nature”, of the individual, and of biology; the public sphere is the realm of culture, society, and history” (Padgug 17). The limited economy of gay sexuality thus seems to be punished for its passivity and infertility with a deadly disease targeting desire—the very locus of the modern subject’s identity.

AIDS also problematizes the moral frontier of the state and the self, production and consumption, and the boundaries between personal culpability and government intervention. As a cultural diagnosis it is connected to processes of Othering, as the initial “three H theory” of AIDS shows, blaming homosexuals, hookers and Haitians for the disease. Thus, people with inappropriately permeable bodily margins become the faceless, filthy bodies of globalised AIDS. Along with the shrinking of the global village, increased contact and protection seem to create a nostalgia for colonialist hygiene: “[t]he boundaries of nation-states, however, are increasingly permeable by all kinds of flows. Nothing can bring back the hygienic shields of colonial boundaries. The age of globalization is the age of universal contagion. (Hardt & Negri 136).

In terms of national geopolitical spaces—whether one considers the medical, political or artistic reactions to AIDS—, the United States seems to have produced the largest amount of this contagious discourse, while the British situation has never been regarded as comparably

⁹⁴ “Sodomy” was only decriminalized in Britain in 1967, which partly explains why the “gay plague” metaphor was so lasting: “[t]he plague metaphor for AIDS, for example, is now so routine that we cannot really say how meaningful it is unless we can examine exactly how and where it is deployed, how it is understood, and how it is acted on. The apocalypse metaphor functions very differently in the history of formulations about AIDS in Africa, in contrast to formulations about AIDS in the West or to formulations about AIDS by Africans” (Treichler *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic?* 172).

serious. Also, the political and cultural feedback on AIDS in the United Kingdom shows markedly different patterns from the US heritage. The major difference between American and British AIDS fiction seems to be the presence or absence of a direct, explicitly political, activist tone. The best of American AIDS writing evinces strong testimonial-like traits, suggesting the self-made man's desperate attempt to reinvent its frontiers in the form of a personal pathography, while in British literature AIDS rarely takes centre stage, usually combined as it is with other issues, such as the Zeitgeist of the Thatcherite 80s (as the reading of the Hollinghurst novel will show), a countercultural social critique (Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting*, 1993), a melancholic family saga (Colm Tóibín's *The Blackwater Lightship*, 1999), or an artist's existential self-reflection (Adam Mars Jones' *Monopolies of Loss*, 1992; Will Self's *Dorian, an Imitation*, 2002).⁹⁵ In the two novels to be analysed here Englishness itself is closely caught up with the depiction of AIDS, which allows the texts to reflect on various kinds of otherness. The novels feature all the above mentioned kinds of otherness, be they sexual, national, racial or class-related, sharing a common ground: the gay protagonist appears as an outsider wherever he goes, whatever he does—his life is always already a sin, as *The Pet Shop Boys*' iconic 1987 hit suggests. The world of art seems to be their escapist, hyper-individualized answer to their outcast status, which does not offer a real sublimation of their suffering. This seems to support Sontag's argument, which contrasts AIDS with the romanticized, elevated image of 19th-century consumption as the condition of the poet genius' creative mind: "but with AIDS [...] no compensatory mythology has arisen" (*Illness* 109). The central moral, existential and socio-cultural question of *The Line of Beauty* and *Party of His Story* all boil down to the questions whether the love of art can make anyone truly immune to the loss of life.

⁹⁵ A few examples from the US tradition: Randy Shilts's *And the Band Played On* (1987), family sagas like Alice Hoffman's *At Risk* (1988), Robert Ferro's *Second Son* (1989); elegies for lost loved ones like Paul Monette's *Love Alone* and *Borrowed Time* (1988, 1989); autobiographical works like Eric Michaels' *Unbecoming* (1997), Richard Berkowitz's *Stayin Alive* (2003), blistering critiques like Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* (1985), pastoral evocations of the risk-free past like Andrew Holleran's *Ground Zero* (1989). One could also mention stage plays such as William Hoffman's *As Is* (1985), Robert Chesley's *Jerker* (1986), Alan Bowne's *Beirut: Falsettoland* (1990) (Goldstein 18). See also Paul Reed's *Facing It: A Novel of A.I.D.S.* (1984), Samuel R. Delany's *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals* (1985), Toby Johnson's futuristic and dystopian *Plague: A Novel about Healing* (1987), *The World Can Break Your Heart* (1984) by Daniel Curzon, *The Wrong Apple* (1988) by David Rees, *Genocide: The Anthology* (1989) by Tim Barrus, and *Gardy and Erin* (1989) by Jeff Black, Christopher Bram's *In Memory of Angel Clare* (1989), Sarah Schulman's *People in Trouble* (1990) and *Rat Bohemia* (1995), Alice Hoffman's *At Risk* (1988), James McCourt's *Time Remaining* (1993) and Jonathan Larson's *Rent* (1989). In poetry, one should mention *Poets for Life: Seventy-Six Poets Respond to AIDS* (edited in 1989 by Michael Klein) and *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men* (edited in 1991 by Essex Hemphill), Robert Boucheron's *Epitaphs for the Plague Dead* (1985), Paul Monette's *Love Alone: 18 Elegies for Rog* (1988), Walter Holland's *A Journal of the Plague Years* (1992), Mark Doty's *Atlantis* (1995), and Essex Hemphill's collection of prose and poetry *Ceremonies* (1992) (Byrne *Encyclopedia* 14-15).

A Disturbing Guest: The Pharmakos, Immunity and Elitism in *The Line of Beauty*

“Do we have to do the section on risky sex?” Margaret Thatcher’s memo on Health Secretary Norman Fowler’s AIDS awareness campaign plan, 1986 (Nick Higham, *BBC News*)

The Line of Beauty portrays the boom society of 1980s London, narrating the decade of the start of the AIDS scare from the point of view of a middle-class gay Oxford graduate, Nick Guest, who lives in the posh house of his Oxford friend’s Tory MP father, Gerald Fedden. The classy lifestyle of high society is chronicled in the period between 1983 and 1987: the first major section starts in 1983, before the appearance of AIDS, and then the narrative suddenly switches to 1986, the year of the outbreak of the epidemic. In terms of genre, the novel can be approached on several levels, being a postmodern historical novel of the 1980s upper classes’ general atmosphere, a richly layered intertextual homage to Henry James, and an uncannily vivid elaboration on the emergence of AIDS in Britain.

The Line of Beauty occupies a special position in the openly gay author’s oeuvre⁹⁶ as this is the first book in which Hollinghurst addresses the problem of AIDS, the disease that surely made an impact on his formative years as a writer: “the sequencing of his novels, all written after the outbreak of AIDS in England means that it is only in a third novel when a death from the complications of AIDS is first reported, and a fourth when a central figure dies from the virus” (Johnson, Allan 154). *The Line of Beauty* is thus a first, delayed attempt on Hollinghurst’s part to speak about the disease as a contemporary crisis, and maybe this is why the story goes back to the very beginnings of the epidemic in Britain, carefully mapping the social milieu of the Thatcherite 80s. In an interview, Hollinghurst admitted his fascination with the hidden lives behind the apparent wealth of Kensington houses, where he sets the story:

I wanted to do something about a fallible individual and the implosion of the Tory world of power and money which seduces him at the start. The whole idea, when I look back

⁹⁶ Alan Hollinghurst is increasingly regarded as one of the most “English” contemporary writers, since his novels often thematize various layers of English cultural heritage—his latest volume, *The Stranger’s Child* (2011), for example, reworks both the institution of the country house and the literary tradition of the poetry of the Great War. However, he is best known as a gay writer and potentially the finest stylist of his generation. His novels always manage to speak about homosexual identities from a new socio-historical perspective. Beside Evelyn Waugh’s critical and often nostalgic view of Englishness in *Brideshead Revisited*, he is also greatly influenced by Henry James. All the above mentioned thematic and stylistic trademarks partly come from the author’s background in elite education and gay subcultures, since he studied and taught for several years at Magdalen College, Oxford, where he wrote an unpublished M. Litt. thesis on homosexuality in the novels of E. M. Forster (Canning 331). Thus, he belongs to the ever larger group of contemporary British novelists who have an academic background, including Sarah Waters, Claire Clark (the author of the already quoted *The Great Stink*), A. S. Byatt or Patricia Duncker.

on it, seems coupled in my mind with an image of Kensington Park Gardens, which is a longish, wide, treeless street. When I first came to London I lived at a friend's flat in Notting Hill, and I used to walk along that grand street [...] it was dingier in those days and rather different from the gleaming millionaire's row it is now. But I used to wonder what sorts of lives were led in those tall houses. (Yeager 310)

Maybe this outsider's (aptly called a "a cuckoo in the nest" by the critic Alex Clark) obsession with the mysteriousness of the curtained elite world is why spatial and chronological distancing is one of the text's most powerful strategies in grasping the essence of the emergent AIDS era. The strategies of distancing are inseparable from the role of the aesthetic sphere, seen as a defensive screen erected in the face of mourning a sexual, cultural and political golden age that might have never existed. Nick Guest's love for beautiful things and his often unspecified longings are primarily manifested in his escapist and conspicuous consumption of high art, popular culture, luxury drugs and gay sex, while his otherness in sexual and class terms keeps him from ever truly being initiated into these elite pleasures. As the backdrop of all this, the spatial politics of the Feddens' town and country houses as well as London's cultural geography from Kensington to Notting Hill metaphorically stand for this idealized, desired and much protected lifestyle of the pre-AIDS world.

The somato-spatial politics of the pharmakos

AIDS is different from the previously discussed epidemics in that it is initially just a condition: being HIV infected means that the body becomes easily penetrable for other, potentially dangerous viruses and opportunistic infections. The HIV virus is thus not the disease itself yet, but it opens the way for various diseases, just like's Nick presence in the Fedden house makes the family symbolically vulnerable to the invasion of otherness. The appearance of the disease is later symbolically identified with Nick's ambivalent position in the Feddens' life. Eventually, the immune system of the elite fails to recognize and effectively eliminate the "enemy". Nick is initially seen as a safe antibody who is used to support the family but later becomes an anti- or foreign body. His name already suggests Nick Guest's liminal position in the family saga and marks him as a parasitical figure who exists in relation to and feeding off his "hosts". From the family's perspective, the point of his being there is partly to serve them by protecting their unstable, suicidal daughter to whom the gay man obviously does not pose any sexual or economic threat (and neither to the heterosexual son, Toby, for whom Nick has a Platonic love). Nick thus embodies the contagious, phobic contact between the gay subculture in Thatcher's London and the privileged life of a Tory politician's family. Although originally a caretaking,

nursing-healer figure, he is increasingly identified as a disease (or at least the carrier of a disease), a scapegoat, and this othering process culminates in his expulsion from the body of the house, that is, the immune system of The Establishment. His place in the family and the house can thus be read as a social metaphor of the medical mechanism of AIDS itself.

In the light of these insights, he can also be interpreted as a *pharmakos* figure in the Derridean sense: simultaneously a healer and a poisoner. According to Jacques Derrida's *Plato's Pharmacy*, the *pharmakon* in ancient Greek culture was a double-edged term meaning a "remedy", "recipe," "poison", "drug", and "philter" at the same time (71), just as the figure of the *pharmakos* could function as a magician, a sorcerer, but also a poisoner (117). The ambivalent *pharmakos* figures were often used as human sacrifice in times of plague or other crises. Derrida interprets their symbolic functions in the following way:

[t]he character of the *pharmakos* has been compared to a scapegoat. The in- and the outside, the expulsion of the evil, its exclusion out of the body (and out) of the city- these are the two major senses of the character and of the ritual. [...] The city's body proper thus reconstitutes its unity, closes around the security of its inner courts, gives back to itself the word that links it with itself within the confines of the agora, by violently excluding from its territory the representative of an external threat or aggression. That representative represents the otherness of the evil that comes to affect or infect the inside by unpredictably breaking into it. Yet the representative of the outside is nonetheless constituted, regularly granted its place by the community, chosen, kept, fed, etc. , in the very heart of the inside. These parasites were as a matter of course domesticated by the living organism that housed them at its expense. The Athenians regularly maintained a number of degraded and useless beings at the public expense; and when any calamity, such as plague, drought, or famine, befell the city, they sacrificed two of these outcasts as scapegoats. (60)

As Jennifer Cooke explains when using the notion to interpret plague images in contemporary culture, the *pharmakos*' function is thus that it "symbolically carries plague outside the city and this expulsion marks the equal symbolic catharsis of the polluted population" (82), s/he is an embodiment of infection and centripetal movement, a source of communal catharsis:

[t]he *pharmakos*, like the *pharmakon*, muddles the very distinctions which it is intended to enforce: the scapegoat which the city casts beyond its walls is supposed to secure the city by placing outside what is actually a part of the inside and its very constitution –

the pharmakos, after all, is chosen from among the people. At the same time, plague and evil are also, even today, seen to come from without, poisoning the inside from outside the walls or boundaries of a country, nation or town. The stability of inside/outside distinctions and those which follow on from them, such as health/sickness and physician/poisoner, are shaken and questionable in the light of the pharmakos. (79)

The pharmakos is the one who secures the maintenance of proper boundaries in the social body precisely by transgressing them with its otherness and by breaking the taboo: “like the pharmakos, taboo exists to enforce distinctions, to maintain purity or separate impurity, and it achieves this through a similar muddying of the literal with the metaphorical” (88). The classical figure of the pharmakos is the embodiment of abject otherness, which needs to be integrated and acknowledged within the social body; however, it never ceases to be expendable, and when the social body becomes dangerously precarious, the Other figure is scapegoated, expelled, sacrificed to restore the inner order of the system. This is precisely Nick’s role within the somato-spatial politics of the elite: he is used by the family as a protective agent against their own inner instabilities and an exotic entertaining device, who at the same time represents dangerous sexual, social and cultural contamination and AIDS.

The biopolitical scenario of London as a (metro)polis is juxtaposed to the representation of party politics as both the most visible and encompassing metaphor of power hierarchies in the novel. Right in the first lines we see a shopwindow through which Nick is curiously looking at a book entitled *Landslide*, a history of the previous election won by Margaret Thatcher: “[t]he pale-gilt image of the triumphant Prime Minister rushed towards the customer in a gleaming slippage” (Hollinghurst 3). Thus, the opening puts the history of the present symbolically into focus. The constructedness of the transparent shopwindow spectacle is the context where the present, which is soon to become history/commodity, is taking place and teasingly invites Nick as a viewer, as a guest, to consume the bestseller, but never actually allows him to be part of it. This episode establishes Nick’s dramatic role all throughout the narrative: ironically, critically, desirously gazing and participating, but not properly belonging or possessing. He eventually enters the bookshop and cannot resist looking up Gerald Fedden in the book, and then leaves the shop “with a shrug; but out in the street he felt delayed pride at this sighting of a person he knew in a published book” (4). Without Nick’s appreciative spectatorship and role-playing, the whole scenario would have no meaning at all. However, his outsider identity can never break the glass ceiling of the heterosexual and heteronormative political and social elite he masquerades as an accepted actor of. The contrast between the elite on display and his closeted gay identity serves as the basis in an exploration of the faultlines of 80s Thatcherite society, its

transparent but tangible layers of moral duplicity. As a result, fantasies, art and drugs provide the middle class Nick's only keys to this brave new world. For all his unbelonging, Nick's cultural capital provides him with a relatively protected position, as he is writing his PhD on Henry James' style—a horrendously huge topic fitting his fascination with objects of beauty. He is, thus, a professional reader appreciating and assessing other people's creations and properties, something not unlike his window shopping in the opening scene. As opposed to this, the Feddens' financial and class capital occupy radically different symbolic realms, and Nick is unable to exchange his low class, high culture heritage for this kind of empowerment.

One of the personifications of power is the figure of Thatcher, whose presence in the novel remains mostly indirect or metonymic, a series of isolated moments like her appearance on the book cover in the bookshop scene. We normally only hear or have a short glimpse of her, which is a perfect representation not only of the workings of her elevated neo-conservative reform politics but also Foucault's notion of power permeating the micro-levels of reality.⁹⁷ Her presence based on personal absence in the novel echoes her real life reaction to the AIDS epidemic, her distancing of sexuality as an ultimately "private" matter.⁹⁸ For instance, she refused to spend public money on AIDS research:

[h]er biographer, Hugo Young, records his impression of the event: 'The Prime Minister's veto on public money appeared to derive from an instinctive distaste for invasion of heterosexual privacy—although homosexuals were fair game. Her decision was never explicitly defended. It simply happened, without a public rationale and without the relevant minister, in possession of the scientific facts, feeling able to challenge it. (Street 229-230)

In general, Thatcher's attitude towards the disease as a medical and moral crisis can be described as dismissive and repressive: "one of the most distinctive features of Mrs Thatcher's influence on AIDS policy is her apparent lack of interest" (234). In contrast with her attitude

⁹⁷The metonymical depiction of Thatcher as a source of authority often appears in the British literature and cinema thematising the decade, for example in Steve McQueen's *Hunger* and Stephen Daldry's *Billy Elliot* through radio speeches. In literature, Ian McEwan's *The Child in Time* uses the same technique.

⁹⁸ When the epidemic appeared in Britain, the *Guardian* published its famous article claiming that "the real plague was panic" (Berridge *AIDS and Contemporary History* 26). Considering statistical data about the British outbreak, one can see that the country never had a large-scale spread of the disease: in 1993 there were 8000 new cases, in 1983 29, in 1984 106, in 1985 171, in 1986 610, and in 1989 2000. Britain thus never had a truly uncontrollable AIDS crisis: "over the past decade AIDS has passed through three stages: an initial period from 1981 to 1986 of surprise and shock, with relatively little official action, succeeded in 1986-7 by a brief period of 'war-time emergency' when politicians publicly intervened and AIDS was officially established as a high level national emergency" (3).

towards such unmentionable topics, later PMs apparently felt the delayed social pressure of acknowledging the problem: “her successor, almost immediately, reversed her policy on compensation for haemophiliacs. In doing so, John Major showed that political intervention need not work negatively” (235). Consequently, it can be argued that in the early 90s AIDS was both being mainstreamed and marginalized in the country (Berridge *AIDS in the UK* 8). *The Line of Beauty*, published in 2004, is thus in the position to look back on two decades of political and cultural reactions to the AIDS problem from the vantage point of the post-AIDS-scare era.

Thatcher’s ambiguous presence in the novel is encapsulated by the ball scene, when, after careful diplomatic manoeuvres, The Lady finally appears in the Feddens’ home in person. When the cocainee-loaded Nick is the first to daringly ask The Lady to dance midst the envious gazes of Tory politicians and the flashing lights of tabloid journalists, his relationship with the owner of the house and the Head of Government as authority figures is sarcastically and spectacularly staged. His perfect pastiche is preceded by in the novel by the shocking scene of drug sniffing and gay sex in the toilet. Nick’s moment of glory on the dancefloor is later powerfully contrasted with Gerald Fedden’s subsequent affected dance downstairs with the Lady. At this point, Nick learns to play the elite power game but maintains his ironical—and aesthetic—distance from it. When the next day he is looking at his own photos with The Lady in the tabloid papers, the power of politics and representation becomes a personal success story for him: he successfully managed to masquerade as one of “them”. However, for Nick, serious politics is just the field of “male conspiracy” (Hollinghurst 123), implying a heterosexual hierarchy.

As the ball scene suggests, it is the Feddens’ Kensington house which is the central spatial image of class position and the well-guarded immunity of the rich. Probably the most important problem the house represents is “a conflation of public and private space” (Yeager 311), portraying how the personal is political and vice versa. Nick lives here as an invited guest, a friend of Toby’s, the Fedden’s only son’s, being more than a lodger but less than a family member, and his position somewhat resembles what the cholera chapter argued about the polluting figure of the house servant based on Anne McClintock’s ideas. At the beginning, we read that in the absence of the family who are on holiday “Nick was in residence, and almost, he felt in possession” (Hollinghurst 5), and that experiences like this help him “to steep himself in the difficult romance of the family” (13). This romance, however, by which he is fascinated, is in fact the Feddens’ collective narcissism—the story’s strongest link to *Brideshead Revisited*. As the text later emphasises: “what always held him was the family’s romance of itself” (77). Later, “their return marked the end of his custodianship, and his real pleasure in seeing them again was stained with a kind of sadness he associated with adolescence, sadness of time flying

and missed opportunities. He was keen for a word of gratitude to ease the mysterious ache” (21). This early example of nostalgic longing shows that Nick is always almost childishly yearning to become part of this family romance, to be acknowledged and incorporated as an insider, but he is elegantly, though consistently denied this: “as an outsider, he had no pet name” (22) even.

Despite Nick’s idealizing view, there are early signs of the Feddens’ imperfection: they keep joking about the “other woman” in Gerald’s life, meaning The Lady, while, as it later turns out, there is actually another other woman in the picture, Gerald’s secretary, and he is also involved in shady tax evasion scams. Fedden comes across as the kind of arrogant Tory politician and patriarchal father figure who wants to win in all situations, even at the country fair of his own constituency – ending up with a pig as the prize in a scene of Orwellian irony. When it turns out that Gerald is using a “fuck-flat,” and because of Nick’s homosexuality, scandal-mongering headlines suggest connections between AIDS, gay sex and his sacred family home, the family façade finally seems to crumble. Still, Gerald gets away with all that in the end, with his machismo masculinity and social position intact. It is as if Nick were suffering for the sins of the whole family, being grotesquely transformed into a little queer lamb, but above all, a parasite becoming a *pharmakos* who provides a questionable moral catharsis, a hypocritical purification for the family. In Roberto Esposito’s words, “the *pharmakos* is what is opposed to its other not by excluding it, but, on the contrary, by incorporating and vicariously substituting it (*Immunitas* 127).

Politics is intrinsically connected to the representation of social class, an invisible but still ubiquitous system of demarcations, insides and outsides, the boundaries of a safely guarded self and an invasive other. Nick as a member of the gay subculture is the direct opposite of this, as queer culture permeates and thus threatens social class boundaries. The elite always succeeds in reproducing itself, like a virus, actually, while the gay characters of the story keep dying. Even though Nick seems to share the Feddens’ active social life and many of their exclusive pleasures, his closeted male gay body is just as separated, isolated as the epidemic itself should ideally be. For instance, when Nick is walking with Leo, his very first male lover, a young, working class black man towards the Kensington house, Nick suddenly becomes aware of the “the hill as a social metaphor” (Hollinghurst 166), that is, his own outer perspective of the scene, or when we learn that Nick’s middle-class father, who is a clock-maker, visits country houses only to wind up the vintage clocks, as a guest, just like his son at the Feddens. However, Nick’s gradual coming out and the outbreak of AIDS explode decent, pre-existing social and medical boundaries both in the house and the social body.

Beside class positions, financial capital serves as another tangible embodiment, an economic metaphor of power. *The Line of Beauty* repeatedly makes references to the huge gap between “the patina of old money” (33) and dubious new money, represented by families like the Lebanese Ouradis. Wani Ouradi is also Nick’s Oxford mate and gay lover, whose patriarchal father wants his son to continue the family business (a franchise of grocery shops), the business empire he had built up from scratch as a penniless immigrant. But when even Wani dies of AIDS, the disease seemingly becomes the great leveller in terms of chances of survival, recalling the random ruthlessness of the plague times.⁹⁹ It is thus not only Leo, the lower class black character who gets it from the toilet seat in the office from Socialists—this, at least, is the fear of Leo’s deeply religious mother (408). Nick’s class outcast identity is finally unveiled when he drives the dying, weak Wani back to his parents’ luxurious mansion: “they forgot their manners, and the door was closed again without anyone saying goodbye.” (442). This scene is resemblant of the atmosphere of *Great Expectations*, and leaves the aching Nick at the gate of yet another ever-desired, ever-disappointing Satis House, foreshadowing the novel’s end, when the gates of the elite are slammed in his face for good. While the poor, uneducated, black Leo and the rich, Oxford-educated, Arab Wani both die of AIDS, the white, middle class academic, Nick, still seems to be immune to it, potentially due to his aesthetic shield of viewing the world around him.

Money and disease are also interconnected via the use of the word “possession” in the novel. When on holiday with the Feddens in France, Nick contemplates the true nature of wealth as something still foreign and all the more desirable to him. When it turns out that Toby has no idea how much property he actually owns in France and cannot recall having a woodyard, Nick is green with envy: “it struck him that a sign of real possession was a sort of negligence, was to have an old woodyard you’d virtually forgotten about” (310). This idea echoes bitterly with the possession of his own physical capital, his own ability to be forgetful of his health in the Gadamerian sense, a luxury he only learns to cherish when it is already at risk. Nick only uses (and does not possess) an attic room in the Fedden house, a culturally loaded place of repression, raising the question of the containability of dangerous sexual material. Nick’s pharmakos-like place in the house also evokes cultural images of the Victorian madwoman, and just like hysteria, homosexuality proves uncontainable and unmentionable for majority society, an inner otherness collectively projected on something inferior and pathologized. Catherine, Toby’s sister is the only Fedden who at least occasionally speaks the embarrassing truth: “poor old

⁹⁹ Wani’s racial otherness, his Eastern alienness is part of Nick’s orientalist fascination, him “being both English and exotic, like so many things he loved” (200), as if Nick saw him as just another beautiful, hybrid art object.

Nick, you always get the worst room” (341), she tells him on the family holiday in France, jokingly but earnestly acknowledging his consistent marginalisation.

The crisis that necessitates the appearance of the pharmakos is also embodied in Catherine. She seems to be closer to Nick than to anybody in her own family, and her bipolar disorder—which would surely have been called “hysteria” a hundred years before—seems to express the family unconscious: her wellbeing is the price of the hypocritical extravagance they live in. Despite the seriousness of her condition, her symptoms are continuously swept under the carpet, no family member can even remember the name of her psychiatric medicine: they keep calling it Librium, while Nick keeps correcting them that it is actually Lithium. This collective Freudian slip might also suggest that they unconsciously want to liberate themselves from Cath’s otherness, while Nick is there to create balance by allowing them to forget about her. Just like Isobella’s “hysteria” in *Sweet Thames*, Cath’s bipolar disorder is also a social as much as a physical disease. At the very end, when, one by one, the family members all blame Nick for the scandal of Gerald’s sexual affair and tax evasion, there is not even a goodbye scene with Cath: she stays out of his ousting completely as a silenced and damaged voice of disagreement. Even though she is the one who tells the press about the dirty family laundry, including Nick’s private life, it is not Nick she wants to destroy but the vital lie of the family romance. However, the central but still marginalized figures of a new epidemic, the madwoman and the gay man cannot eventually subvert social, family and house order. Nick’s attempt to get inside is futile, while Cath cannot break free from the fetters of her elite bondage.

As opposed to the control of the house and Nick’s inferior attic room, the communal garden in Kensington is an ambivalent space of (be)longing for him, the scene of his first sexual encounter with Leo. Nick can enter the utopian garden because he is also a “keyholder”. The communal gardens were as much part of Nick’s romance of London as the house itself: “big as the central park of some old European city, but private, and densely hedged on three sides with holly and shrubbery behind high Victorian railings” (15). The garden, however, is also part of the house: he can enter it without having to go out into the street, but it also provides a natural, less ordered counterpoint to it. In Nick’s whole homosexual career Leo seems to be the only one who truly loved him, and this lost paradise of the first love is closely connected with the memories of the secret, forbidden garden. This private paradise, however, is again just an illusion of Nick’s established place in the world surrounding it beyond the high iron railings. Nick initially finds his own (sexual) marginality exciting, as his first date with Leo in the communal garden shows: “so there they were, two men on a summer night, with nowhere to call their own. There was a kind of romance to that” (35). Nick uses the word romance again to describe their spatial-sexual dislocation, just like he calls his often abusive relationship with the

Feddens a romance, implying a utopian approach to his own existential problems. Despite his gayness and virginity, Nick never comes across as passive or feminized even in this early scene, and when a passer-by asks Nick if he belongs there, he is showing his key “in an act of phallic irony” (Yeager 313), thereby achieving a temporary possession of the night garden. This first sexual encounter perfectly embodies the carefree, pre-AIDS era of sexual freedom in 80s London,¹⁰⁰ and the garden itself suggests a simultaneous sense of being outside of culture and in the very centre of it. Later, in the middle of the ecstatic act, Nick has a sudden, uneasy flash of heteronormative self-reflection: “Nick was more and more seriously absorbed, but then just before he came he had a brief vision of himself, as if the trees and bushes have rolled away and all the lights of London shone in on him: little Nick Guest from Barwick, Don and Dot Guest’s boy, fucking a stranger in a Notting Hill garden at night” (40). The sexual double standard in his own mind makes it very difficult for him to be forgetful of himself, his healthy sexual body. He is acutely aware of this doubleness in his class background as well when remarking about his small hometown that “statistically there ought to be five or six hundred homos in Barwick, hidden away, more or less, behind these shopfronts and unreadable upper windows” (286). His rebellion against being closeted also appears whenever he feels an outsider, when “the great heterosexual express” (65) is quickly leaving him behind without an established marital or professional status. He is left behind as a dislocated gay man, a middle-class offspring, an aspiring scholar who seems to be one of the “also rans” in too many walks of life. His taboo sexual encounter in the partly private, partly public space of the communal garden can also be read as the symbolic repetition of the unavoidable inclusion and abjection of gay bodies in heteronormative culture:

[s]ince anal and oral sex among men clearly establishes certain kinds of bodily permeabilities unsanctioned by the hegemonic order, male homosexuality would, within such a hegemonic point of view, constitute a site of danger and pollution, prior to and regardless of the cultural presence of AIDS. [...] Significantly, being “outside” the hegemonic order does not signify being “in” a state of filthy and untidy nature. Paradoxically, homosexuality is almost always conceived within the homophobic signifying economy as both uncivilized and unnatural.” (Butler *Gender Trouble* 180)

The irony of this abjection is that homosexuality is well-known to be an integral part of aristocratic, Oxbridge culture as well (see the controversial institution of faggot, for instance),

¹⁰⁰The recent film *Pride* (2014), on the other hand, shows how difficult it was in a countryside mining town to even address the topic.

as the visit to the country house (another cultural institution of The Establishment) of Mrs. Fedden's eccentric uncle suggests. The elderly, erudite bachelor's gayness is an obvious but unmentionable fact within the family. The country house trip coincides with the Notting Hill carnival, which would mean a kind of coming out for Nick, as "Notting Hill as an area popular in the post-war years among gay men looking for furnished rooms to rent" (Yeager 311). Nick thus has to choose between participating in the subversive grotesqueness of the queer carnival in the capital and playing his part in the elite performance in the country. He chooses the latter, the upper part of his body can show off his erudition, while the lower registers of his identity remain uncarnivalised. The cultural geography of London thus becomes a map of Nick's evolving queer identity, where he first wants to put himself on the high class map. For Nick, coming from the provincial town of Barwick, London is a space where he can juggle with his different identities: as Matt Houlbrook suggests in *Queer London*, for the gay individual the city is both a utopia and a dystopia" (qtd. in Yeager 311). At this point the carnival and the country house appear as equally alluring and utopian spaces of satisfying Nick's desires—sexual and social, which seem to exclude each other.

Finally, just like in the case of the pharmakos, Nick's expulsion takes place during a communal crisis, when Gerald's sexual and financial deceptions are revealed in the gutter press. The Feddens blame it all on Nick's AIDS-tainted scandals and kick him out. As a result, normality and order are seemingly restored, the house evacuates its waste material, the pharmakos, who is needed to re-establish the dodgy boundaries of self and other:

[t]he ceremony of the pharmakos is thus played out on the boundary line between inside and outside [...] The origin of difference and division, the pharmakos represents evil both introjected and projected. Beneficial insofar as he cures-and for that, venerated and cared for-harmful insofar as he incarnates the powers of evil-and for that, feared and treated with caution. Alarming and calming. Sacred and accursed. (Derrida 133)

Still, it is in fact not Nick who is diseased or who is disease itself: he merely catalyses the decomposing processes of the elite masquerade. The exclusion of his polluted body from the spaces of the elite is a ritualistic rejection of reality in order to maintain the Feddens' vital lie of the family romance and to clean their precarious boundaries from the stigma of AIDS.

The lost young men of the 80s: immunity and the containing of otherness

Connected to the contagious nature of the pharmakos elaborated on in the previous section, *The Line of Beauty* can be read along the metaphoric lines of the immune system,¹⁰¹ an obvious metaphor in AIDS fiction, but one which in Hollinghurst's novel is indirectly projected onto the notions of class as well. Nick is like the HIV virus itself masquerading in the host's body, he is the disturbing guest, the unwelcome stranger, the all-too-knowing outsider who wants to enjoy the elitist immunity provided by the family. The transgression of self and other, public and private spaces which play a focal role in the novel, and at the same time the conflation of these dichotomous realms takes place as well, showing it the "host" itself has always already been fatally ill.

In order to read Nick as a symbolic anti-body in the story, the metaphors of the immune system within the AIDS discourse needs to be briefly examined. The basic insight in connection with this problem is that ideologies of medical normalization are politically loaded.¹⁰² What could be called the "cultural emphasis on the immune system" (Williams 36) "has moved to the very centre of the way ordinary people now think of death. People are reaching for a way of imagining a fluid, ever-changing body, a body containing turbulence and instability, in constant motion, a body that is the antithesis of a rigid mechanical set of parts" (36). Donna Haraway also argues in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*

¹⁰¹ Immunity is originally an Anglo-Norman legal term, deriving from the Latin *immunitas*, which indicates a privilege that grants exemption from certain duties or obligations (Hammill 88). The etymology of the word goes back to the Roman times: "[t]he standard etymology of the word immunity crystallizes this productive yet paradoxical turn. Immunity derives from the Latin (im+ munis) where the root *munis*, from which municipal also derives, gestures towards responsibility for 'shared duties, charges, or services'. In its original Roman usage, *munis* signified a range of possible social practices and obligations: service, function, duty, gift, favor, kindness, tax; public entertainment, gladiatorial show, tribute (to the dead), rite, sacrifice, public office" (Cohen "Metaphorical Immunity" 152). Thus, the history of the word itself implies duties within the social body and being outside of them at the same time.

¹⁰² The reception of AIDS in scientific circles officially started when the First International Conference on AIDS in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1985 was held (*Encyclopedia* viii). From the earliest phases, there is a spatial-military dimension to the medical description of the AIDS-affected cells, namely, that "[t]he consequence of this capitulation of the T cells to the virus is in other words the eventual complete collapse of self/other distinction as it is figured in immunology. The body loses its biological national boundaries and is overtaken by 'foreign' organisms because its standing army has been successfully infiltrated, perverted and demobilised. Its dehierarchisation is equated with debilitating chaos and dissolution, death by a kind of infectious entropy where the closed system is thrown open to its dangerous outside" (Waldby 64). This transgression is also sexualized in the scientific discourse, not only on the level of the patients' bodies, but even on the cellular level as well: "hence the immunocompetent body is figured as a phallic body, taken to be heterosexual and masculine, while immunocompromise is attributed to various kinds of passive, erotically receptive or 'excessive' bodies, which can be made to stand for feminine or gay masculine identity" (77). This implies that "HIV infection involves a kind of 'homosexualisation' or feminisation of the T cell and hence the whole immune system, the perversion of a highly organised system of heterosexual, masculine 'self-protection' which is equated with both the stability of a closed system and the interests of a mobilised nation-state" (64). While "the virus is often endowed with the power to seduce the T cell into a consensual but perverse union" (63), the T-cells are referred to as "the Rambo of the body's immune system" (61). Thus, the infected T cells are promiscuous, susceptible, and receptive. However, there are counterexamples as the "immunologist Richard Gershon has described an 'immunological orchestra' with a 'commanding conductor' and clearly defined 'parts' for the immune-system cells to 'play'" (Healey 235).

that it was the move away from the military/industrial complex of metaphors to the post-industrial information age metaphors of coding and communication that enabled immunology to claim its current high theoretical status. It is thus not an exaggeration to argue that the immune system is not only the master trope of the AIDS discourse itself, but also a central metaphor of late-20th-century and 21st-century biopolitical dilemmas. Donna Haraway argues that in the late twentieth century, the immune system is a flexible iconic device which can stand for various kinds of bodily coherence and incoherence, and various delineations of self/other relations. It is a “potent and polymorphous object of belief, knowledge and practice”, and claims that

[t]he immune system is an elaborate icon for principal systems of symbolic and material “difference” in late capitalism. Pre-eminently a twentieth-century object, the immune system is a map drawn to guide recognition and misrecognition of self and other in the dialectics of western biopolitics. That is, the immune system is a plan for meaningful action to construct and maintain the boundaries for what may count as self and other in the crucial realms of the normal and the pathological. (*Simians* 204)

The immune system is thus the late modern biopolitical metaphor of security, the reassuring differentiation of self and other, while any danger undermining its reliability also poses a major existential threat to the unity of the self. Similarly relying on images of aggression and spatiality, John Protevi argues that immunity is rather a question of what he calls forceful body politics:

[f]or immunology, the question is never one of inside and outside, but of the economic distribution between intake, assimilation or rejection and excretion. The unitary, self-present body is exploded into a systemic interchange, a point of exchange of forces; in other words, immunology studies forceful bodies politic. The outside is always already inside, in relation to the inside; the regulation of this interchange is the job of the immune system. (*Political Physics* 107)

In this sense, the immunological AIDS discourse is just as intrinsically part of the contemporary biopolitical discourse of enemy images as the early modern secular, medical plague diagnosis or the Victorian identification of cholera by laboratory science as a tropical diseases, demonstrating that scientific theory and practice cannot stay uncontaminated by current images of inside and outside, normality and pollution.

(Scientific) facts are never simple and transparent, since the irreducibility of metaphor in scientific texts, the figurative contexts of the practice of “biomilitary” rhetoric in the case of AIDS, is crucial in understanding cultural and social responses to the epidemic: “in the West, the disease prefigured a novel order of post–Cold War terrors: of protean, deterritorialized invaders who hijack our defenses and threaten to coexist with us in a deadly symbiosis that sets off rapidly mutating, mimetic forms of violence and counterviolence. In short, it is a process that W. J. T. Mitchell (forthcoming) has called the ‘cloning of terror’” (Comaroff 198). The primal scene of the gay sexual encounter, as a kind of foundational fantasy or screen memory of scientific AIDS theories, takes centre stage in medical theories of the virus. All this implies that, on the one hand, the gay man’s body appears as essentially vulnerable for penetration. The heteronormative scare of homosexuals wanting to infiltrate the respectable households of the straight majority extends the risk of permeability and invasion, while the norm itself is never questioned: “because heterosexual male bodies are not conceptualised as being implicated in this flow they form the privileged ‘general population’ which is not subject to surveillance or educative intervention and which is implicitly protected by the control or responsabilisation of other bodies” (Waldby 101).

What the virus does in the body is a result of the fact that “in this sense the HIV test is a test organised around the virus’s failures to ‘pass’ within the immune system” (110), that is, the virus, as it were, fails in cross-dressing, acting like a drag queen in the host’s body. This the medically imagined coming out is the disease itself. The workings of the virus have also been linked to the inner government of the body, its internal power relations:

[o]ne of the major reasons that the virus is thought to be so successful in its occupation of the body is because it can conceal its true nature from the surveillance of the immune system. It gains access to the body through its concealment in blood and semen, a method which one popular immunology text likens to the Trojan horse. Like Greeks hidden inside the Trojan horse, the AIDS virus enters the body concealed inside a helper T cell from an infected host.... Once inside an inactive T cell, the virus may lie dormant for months, even years. (109)

The politics and poetics of hiding and masquerading making a difference between self and other play a crucial role in both novels examined in this chapter, both focussing on being a stranger. Hollinghurst, like much British AIDS fiction, exploits the connection between the poetics of this disease and the markedly “English” trait of closeting and concealment. Nick’s gayness is initially difficult to accept and experience even for himself, let alone the Feddens. The rather

surreal conversation below between Mr. and Mrs. Fedden with Nick suggests the family's utter puzzlement about the gay issue and even gender as such well before any news reach them about the new disease: "Boy George is a man, isn't he?" said Rachel [Mrs. Fedden]. 'Yes, he is,' said Nick. 'Not like George Eliot.' 'No, not at all.' 'Very fair question,' said Gerald." (Hollinghurst 100). In this short domestic exchange gayness, popular culture, the gender of an artist and the English classics are all conjured up in a gendered context, also self-reflectively representing the various cultural registers the novel is using to create a discourse for gay culture in the 1980s. Similarly to the Feddens' lack of knowledge and understanding concerning the gay issue, Nick's homosexual identity at the beginning is also primarily represented by lack: a lack of self-knowledge, experience, approval from the outside world and a private and cultural space to occupy. His true otherness is thus initially invisible to the hosts.

The hiddenness of gayness and AIDS are symptomatic elements of the novel, just like the virus itself, the topic of the disease surfaces in the narrative structure of the text after a surprisingly long period of latency. For quite a while, the novel is silent about the epidemic apart from occasional hints, like for example the one that Old Pete, Leo's previous lover is "not well", and more importantly, Leo is simply dropped from the story after a chapter on their happy affair with Nick, without any comment on how their relationship ended. It is Toby Fedden who first talks about the disease openly – and metaphorically: "God it's awful, this bloody plague" (336). Later, he periphrastically calls it "the plague thing" (470), while the gay Wani is highly judgemental about it in a France holiday scene and even refuses to name the unmentionable disease: "there's really no excuse for getting the thing now." (340)¹⁰³

The subject of losing a friend, a lover or a relative to AIDS is simply taboo in the Fedden home, even though Nick more or less comes out in France during the holiday when using the first person plural in an AIDS discussion: "we are learning to be safe" (339). However, the family still discusses the death of a close family friend in cryptic terms, regressing to the colonial discourse of disease and invalidism to distance the problem: "[h]e picked up some extraordinary bug in the Far East last year" (334). Back in London, we see Nick at a gay beach with Wani, where a stranger mixes them up with someone else and shares with them the news that "George", the gay Everyman, has died. Even the privileged Wani becomes a leper-like figure in his favourite luxury restaurant when his disease obviously shows, "as if Wani's

¹⁰³ Waldby describes the transition of disease from the concrete gay male body to the symbolic cultural body in the following way: "AIDS biomedicine maps the flow of infection from its 'reservoir' in the gay male body, through the transmission bodies of bisexual men and heterosexual women to the ultimately 'cultural' body, that of heterosexual masculinity. In other words, biomedicine maps the flow of infection according to a successive positioning of these sexual identities across the threshold of the nature/culture division, where departures from the heterosexual masculine are represented as departures from the fully human. In so doing it recapitulates a whole history of the association of the nature" (19).

presence was no longer good for business” (431). Nick is fully aware of the economic dimensions of the sexual epidemic as well: although the market may recover—it always bounces back, Wani once observes, “it always recovers” (433), the lost young men of the ’80s will not return. Catherine also has a problem with temporality, as opposed to Nick’s anxiety about the running out of (life)time, feels that time has frustratingly stopped: “the 80s are going on forever,” (393) she claustrophobically says to Nick.

The novel depicts the emerging moral panic around gayness and AIDS, as the normalized immune system of the social body starts to recognize the threatening otherness of gays. According to Mary L. Dudy, a moral panic can be defined by the desexualization of sexual issues, which, in the case of AIDS, might mean that social and racial groups are equally stigmatized for their presupposed, decadent sexual behaviours:

nonsexual events become sexualized via moral panics just as sexual events become nonsexualized via moral panics. This reversal—one of the most insidious and dangerous features of moral panics—inverts what we know about “villains” and “victims.” The villains—those who dangerously and shamelessly propagate moral panics onto others—and the victims—those who live with the material, physical, social, and psychological damage of moral panics—are often inverted or obscured so that the ways to distinguish between the two become invisible. (*The Moral Panics of Sexuality* 6)

Accordingly, Nick gradually turn into a villainous virus in the public eye, while his ritual sacrificing actually discloses the Feddens as the real aggressors. Since from a medical point of view the virus seems to homosexualize healthy T-cells by manipulating their natural behaviour, Nick’s influence on Toby Fedden can be mentioned as another blame against him, and also the fact that in his relationships it is usually Nick who plays the active, masculine role, he tends to be sexually dominant, unlike his lovers, the effeminate Wani and the underprivileged Leo, who both fall victim to the disease in the end. Thus, even though Nick is feminized merely by his gayness in the eyes of the Feddens’ heteronormative culture, he still appears as masculine, white, educated and impenetrable within the gay subcontext of the story.

Nick as a “Trojan horse” of decadence provides various services to the family, but at the same time, however, he makes an almost fatal puncture or wound in the perfect fabric of the family. Ironically, the Feddens in the end prove immune to his foreign influence and successfully eject him from their system, staying apparently unharmed, while Nick by that time is probably infected by the fatal virus of elitism and potentially HIV as well. His main function in the family is thus to initiate a moral panic, as a result of which the deep immorality and

emotional-ethical pollution of the Feddens comes to the surface and cleanse the system. Before finally dismissing Nick from the house, Gerald Fedden calls his presence “a typical homo trick” (Hollinghurst 477), and Nick realizes that “it seemed natural as day to him to dress up the pet lamb as the scapegoat” (481), referring to the whole scene as a “the contagion of madness” (482).¹⁰⁴ This expression suggests that it is actually the Feddens who are hopelessly infected, and it is not an outside enemy they have to fight but the realisation that the family romance is rotten to the core. That is why its immune system desperately needs to exile dangerous otherness to its own margins, as Isabell Lorey’s notion of biopolitical immunization suggests:

I use the concept of “biopolitical immunization” to designate a modern dynamic of legitimizing and securing relations of domination. This figure of the politically immune is characterized - in contrast to juridical immunity - by the movement of taking in. This involves a manner of safeguarding that implies a movement into what is to be protected. What is to be protected can be a political community, a social constellation, from which an evil coming from “within itself” must be differentiated in order to protect this community. First, this kind of evil must be discursively positioned at the social margin - frequently supported by a process of othering - in order to then be split: into one part that is considered, in relation to immunization, as “capable of integration”, and another part that is constructed as “incurable” and deadly for the community, and that must therefore be completely excluded. (43)

The Feddens’ world similarly ejects all forms of otherness, be it racial, sexual or medical. In the novel, Leo and his family provide the racial and also class counterpoint to the Feddens and actually, also to Nick’s erudite world. When Leo comes to visit Nick, Gerald simply announces him as a “black chap”. The old Ouradi, Wani’s father also shows racist behaviour when he abuses a coloured waitress at a party for no reason at all, suggesting that class superiority easily overwrites racial identity. Leo’s uneducated mother, on the other hand, stands for the naïve Christian faith of someone who cannot even accommodate his son’s gayness, let alone his

¹⁰⁴ Homophobia has always been present in the AIDS discourse, both on the level of scientific and popular depictions of the disease. For example, “more than one scientist has suggested ‘removing the pump handle’ from the gay community” (Patton *Sex ad Germs*, 54); which is an intertextual reference to Victorian cholera and Snow’s discovery of its source, and there is of course the so called “hot-bed theory” as well. Moreover, John Langone’s 1985 review of his research entitled “AIDS: The Latest Scientific Facts” suggests that the virus enters the bloodstream by way of the “vulnerable anus” and the “fragile urethra”; in contrast, the “rugged vagina” (built to be abused by such blunt instruments as penises and small babies) provides too tough a barrier for the AIDS virus to penetrate (Treichler “AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse” 360). The very act of naming is highly political, see abbreviations as WOGS (the Wrath of God Syndrome), GRID (gay-related immunodeficiency), while AIDS was selected at a 1982 conference in Washington as “reasonably descriptive” without being “pejorative” (366).

disease, and whose ignorance does not come from snobbery but a limited intellectual access to the world. Nick cannot discuss the situation with anyone, he cannot even talk about Leo's death with Cath, supposedly his best friend in the house, as he always feels that somehow "it was the wrong moment, the wrong week, and actually the wrong death" (Hollinghurst 414). When Nick is suddenly visited by Leo's lesbian sister and her partner who tell him about Leo's death, she sarcastically comments on the death of her brother and the self-deceiving mourning of their Christian mother, who has a cheap reproduction of Holman Hunt's *The Shadow of Death* hanging on her wall, saying that "[w]ell, he's been to the altar now" (408), something their mother has always desired. Looking at Leo's last photo, which shows him in his hospital bed, Nick realizes that "it was the loneliest thing Nick has ever seen." (410), projecting himself into that non-marital but medical bed.

Nick also ends up alone, as an outsider in the Fedden home he is forcefully excluded from the Kensington house. Finally, when he leaves the house for good on the last page, he has a dark premonition about his own future, his next HIV test: "[i]t came over him that the test result would be positive" (500) and he imagines how so many others are learning about their results those days and experience the biographical disruption of disease: "the time came, as they learned the news in the room they were in, at a certain moment in their planned and continuing day" (501). Importantly, we never learn the result of Nick Guest's third HIV test, the possibility, the precariousness is emphatically implied, though. His fate, his class and medical position in life again remains unresolved and uncontained.

The art of decadent consumption: the aesthetics of AIDS

Art is the last and most pervasive metaphor of Nick's otherness beside his class and sexual difference: the world of beauty appears to be his escape from the depravity of the present. It has been pointed out before that aestheticism in *The Line of Beauty* functions as a visual counterpoint to the epidemic: "[r]ising from both the *fin de siècle* aesthetic ideal of image-formation as both an end and a mean, and the radical re-evaluation of artistic impact and mortality emerging from the AIDS epidemic, Hollinghurst's fiction curiously and consistently values the visual as a central component of textual composition" (Johnson, Allan 6). Nick's story eventually raises the question of art's ability to aestheticize, romanticize and elevate AIDS as a decadent disease in a *fin-de-siecle* sense, similarly to the representational tradition of tuberculosis (also known as consumption), relying on a metaphorical cult of illness as a counterpoint of *petite bourgeois* lifestyle. Considering that the figure of the artist suffering from AIDS has initiated a whole new and still vigorous tradition of the *Künstlerroman*, Nick's aesthete

identity has even more connotations evoking tb, as, in the wake of AIDS, “the Bohemian stereotype of the starving, consumptive artist – the tubercular Kafka’s Hungerkünstler – was replaced by the image of the artist-with-AIDS” (Gilman 6). Nick, however, is not an artist but an aesthete, a lover of art, which is a major difference. It seems that he is consumed by the utopian, elite, aesthete life he desires, while he is consuming more and more drugs to retain his idealized vision of reality, while the world of beauty can offer him neither physical nor social sublimation.

The problems of sexual, cultural and drug consumption and various kinds of exchanges have already appeared in the cholera and plague chapters, suggesting that economic metaphors are interconnected with the discourse on epidemics. Evoking the 80s as a simultaneously neo-conservative and consumerist decade, Hollinghurst’s novel provides a revealing case study of pre- and post-AIDS attitudes to death, pleasure and wealth. Since *The Line of Beauty* is also a historical novel concerned with the recent past, its aesthetic tone can be read as a critique of the Thatcherite years’ moral double standard. Thus, it is not surprising that the metaphor of “sexual tax” (Black, David 19) has also become a widespread image of AIDS as a due punishment for promiscuity, blaming “fast-lane lifestyles” and the “sin cocktail” of gays for its spread. Its victims are still often regarded as socially contaminating agents, who, by their perennial transgression of bodily, social and moral boundaries, have put the healthy circulation of social order at risk. Susan Sontag interprets the AIDS phenomenon as a product of mass society and mass media in the following way: “the culture of consumption may actually be stimulated by the warnings to consumers of all kinds of goods and services to be more cautious, more selfish.” (*Illness* 165). Nick becomes part of this accelerating culture of consumerism and also a witness to its fall by stepping over the line – the line of beauty.

Nick’s consumption could be called decadent in the sense that the notion of decadence has been traditionally identified as the superior state of the artist in a commonly healthy world, characterized by “the grotesque or sexually bizarre or the freakish, in sensations of exquisite and sterile refinement, in languorous debauchery and cultivated eroticism (Gilman, Richard 86). In general, it has been defined as an irritability full of boredom, a “backward movement or sterile arrest” (11), the mixture of a heightened sensitivity and the exhaustion of the senses. Gilman also claims that the word decadence has become a synonym of perversion, of pathological or careless sexuality and the cult of strange pleasures in general (175). He also approaches the notion as a pathological inability to grow and develop, a stagnating state, which suggests that its unproductivity makes decadence a disease. This idea makes it possible to read AIDS as the contagion of the age (the late 20th century), where Nick’s aestheticism and

decadence are the symptoms of his infection with the virus of elitism, even before the appearance of AIDS.

Nick's aesthete identity as the consumer of elite culture is repeatedly emphasised. At the beginning of the novel, he confesses that "I just love beautiful things" (Hollinghurst 7), he is proud of his first class Oxford degree, and, as it has already been briefly mentioned, is writing a PhD on Henry James' style. His choice of topic is highly symptomatic, too: he wants to address James' style, not, for instance, the moral, social, historical or psychological implications of his works. Nick is interested in form, in form only, even if it is an ungraspable, empty but decorative casket just by itself. The presence of Henry James is relevant here not only because of Nick's PhD topic, but because the morally ambiguous aesthete represented by Nick is also a recurrent figure in James' fiction, where, for instance, art collecting and the tendency to view life in exclusively aesthetic terms usually have a morally negative tinge¹⁰⁵. In the novel thus "James is invoked as the knowing figure who comprehends all too well what the romance and rapacity of this decade are all about" (Rivkin 289), providing yet another intertextual and self-mirroring layer to the text.

At the same time, direct encounters with invaluable art objects in others' wealthy homes often only strengthen Nick's experience of otherness, for instance when a classical French painting in the country house of Mrs. Fedden's uncle "gave him a hilarious sense of his own social displacement" (Hollinghurst 48). For him, the country house is like an exhibition space, an art museum or a "luxury hotel" (48) where he can only be a temporary, lucky guest. His aesthete identity influences and even distorts his memories and often makes the unreal feel more real than his own experiences. For Nick, life is primarily an aesthetic experience, this is the pane of glass through which he is gazing at the world around him. The novel's title is the central symbol of what art means to Nick. As he explains to the Feddens about William Hogarth's notion, he says "I suppose the line of beauty's a sort of animating principle" (225). The novel's very last word is also "beautiful," although nothing on the plot level explains this.

Even though he often feels alienated, an outsider in this world of the elite, sometimes Nick feels superior to the rich due to his Oxford education, his only symbolic capital. For instance, they keep disagreeing with Gerald about the music of Richard Strauss, a composer who embodies everything Nick despises in art, that is, an explicit desire to entertain and catch attention—actually, the key elements of his own presence in the family. He also vaguely despises Leo's popular taste when they watch the blockbuster movie *Scarface* in the cinema, showing that he has a very selective taste in classical and popular culture as well. As opposed

¹⁰⁵ Like Osmond's character in *The Portrait of a Lady*, Adam Verver in *The Golden Bowl*, while Milly Theale's illness in *The Wings of the Dove* becomes a source of revelations.

to the explicit pleasure value of Strauss or *Scarface*, Nick prefers secret, indirect aesthetic joys like driving by Coleridge's house on his way to a group sex session with Wani and a man they just met on the beach, hilariously "mixing up sex and scholarship" (209). The novel's sense of humour appears at its finest when it refers to heritage films, a genre born under Thatcher in the 80s, to sarcastically place characters socially and intellectually. It is especially references to the film *Room with a View*, which repeatedly reveal that someone lacks real erudition. The man Wani and Nick pick up on the gay beach also brings up this topic to make what he believes to be an intellectual conversation before casual sex. In a scene with the Ouradis, for instance, Nick comments on a family occasion that "on analysis he thought it was probably a scene from a Merchant Ivory film" (486). The irony of these cultural references turns into painful self-sarcasm when Nick tries to sell his new script for a Henry James movie to American producers. He sums up the plot in the following way: "it's about someone who loves things more than people. And who ends up with nothing, of course" (435). This could be Nick's moment, showing that his cultivated mind can turn into something artistically and financially productive. However, the reaction of the American producers to all this refined image is that "it kinda sucks" (435).

Beside high art, Nick also consumes rather lowly pleasures as well, mainly cocaine, the ultimate luxury drug. His increasing drug addiction is one of his most important means of distancing himself from the profanity of the reality surrounding him. Just like with fine arts, Nick has expensive tastes when it comes to intoxication, too: only the very rich can afford a cocaine habit, as it cost a fortune and its effect wears away very quickly. The image of cocaine as the drug of the elite is reinforced by the fact that it is traditionally consumed with the help of bankcards and banknotes. Thus, being addicted to it means the continuous consumption of money with the help of various symbols of money. As several critics have pointed out, the novel's title can also refer to all the streaks of cocaine Nick consumes in the novel, making the line of beauty a highly ambiguous symbol of art and profanity. In Hollinghurst's AIDS fiction the place of political activism is thus taken over by an aesthetic and aestheticizing passivism, often metaphorized by images of high art and Nick being "high".

On the whole, Nick's aestheticism is neither an efficient means of psychological escape nor a morally positive resolution for his conscience, as his failed creative projects, the PhD on Henry James, the movie script, and the luxury magazine, *Ogee*, he edits with Wani all show. The magazine's title is a synonym for the line of beauty in art history, it is supposed to be the marketable and easily consumable amalgam of all Nick's high class knowledge and material desires. *Ogee* is an elite lifestyle magazine rather than an art journal, a mere excuse for trying out first class hotels, brothels and other sites on the Continent. The final product is the perfect

example of excess and overconsumption: it is loaded with luxury advertisements and images of beautiful objects and places, punctuated with Nick's duly short essays on art. The advertising images of extremely expensive products openly target an elite male audience, suggesting that one problem with aestheticism in the contemporary world is that it has largely shifted over into the world of the moneyed. However, the packaged product remains unsold and inconsumable: because of Wani's untimely death of the unmentionable disease only the first edition is published and even that stays in boxes.

Beside images of consumption, Nick's aesthete self is often connected with reflections and mirrors, the metaphors of his troubled narcissism. He is a helpless aesthete, in love with beautiful, inanimate objects that for him seem to reflect eternal, alive beauty and youth, projections of his own sensitivity. Nick's troubled self-love gives him a sense of superiority and snobbery based on his education; this is his only weapon when it comes to competing symbolic capitals of elitism and money, for instance when he is observing the Ouradis from the perspective of an omniscient narrator: "[i]n the tilting mirror Nick saw them all, as if from a privileged angle, like actors on a set" (211). The same self-reflexive, distancing mood comes over him when he is evicted from the Feddens' home: "he saw the romance of his years with the Feddens, deep, evolving, and profoundly private, framed and explained to the world by this treacherous hack." (472). For him, life often and too easily translates into artistic patterns, frames, sets, mirrors, angles and actors. Even in a very intimate moment, which recalls his momentary flash of sobriety in the garden scene of sexual initiation with Leo, his unwanted narcissistic self-reflection reveals his emotional fragility: "since he could see himself in the wardrobe mirror, he got under the bedclothes. He lay there, with one hand behind his head, in an almost painful state of happiness and worry" (176). Mostly, however, Nick is much more of a voyeur than a narcissist when it comes to the sexual economy of the gaze. Sentences like "it was the gleam of something that was over" (489) clearly show that Nick can only experience the present by seeing it as a reflection of something else, continuously gazing at the protective shield of his aesthetic mirror, like a modern-day Lady of Shalott. He is simply unable to develop real, deep emotions for other people because he only sees life through inanimate artistic beauty. This is underlined by his goodbye scene with the middle-aged Italian housekeeper of the Feddens, who tells him before he leaves the house for good how her first impression of him was that "he is no good (475).

The dominant emotion behind Nick's love for art and pleasure is a kind of self-destructive nostalgia which gradually devours every segment of his life, be it his sexual fantasy life, his relationship to art in general, travelling, mourning or his formative Oxford education: "Nick senses a touching nostalgia for the Oxford years, on which a door, an oak perhaps, seems

gently but firmly to have closed.” (71).¹⁰⁶ The present moment is never void of the perennial sense of having always already lost something precious. It is a kind of “inner theatre,” with no “real memories” (26), and he is often tormented by “moods of vicious nostalgia” (263). He feels nostalgic even about the green front door (366) of the Feddens when they paint it blue for Thatcher’s sake. Whenever he has lost or is about to lose something, “he felt a kind of sadness,—well, the shine went off things, as he’d known it would” (249); when he learns about Leo’s death, he feels “a kind of dazzled grief, in which everything they’d done together was vivid to him, and the strain of loss was as keen as the thrill of success” (44). Finally, when he leaves the Feddens, his dominant emotion “was a sort of terror, made up of emotions from every stage of his short life, weaning, homesickness, envy and self-pity; but he felt that the self-pity belonged to a larger pity” (501). Nostalgia has been defined and approached in several different ways recently, however, perhaps the most widely cited academic study of nostalgia, Susan Stewart’s *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, characterizes it as a social disease (23), a disease of memory which is part of the AIDS discourse of the novel.

In *The Line of Beauty*, Nick’s initial social and sexual dislocation gradually turns into an aesthetized, escapist, melancholic nostalgia as a result of having to work through loss and mourning, not only for his friends but for his own dreams, too. Nick’s aestheticism and escapism replace mourning for lost friends. One of the clearest examples of this emotional metonymy is when Nick is having some kind of a nostalgic flashback, thinking that he is reminded of Leo by a skinny black man in a pub, but he has to realize it is actually Leo, wasted, turned into a stranger by AIDS: “[e]ven then, the nostalgic idea that he was like Leo held off for a second or two the recognition that he was Leo.” (423). Nick repeatedly quotes a Jamesian expression, “the extremity of personal absence” (313) to describe how he misses someone, but this personal absence is actually Nick’s own emotional absence from his own life. What Nick misses most is a sense of belonging, and he cannot find it either through being integrated into the social body, nor through the conspicuous consumption of his private body. He can only long, not belong and represents loss of an unlived, fantasy-filled past, the loss of a missed, drug-hazed present, and finally, the loss of a sexually, emotionally active future.

¹⁰⁶ In many ways, *The Line of Beauty* is the inversion of *Brideshead Revisited*: Nick is the descendant of Charles Ryder in many ways, as he falls in love with a whole family, moreover, Waugh’s novel has also become an icon of the gay community due to the complex relationship between Charles and Sebastian.

An American in London: Monumentalization in Alfred Corn's *Part of His Story*

"The AIDS pandemic has reminded us starkly that no man or his nation is an island." (W. F. Bynum, qtd. in Alison Bashford: *Imperial Hygiene*, 124)

Alfred Corn's *Part of His Story*, just like Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*, does not belong to the trend of AIDS writing which is strongly political, manifesto- or activist-like, addressing the crisis in the form of a memoir, diary or personal pathography. The above mentioned subgenres of AIDS fiction are especially common in early AIDS writing, and have already been the object of sustained critical scrutiny, unlike the two novels analysed here, which belong to a later phase of AIDS fiction, dealing with the epidemic in a markedly indirect, stylized way, while the mental dynamics of historicizing the present and the possibility of aesthetic distancing come to the forefront. Like *The Line of Beauty*, Corn's novel, also set in 80s London, is about the experience of Otherness. Hollinghurst's novel ends with the outbreak of the AIDS epidemic in Britain in the mid-80s, whereas Corn's narrative starts after the American playwright protagonist has already lost his life partner to the disease. In this sense, the two stories could be read in conjunction as reflections on the history of AIDS in Britain.

In *The Line of Beauty* and *Part of His Story* art and aestheticism are inseparable both on individual and social levels of otherness and loss, initiating new patterns of gay sexuality and dealing with death. Corn's protagonist – like the author – is an American, visiting London,¹⁰⁷ a stranger, who repeatedly reflects on the cultural differences between the two nations. Corn's story describes only a few months the unnamed narrator spends in London, which proves to be a life-changing cultural, psychological and intellectual experience for him, inspired by the city's architectural and artistic heritage. Hollinghurst, on the other hand, relies on Nick Guest's class difference, focussing on an outsider on his own in a potentially hostile context. Both novels portray the protagonist's strong attachment, even addiction to the elevated world of art, which appears as an escape, a decadent ivory tower, an individualistic counterpoint to the inescapable physical agony and reality of AIDS as well as the threatening loss of the self.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Before the publication of *Part of His Story*, which is his first novel, Alfred Corn published several volumes of poetry, taught at Yale and UCLA, among others, thus, similarly to Hollinghurst, he also has an academic background.

¹⁰⁸ *Philadelphia* (1993), the first mainstream Hollywood movie on AIDS also emphasises the "social death" preceding biological death for AIDS patients.

Part of history: personal and collective narratives

The novel's title can be interpreted on several levels. Obviously, on the plot level it means the personal loss the protagonist has to go through after losing his long-term partner to AIDS, while it also refers to the individual work of mourning by being able to tell only a fragment of his partner's, Joshua's story, whose death identified him with the stigmatized disease. On the other hand, the title is also a pun, suggesting that AIDS has to be regarded as part of history now, irreversibly influencing the grand narratives of our time. Despite its metaphoric links to previous pestilences, "AIDS has now its own history, rather than borrowing it from the more distant past" (Berridge *AIDS and Contemporary History* 1). Moreover, the personal pronoun can refer to the protagonist himself as a distancing gesture, since when we leave him at the end of the novel, he has just received a positive HIV test result and is about to return to the States – to die. The story is thus aware of being a small part of something big and collective while also living through something small and personal, and as such serves as a conclusion to the examination of all three epidemics in the dissertation as individual and social identity crises.

Corn's text tackles the challenge of conceiving of the disease as part of socio-cultural and art history. Within the broader historical context of the 80s, *Part of His Story* also hints at how the disease changed social behaviours. Its high media profile, the blanket media coverage it initially received as well as the voices of the alarmists activated deeply entrenched cultural narratives about sexuality and morality: "AIDS exacerbates the latent tensions between individual rights and social goals, as the need to protect the public health confronts the norms of privacy and confidentiality in personal life" (Bolton 5). This is why Paula Treichler's point is relevant here: "[t]he AIDS epidemic—with its genuine potential for global devastation – is simultaneously an epidemic of a transmissible lethal disease and an epidemic of meanings or signification" (Treichler "AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse" 357).¹⁰⁹ The protagonist witnesses an example of this AIDS-induced epidemic of cultural signification quite early on, as he accidentally finds himself at the rehearsal of an AIDS victim's funeral service while walking about in the city as a tourist. He experiences "vicarious grief" (Corn 7) while watching the awkward scene, performing a gesture of emotional distancing, dissociation even. The funeral also fails to meaningfully ritualize, inform, and represent what is actually happening, showing that there is as yet no generally accepted language or code of social behaviour for reacting to AIDS, it is an unnamable vacuum of representation, which later develops into a so-called "epidemic of signification" infecting various discourses.

¹⁰⁹ Treichler made a list of thirty-eight social anxieties about the disease, such as: "a creation of the media, which has sensationalized a minor health problem for its own profit and pleasure" or "a creation of the state to legitimize widespread invasion of people's lives and sexual practices" ("AIDS, Homophobia" 357-8).

Similarly to *The Line of Beauty*, *Part of His Story* strongly relies on evoking media and popular reactions to the new “plague” as a means of creating the atmosphere of the depicted era and to show how the metaphoric language of the AIDS discourse has been historically constructed. Nick Guest cannot feel at home in the shopwindow life of the elite political circles, just as Corn’s protagonist cannot really find his place in the very English, very artistic high cultural segment of the city. Early on, *Part of His Story*’s unnamed protagonist-narrator comments on the British media’s distancing and elliptic treatment of the crisis, and finds various similarities with American media strategies: “1986 turns out to be the year when the British public finally realizes the full extent of the disaster” (19), adding that “[t]hese [expressions] are like verbal tongs to fasten unto an untouchable subject and hold it aloft for public inspection;” while the majority of people already suffer from “compassion fatigue” (19), the loss of individualized mourning as a result of the sheer number of victims. He also foresees that as the newsworthiness of the issue increases, “Britannia will have to roll up her sleeves and deal with the unpleasantness,” comparing it to the events described in the Doomsday Book (20). As a man of words, he is thus especially responsive to the apocalyptic verbal climate generated by the AIDS issue and its allegorizing tendencies. While a critic has remarked about *The Line of Beauty* that “the book sees history as a place of revelation, as a backdrop for self-articulation, and, ultimately [...] as a place of sadness and melancholia (De Groot 155), *Part of His Story* establishes a similar link between the historical and individual contextualizing and representation of a new mass disaster affecting a culture of individuals.

The survivor’s sense of continuity: London as a memorial

The playwright protagonist is greatly inspired by London’s cultural heritage, especially its architecture and museums, and his aesthetic experiences of the city’s fine arts and historical past go hand in hand with his own self-appointed art therapy project: writing the biography of a forgotten but gifted 18th-century English playwright and sculptor. Symptomatically, he establishes a symbolic connection between the worlds of art and disease quite early when quoting Jean Cocteau’s statement on theatre-going being the “red and gold disease” (Corn 118). Thus, it seems that he replaces the actual disease, AIDS, with a metaphorical contagion, art, his own profession, to ensure his psychological survival at least. His self-protective reflections are often triggered by the experience of his cultural and sexual otherness: “now I can alternate focus between the two separate kinds of estrangement—the survivor’s and the expatriot’s—just as you shift a heavy suitcase from the left hand to the right, a regular pendulum swing of pain that makes time pass” (5). Thus, he simultaneously becomes a tourist, an American artist in London,

and a resident alien clashing with the repressive and frustrating “British negative technique of reining everything in” (7).

The opening page perfectly captures his fascination with the city and the feeling of being a potentially dangerous outsider, as we see him watching his own thumbprint on a freshly bought London postcard, “as though I’m being booked for some crime, defacement of public documents” (3). He is already feeling like a creeper, a trespasser, a bit like Nick gazing at the shopwindow on the first page of *The Line of Beauty*, stealing a glance at something he does not properly belong to. Both items, the London postcard and the book *Landslide*, are cultural products of the heritage milieu of the 1980s, representations of a kind of spectacle of Englishness the protagonists cannot authentically relate to but find irresistible. A sense of guilt, taboo and dislocation characterize the initial experience of Corn’s protagonist in London, right until he meets Maeve, the young, passionate and idealist Irish political activist and her gay brother, Derek, who becomes his first lover after the loss of his long-term partner, Joshua. Thus, both novels utilize the outsider’s point of view when it comes to Englishness, be it the class or the national characteristics of the country in the face of AIDS.

During his long walks in the city, the narrator evokes the images of London’s long history of plague, metaphorically identifying it with AIDS as the gay plague, introducing plague as an eternal part of London’s traumatic historical past and the cultural management patterns of such cataclysmic events:

[f]ire and religious strife are intensely Londonite themes – to which you could also add plague. The City has a record of surviving all three, one weathered testimonial thereof being the Monument itself. The old landmark is dwarfed by surrounding high rises, implying that those themes are now all safely historical, no threat to a world built of concrete, steel, and glass, and founded on religious indifference. All right. Is modernity then a form of large-scale nonchalance also? Achieved by methods so much different from my own in dealing with personal loss. But what exactly is the loss that modernity wants to cover over in its perfect, glass-smooth constructions, its hard-won serenity? The usual, no doubt: the old unsolvable dilemma of fleshly suffering and physical death. As for plague, the theme has returned again this year, and nonchalance is the last thing in evidence everywhere. Not even the new architecture seems to be of any use. Not the government, nor the religious authorities, nor the private sector seems to have achieved any calm concerning these new emergencies, and maybe we’ll get nothing but concealed panic until somebody solves the Riddle of the Virus. When they do, perhaps a new

monument will be put up to those who worked for a solution and those who died while waiting for it.” (25)

Based on his insights concerning the historical relationship of large-scale disasters and collective memory, it seems that monumentalization has long been a communal answer to pestilences of various kinds. An act of completion, sublimation, and distancing seems to be an anthropological universal, even though profane human suffering as such is one of those experiences that resist representation, as Sontag argues in her essay quoted in the Introduction. However, unlike “the” Monument, a potential AIDS monument appears to be an impossible image of dealing with this present day mass calamity. It seems that monuments are necessary materializations of the collective self-delusion that it is possible to remember the past in a more protective and less precarious way. Derrida also draws a parallel between monumentalization and the repression of reality, the erasure of recollection: “the sophist thus sells the signs and insignia of science: not memory itself (mnime), only monuments (hypomnimata), inventories, archives, citations, copies, accounts, tales, lists, notes, duplicates, chronicles, genealogies, references. Not memory but memorials” (107). While no public monument to AIDS is erected, the narrator decides to write not even his own but a long dead artist’s chronicle instead as a substitute monument.

The narrator’s experience of London’s history of death and suffering also relates to his own acute sense of bereavement, as he claims when watching the statues of Melancholia and Madness guarding the entrance of the culturally loaded building of Bedlam: “they are conscious of being representatives of the City of London himself, a worthy old alderman who has sheltered so many transient strangers over the centuries – before sending them on their way, most of us glad to have been, for a month a year or a decade, part of his story...” (Corn 252). Bedlam (Bethlehem Royal Hospital) is a historically resonant space: founded in 1247, it is an epitome of the evolution of biopolitical practices in England, its popular name having become synonymous with confusion and chaos. It seems as if the man from the New World wanted to find consolation and meaning in the cultural heritage of the Old one (a Jamesian feature, too), the repetitive sedimentation of historical meanings and the realization that all this has happened before, some time, somewhere, to someone – that we are not alone with our suffering. The city’s monumental representations of plague, madness and melancholia all become allegories of his own personal struggle, an escapist, aesthetic answer to the threat of AIDS.

Beside the city’s architecture, there is another work of art in the novel, which can be read as a projection of the protagonist’s bereavement. This is a statue of Hypnos in a museum, to which one of his new English friends, a female academic calls his attention:

[n]ear the entrance to a large room devoted to Hellenistic Roman artifacts was a plexi glass case with a hollow bronze head in it, blue-grey with ancient patina and identified as having come from second-century Iberia. The straight Greek nose, the partly open lips, the downward gaze of the empty eye sockets, all of this was familiar and standard. But then I saw the feature that makes the work what it is: a wing, and one wing only, emerges from the left temple. Hypnos, the god of dreams seemed himself to be caught in the grip of a sample dream, his own, verdigris in colour, and two millennia old, sponsoring billions of shorter sequels that have overtaken all sleepers in the world since the head was cast. (154)

Hypnos is traditionally famous for being a helper to the netherworld, carrying messages between the two opposing realms of existence. But there is one wing only on the sculpture's temple: there is a sign of a loss, a missing and irretrievable part of him (his story) absent which might not even have been there ever. The statue represents death in the form of a dream allegory, Hypnos being a liminal figure stuck on the brink of two worlds: never truly awake, but never fully dreaming either. Even Corn's artist protagonist finds solace in art; unlike the aesthete Nick Guest in *The Line of Beauty*, he does not prefer beautiful objects to people, but, having lost the love of his life, he is simply stuck with the world of objects as mere nostalgic, symbolic substitutes of the real experience of mutual love. Even Derek Findlater is no exception to this, he is the embodied possibility of love (re)found too late.

The loss of the self is just as a central topic of these two novels as the loss of a beloved one and/or the loss of a nostalgically recalled artistic/historical golden age. In a sense, both protagonists are infected with the virus of aestheticism: Nick is an aesthete enamoured of the Jamesian, infinitely stylized view of the world, the heritage film-like period detail of fiction and furniture, while Corn's protagonist is a man of the theatre, drama, falling in love with London's reassuringly old monuments of human suffering as a backdrop to his own personal drama. It is from art objects they receive comfort, not from other people; they remain lonely outsiders. Their characters thus raise the question: what does the care of the self as a bioethical dilemma mean in the age of AIDS, when Eros and Thanatos are so stigmatizingly identified with each other?

After *The Monument*, the plague sculptures and the Hypnos statue, the narrator's last major experience of art is the already mentioned biography he is writing, a project he knows to be recuperative at best: "and if the armchair psychologist tells me that I am trying to bring Joshua back to life by becoming him – a scholar, not a playwright, OK, I can accept that" (24). The desire to construct a meaningful narrative out of the life of a long-dead artist fulfils his own

need for a completion of some sort which he cannot achieve any more in his real life: “the biographer’s search is less metaphysical but can be at moments just as hectic, odd facts pounced on to the accompaniment of an inwardly sounded “ah-hah” of discovery whenever they interlock with details gathered earlier to establish a pattern of behaviours or support a presiding theme” (187). Even his vocabulary reflects a metafictional preoccupation with creating narratives, such as the repeated references to the file cards of his literary research and words like “simulacrum”, “postmodern” or “intertextuality” casually placed in his inner speech. Thus, his language at the same time deconstruct the possibility of successfully creating new grand narratives. Furthermore, he repeatedly refers to various classic British writers such as Yeats, Pope, Swift and Shelley, works like *Lucky Jim*, and calls a hotel “Jamesian” (116). Henry James, who coined the term “hotel world” is thus a major inspiration for both novels as the icon of aestheticized life against human fallibility. Art in *Part of His Story* has basically the same function as in *The Line of Beauty*: for the protagonist it is a psychological device of self-protection, self-immunization from the devastation of loss. The biography project is thus an attempt to write a past life, a his-story, but only parts of the story can be retrieved, and it is essentially faulty, lost to him in the depths of archives. Nobody’s life can be safely saved and accumulated, biography is nothing for him but the writing of life, if the living of it has become impossible. Autography, biography and pathography all appear as examples of self-reflective practices in *Part of His Story*, as instruments of controlling and distancing death.

The loss of the other/self

AIDS has created new patterns of mourning¹¹⁰ and transformed the social codes of dying, as an early comment by the narrator suggests: “mourning is a lifetime project anyway, nobody has set up a deadline. Deadline: what a funny word...” (20). He thus literalizes a word, a dead metaphor – also a metaphor of being dead. Later on, not only words, but the general idea of reproduction reminds him of his loss: “one answer to death is children, and, besides, each adult is the product of the extinction of a child, secretly mourned forever after.” (70) Eventually, he also connects sexuality with death in a Bataille-like comment: “if sexuality and death are always blended into one at some level of the psyche, now their tandem was all too easy to feel, a hard, cold plateau just below the surface of the thought.” (55). He goes even further than the

¹¹⁰ Cleve Jones's Names Project was such an effort, “a giant quilt the size of several football fields, consisting of commemorative panels prepared by friends and loved ones of the deceased” (Each 32), where “affirming that there will be no official memorial for those who died in this epidemic” (Goldstein in Brummelhuis 33). Chuck Palahniuk’s *Invisible Monsters* (1999) parodizes when the parents of a gay AIDS victim want to create a memory quilt for him but fail as all the patterns they want to choose stand for some kind of a sexual behaviour they do not want to link with their son.

philosophical links between Eros and Thanatos, pointing out the “unfairness” of gay sexuality being punished this way: “[i]t’s not that people have never died before, and that we’re not all of us going to die one day; but that the form of death in this case is usually so drawn out, disfiguring, and painful; that it comes from a physical act of love, and, for gay people, one that has been the basis for a personal and political identity” (62). Surprisingly, he mentions in a half-sentence that his parents were killed in a car accident two years before he met Joshua. Thus, loss has been part of his life/story for a long time, and Joshua might have been the result of his making up for his parents’ death, just like he is trying to replace Joshua with Derek and writing in a never-ending chain of substitution and contagious signification. Ironically, both novels’ protagonists are survivors, since in Nick’s case we never learn whether he is infected or not, while in Corn’s novel the protagonist is the surviving half of a couple. Yet, on the other hand, they are both victims: victims of the virus and of the social system around them. In the case of the AIDS epidemic, the individualization of pandemic death is a central issue. Reading the novel as a survival narrative also transforms it into AIDS testimony, as “the AIDS narrative often works dissociatively as well, rendering experiences of disease in complex terms that do not lend themselves to stable interpretation. (Goshert 51). The way Joshua, the Sanskrit scholar, is recreated, reanimated by the narrative as a person is thus also part of the grieving process. The narrator tries to (re)construct a chronological, correct chain of events to make sense of what happened: “the real beginning of everything, as it comes back in memory, was that afternoon in late October, the angle of the sun slanting in differently now, and setting earlier – but still reflecting fiercely enough in the windows of the high rise opposite to leave an askew golden rectangle of light on the wall above Joshua’s head where he sat in a chair across the room.” (Corn 49). The very precision of the memory suggests that it is burnt into his consciousness deeply. Later on we also learn that Joshua was ready to face what was awaiting him with an acute sense of irony when addressing his mother and partner about parts of himself, his story fragmentarily surviving in them: “you realize that if you’ve got each other, you’ve got a good percentage of me.” (67). His death itself is told in a dry, cold tone of traumatic memory, this time with a medical precision of distancing, of coping: “six weeks later Joshua lost his sight because of damage to the optic nerve. Three weeks after that, his involuntary motor functions collapsed, and in a short time he died.” (68). After Joshua’s death, the narrator goes through the necessary steps of mourning, including anger, again coated in theatrical meta-language: “[s]top trying to ignore the fact that the person I was meant to live to a ripe youthful old age with had ignored the script and slipped off with no warning.” (5). His new relationship with Derek is in many ways a symptom of the protagonist’s repetition compulsion, a desire to retrieve what is lost to him. He cannot stop listing the similarities between them, for instance that both Joshua

and Derek were twenty-seven when he met them, and that at first he did not like their names at all. Derek is the new partner he finds – and potentially loses – later as “this new incarnation as part of his story” (66). When skinheads attack Derek for being gay, or when he finds out that he used to be a prostitute to make a living, are shocking, while there is a painted-over crucifix in the boy’s room, a reference to his ambiguous relationship with his Irish Catholic religious background. Both Derek and the biography are desperate attempts to feel whole again, and both of them are unable to achieve that aim.

The narrator-protagonist is especially self-reflexive, often almost compulsively referring to his bereavement. For instance, right at the beginning he claims that “[c]ertainly I don’t plan to come off as broken down with bereavement and sorrow (but I am, I am!) (3), mentioning his “unhealed memory” (7), and “protective cynicism” (7) to handle it. There are even typographical signs of this emotional-rhetorical practice of monumentalizing his past, such as capitalized and thus privately historicized notions like “the Days Before” (11), and he also ironically plays with the notion of “Correct Bereavement Procedure” (13). Moreover, he sarcastically associates his loss with the behavioural patterns of his professional self as a stage director and playwright: “[p]eople like us pride ourselves on our uniqueness, so it is always unpleasant to realize just how symptomatic our responses to large events like bereavement are” (71), or when he realizes that “once again I fail to live in the present.” (157), which could be linked to the overwhelming effects of social dislocation in Nick Guest’s case, always hijacking him from the present. On the whole, a sense of void, numbness, and absurdity characterizes his lack of existence in the reality of the moment.

The depiction of AIDS death as the ultimate existential crisis is connected to the taking of the potentially fatal HIV test in both novels, a motif that concludes both *The Line of Beauty* and *Part of His Story*.¹¹¹ Susan Sontag contrasts AIDS and cancer by arguing that in the case of cancer it is often the family members of the patient to whom the diagnosis is told first; as opposed to this, the death sentence of AIDS is often shared only with the patient (*AIDS* 121). AIDS was introduced into the West as the “gay plague,” and as a result, it also functioned as a devastating, forced coming out. It has meant a dramatic medical and social status change, unveiling someone’s belonging to a subculture, a sexual minority. As Goffan points out: “[f]irst, the visibility of a stigma must be distinguished from its ‘known-about-ness’”(64). In this sense, xenophobia is closely caught up with homophobia in the birth of AIDS consciousness. Canguilhem argues that “[w]hen disease is considered as an evil, therapy is given for a revalorization; when disease is considered as deficiency or excess, therapy consists in

¹¹¹ There are also legal aspects of the test: “[i]n Australia and some states in the USA a positive HIV test is a notifiable disease, meaning that a specified, centralised monitoring body is informed of the result” (Waldby 113).

compensation” (275); and AIDS seems to fit both metaphorical categories of this taxonomy; since it often represented as evil itself, but is also regarded as a manifestation of someone’s guilt. While in *Hollingshurst* the test is not narrated and the result is not found out, in *Corn* we see both the test scene and the protagonist’s reaction to it. Both strategies are very powerful and memorable in their own ways. The HIV test is, as Patton observes, a “coercive technology of confession” (Waldby 111), which is part of the secular public health system, an institution, as the cholera chapter has also partly demonstrated. The test scenes, regardless of their outcomes, appear as a final, non-deferrable moments of facing the truth of the body, the fact of impending death. The test’s ruthless biological reality crushes the façade of art the protagonists have carefully constructed for themselves. In *Corn*’s case, the description of the protagonist’s reaction is especially shocking the reader with its grasping of the uselessness of anger or desperation. The narrator suffers particularly from facing the passing time: “[i]n the small dark cave where my head rests, dry sobs, by their own volition, rise up from the gut, small, steady convulsions shaking me into a kind of forgetfulness that blots out where I am, the image of the missing person, and the prospect of the hours and possibly the days ahead of me” (Corn 234). Coping with the death of the beloved Other and the death of the Self are thus unavoidable and the protagonists’ attitudes towards the test provide their ultimate form of self-reflection.

In connection with art as an escape from embodiment and time, the death of the author is also ironically thematized by the novel, since the protagonist as a writer will probably never finish his project, the biography. As the author of a monograph on AIDS memoirs puts it: “I’ll therefore take the figure of the critic as a model for an understanding of the mourning function of reading and of the witnessing function of writing when, in the mode of uptake, it relays a message marked by the author’s death” (Chambers 129). The narrator in this sense only survives to experience himself as missing, an elliptic figure of speech and agent of agony. Eventually, “it is the death of the author that is the condition of textual readability” (22). Writing about our own disease and death is the ultimate limit of representation of any kind. The protagonist says self-reflexively and all too knowingly that “experts tell me that bereavement always involves a projected mourning of one’s own eventual death” (Corn 74). This is the experience of the final panic, the hit, the dizziness of the loss of the self, the sense of loss the Henry James quote in the *Hollingshurst* novel also grasps, the “extremity of personal absence”. The coming to terms with the news, the death *sentence* –yet another uncanny word – has an epilogue-like function in both novels, suggesting that there might be hope for verbalizing the void of death. The conceptualization of the death of the self thus becomes the ultimate endpoint of the care of the self.

Images of AIDS

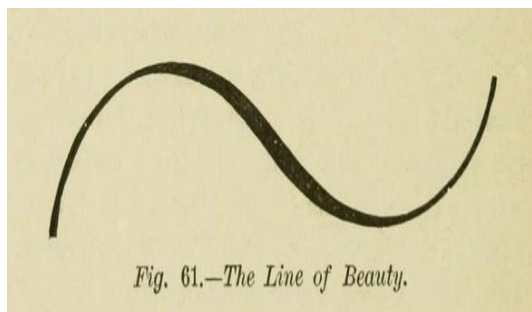


Fig. 8: William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753)

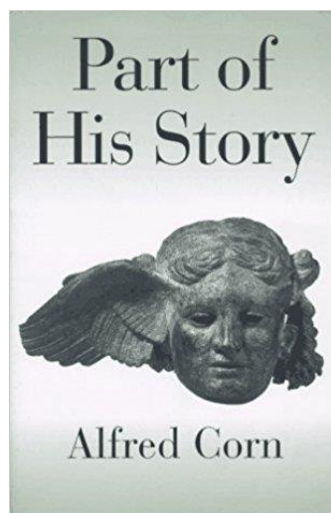


Fig. 9: Hypnos on the cover of *Part of His Story*



Fig. 10: Melancholy and Madness at the entrance of Bedlam Hospital



Fig. 11: Izhar Patkin, *Unveiling of a Modern Chastity* (1981)



Fig. 12: Andres Serrano, *Blood and Semen III* (1990)



Fig. 13: *Names Project*, AIDS memorial quilt (1987)



Fig. 14: A piece at Inter— exhibition, Montreal (2009)



Fig. 15: Kiki Smith, *Red Spill*, Art AIDS America Exhibit, Zuckerman Museum, Kennesaw, Georgia, United States (2016)



Fig. 16: Patrick Webb: *Lamentation of Punchinello* (1992)



Fig. 17: Patrick Webb: *By Punchinello's Bed* (1992)

Conclusion: Regarding the Disease of Others

“We have learned very little that is new about the disease, but much that is old about ourselves” (Frederick C. Tilney, M.D., on the 1916 New York polio epidemic, 469)

The dissertation's cover image shows the contemporary American painter's, Angela Canada-Hopkins' piece from 2012, entitled *Cell No. 6* as it appears to be a contemporary visual echo of all the major questions conjured up by the examined novels, such as embodiment, spatiality, boundaries and otherness. The abstract painting is supposedly a larger-than-life projection of a (human?) cell, the biological entity being depicted aesthetically as colourful and dynamic against a bleak, blackish background but still identified laconically, impersonally only by a number. The ambiguity of the picture might be strengthened by the viewer's impression that it also resembles a bird's eye view of a city, a map of an expanding metropolis even. In this sense, the microcosm of the body, invisible to the naked eye and the macrocosm of the city, which is also unavailable for the “normal” eye, become metaphorically identified, superimposed on each other with their pulsating, medley, flesh-like and palimpsestuous spaces. When our human perspective of something is so extremely oversized and at the same time diminutive, it becomes impossible to differentiate between the dimensions of body and city, blood vessels and vehicles on a motorway, healthy organic functions and pathological proliferation. This flux of (de)formed ways of signification is potentially what the Deleuzian notion of catastrophe means in Tímea Gyimesi's reading of the diagram as a visual image:

[t]he diagram necessarily entails catastrophe. This catastrophe carries within itself the possibility of, for instance, colour, light—that is, the possibility of the picture itself. According to Deleuze, no work of art can be born without a catastrophe. However, the catastrophe, i.e., the deforming of pre-existing forms, might imperil the creation, it can take down the (geometrical) armatures of the whole canvas and, in a wider sense, those of the text-texture as well. The task of the artist is to “grasp”, to “capture” the elemental force emerging formlessly now in the diagram, and to create with it a forcefield in which form as a “painterly fact” (factum) reconstitutes itself. That is, the diagram is endless potential: a chaos germ, a chaosmos” (my translation, 12).¹¹²

¹¹² “A diagram szükségszerűen katasztrófával jár. Ez a katasztrófa hordozza magában pl. a színt, a fényt, vagyis magának a képnek a lehetőségét. Deleuze szerint semmilyen művészeti alkotás nem jöhet létre katasztrófa nélkül. A katasztrófa, azaz a meglévő formák deformálása azonban veszélybe sodorhatja az alkotást, magával ránthatja az egész vászont és tágabb értelemben a szöveg-szövet geológiai (geometriai) armatúráit. A művész feladata, hogy a diagramban immár formátlanul felszínre törő elemi erőt “elkapja”, “befogja”, s vele megalkosson egy olyan

If, among other things, the diagrammatic nature of an entity means that “it consists in taking regimes of signs or forms of expression and extracting from them particles-signs that are no longer formalized but instead constitute unformed traits capable of combining with one another” (Deleuze *A Thousand Plateaus* 587), the painting represents the catastrophic event of somatic, semiotic collapse and the endless recombination and mutation of elements to build new structures, readable pictures. The dissertation, in a similar vein, has attempted to examine a certain kind of human catastrophe: the contagious construction and deconstruction of somatic meanings elicited by epidemic disease, the cultures of pollution bred within the (social) body, the chaotic cosmos mapped out by the examined diseases on one large canvas stretching between 1348 and the 1980s.

*

According to Agamben’s reading of Michel Foucault, a particular society’s “threshold of biological modernity” is situated at the point at which the species and the individual as a simple living body become what is at stake in a society’s political strategies (*Homo Sacer* 3), while Roberto Esposito argues that modernity is made possible by the institutionalization of centrally controlled survival mechanisms: “[o]ne might come to affirm that it wasn’t modernity that raised the question of the self-preservation of life, but that self-preservation is itself raised in modernity’s own being [essere], which is to say it invents modernity as a historical and categorical apparatus able to cope with it” (*Bíos* 55). The shift towards this cultural-historical moment of modernity, the realization of individual survival in the face of collective calamities is precisely what has been explored in the first two novels examined in the dissertation, *Pestilence* and *Year of Wonders*, which both feature plague as an epidemic that has greatly contributed to the establishing of the modern boundaries of the individual and the state. The texts problematize the integrity of the social body, the skin being the locus and metaphor for the clash of pre-modern and modern methods of surveillance as well as “the emergence of Western guilt culture” (Cantor 211). Medieval plague also initiated new systems of economic production, while early modern outbreaks contributed to the birth of the masculinized medical profession. Enclosed spaces—be it a quarantined country, a city, a village or a house as well as the people who are managing the bodies in these spaces—tell about the historical constructedness and eventual claustrophobic unmaintainability of cultural boundaries. Whether it is referred to as the plague, Black Death or pestilence, this epidemic has remained strongly

erőteret, amelyben a forma mint “festészeti tény” (factum) újra összeáll. Vagyis a diagram kimeríthetetlen potencia: káoszcsíra, káoszmosz” (12).

resonant and value-laden trope in the last six centuries, resurfacing at the time of any kind of epidemic calamity.

I have read *Pestilence* as a novel which depicts the shift from pre-modern to modern notions of the body, narrative, state and economy. By interpreting the novel from a somatic and a spatial point of view, the relativization and cultural constructedness of “purity”, “civilization” and “welfare” emerge. The metaphors of bodily filth (the grotesque, carnivalistic body, excrement, the figure of the leper, sexuality and the plague itself) along with the text’s fragmented, episodic structure and satirical style underline the epistemological distance between the reader’s 21st-century and the novel’s 14th-century points of view. The dichotomization of the spaces of East and West, Continental and Muslim readings of plague as well as the feudal and capitalistic systems of production initiate the modern notions of the subject as a biopolitical agent. *Year of Wonders*, on the other hand, builds on early modern views on subjectivity, taxonomizing it by grasping the competing ideologies of the protestant Anglican church and the fledgling, internally divided medical establishment. The spatial control device of the quarantine and the cunning woman’s—a liminal figure between the female witch and the male doctor—treatment of plagued bodies outline the scientized biopolitical structures of the ensuing era of the Enlightenment, leading up to (dis)infected 19th-century cholera scenarios.

When representing Victorian cholera, Matthew Kneale’s novel demonstrates the infiltration of the cultural and spatial turns into the humanities, its putrefying London disclosing a desire of contemporary writing to purify our obsessive heritage of the Victorian era as a dark double and neat predecessor of 21st-century biopolitics. Although Roland Barthes claims in *Sade/Fourier/Loyola* that “shit has no odour when written” (137), the novel still manages to recreate a formative historical moment both for our senses and intellect. Similarly, *An Imperfect Lens* uses a colonial setting to pose questions about 19th-century images of political and medical authority in the face of a sanitary disaster, featuring not the vast sewage system but the tiny microscope lens and the molecularization of life as its central spatial metaphor, revealing the mysteriousness of the age-old and invisible cholera bacillus of mythical, oriental proportions. The colonial language of epidemiology can also be read today as a landmark of globalized security fears: “[n]othing can bring back the hygienic shields of colonial boundaries. The age of globalization is the age of universal contagion”, argue Hardt and Negri in *Empire* (136). The very fact that cholera is an exclusively human infection, and neither quarantine nor vaccines can be used against it (Bollet 91-95) makes it an essentially uncontainable disease, a fertile source of fiction even today, as the number of postcolonial novels featuring it as a symbol of the Other’s invasive threat shows. The two novels in a broader sense pose the question how

21st-century cultural spaces have been created in connection with public health. By their panoramic and microscopic perspectives, *Sweet Thames* and *An Imperfect Lens* recreate and review entrenched cultural distinctions both of the episteme of 18th-century Enlightenment (miasmatic explanations) and 20th-century AIDS-stigmatization (risky lifestyles), since cholera “was considered a filth disease, believed to occur chiefly in crowded and unhygienic living conditions, such as those of the poor or the common foot soldier. And like AIDS, cholera was blamed on its victims. (Cohen *Embodied* 42). Thus, 19th-century notions of temperance and cleanliness bear close resemblance to contemporary conceptions of hygienic sexual mores and often ageist ideas of wellness. The sanitary, racial, and sexual crises depicted in the texts raise current questions of what is still deemed to be symbolically rejected and materially ejected from the social and the individual body. The question of the boundary between public and private spaces also lurks behind Kristeva’s point: “[i]t is thus not the lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order” (*Powers of Horror* 4)—be it civic, personal colonial or national (b)order.

For Ben Highmore, one of the major achievements of de Certeau’s treatment of cultural continuity is that “such history will work to unsettle the notion of centre and margin” (147), and this argument also seems to apply to neo-Victorian and historical novels like Matthew Kneale’s *Sweet Thames* and Anne Roiphe’s *An Imperfect Lens*. By the use of ubiquitous spatial metaphors and the vertical stratification of the spatial hierarchy of urban structures, the novels construct a low-angle perspective of a period of European cultural history where the underground inspace of the sewage system and the upsurge of contagion are written onto the social body of metropolitan London and colonial Alexandria. When epidemiology and especially the fight against cholera showed that “medicine becomes a central strut in the foundations of modern statism” (During 50) and created the basis of present-day biopolitical practices within public health. Metropolitan and colonial filth thus seem to be equally overwhelming and symbolically revealing of the culturally constructed notions of cleanliness.

Last but not least, Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Line of Beauty* and Alfred Corn’s *Part of His Story* represent the early days of the AIDS epidemic in a London setting, using gay male aesthete protagonists to showcase the isolation and social death of the AIDS victim, various strategies of distancing the lethal experience by means of national, class and sexual othering. Without any direct political involvement, these are essentially stories of loneliness and loss, depicting the (representational) work of mourning. In *The Line of Beauty*, Nick Guest has been interpreted as a pharmakos figure who challenges and at the same time sacrificially saves the conservative elite’s immunity, while his aestheticism and decadence cannot save him from the dangers of excommunication and contagion. *Part of His Story*, on the other hand, portrays AIDS

as a his/story, a personal and (by now) historicized calamity, where the city of London becomes an individualized memorial for the American traveller writing his own narrative as a work of mourning—as it turns out, for himself as well.

AIDS today in the era of the “Post-AIDS” (Barbour *Meddling with Mythology* 3) is no longer viewed as an apocalyptic threat, but rather as yet another chronic disease (2). The body of AIDS is essentially conceived of today as an immunological body with risky boundaries, fitting the representational history of the precarious, increasingly medicalized human subject:

[t]he bacteriological body had been static before and after the assault by germs; the endocrinological body ran hot and cold, oily and dry, not coincidentally (in the first anxious post-war years when endocrinology briefly had its heyday) mapping the gendered tropes of emotionality. The immunological body was more gracefully fluid and fragile, like a dancer in a delicately balanced environment in which it was placed almost without boundaries. (Patton, Cindy 59)

Historically, the AIDS epidemic seems to be inseparable from the culturally and medically changing notions of the boundaries of the self as well as the emergence of the culture of security, that is, political immunity: “AIDS might simply not have been organisable into a coherent nosology at an earlier historical moment. [...] in the absence of a concept of the immune system developed during the 1960s and 1970s, as opposed to the earlier and simpler concept of immunity, the disease ‘AIDS’ would have been difficult to conceptualise” (Waldby 55). On the whole, “the HIV infected are subjects who publicly bear witness to the mortality of us all, and to the inability of medicine to find a cure for this ultimate encroachment of nature upon culture. HIV infection involves a permanent and indissoluble form of lethal hybridity, where virus and host cannot be functionally separated” (2). The AIDS pandemic can also be interpreted as a foreshadowing of future tendencies in the symbolic and medical treatment of mass calamities, the transformation of the private sphere and emerging “neo-celibacy” (Sontag *Illness* 165): “cultural and political responses to AIDS, which are at once a throwback to medieval notions of sin and disease, and a confrontation with a cybernetic future of slow viruses and technologized sex” (Patton, Cindy 5). In a welfare society, cultural expectations include an individual power position between choice and chance, and falling a victim to AIDS is something against cultural orthodoxy in itself, that results in the loss of the integrity and continuity of the self.

Based on the six novels it seems that death as a result of an epidemic disease is both a monumentalized (see for instance the statues of plague saints, cholera stones, AIDS quilts) and

culturally repressed element of modernity's cultural memory. Thus, Ricoeur's notion of death as "the absent in history" can be read as an identification of the novels' addressing of epidemics which can also offer new models of coming to terms with the problem of increasingly privatized death:

[t]here is indeed a history of death—whether in the West or elsewhere—which constitutes one of the most remarkable conquests in the domain of the history of mentalités and of representations. [...] Death marks, so to speak, the absent in history. The absent in historiographical discourse. At first sight, the representation of the past as the kingdom of the dead seems to condemn history to offering to our reading no more than a theatre of shadows, stirred by survivors in possession of a suspended sentence of death. One escape remains: considering the historiographical operation to be the scriptural equivalent of the social ritual of entombment, of the act of sepulcher. (*Memory* 365)

The three thematic chapters have thus attempted to show that the (re)literalization of plague metaphors, the (r)ejection of wasted bodies, and the impossibility of immunity serve as a 21st-century palimpsest of human embodiment, somatic anxiety and death. By reading contagious fiction one might achieve an imaginary understanding of the polluted bodies we never want to become but somehow feel haunted by. In this sense, reading epidemics is a personal cathartic ritual, an ethical imperative, somewhat like in the case of communal sacrifices, where "[t]he victim dies and the spectators share in what his death reveals" (Bataille *Eroticism* 22).

*

Although the germ war against our invisible enemies is not likely to ever end, the closed, healthy, Western humanist body again and again becomes the reconfigured ideal of agency; and the contaminating, polluting, abject body still appears as the primary threat of transgressing bodily and social boundaries. The ever-corrupt human body has been evoking catastrophic and cathartic discourses of (dis)order for centuries, and the cultural study of contagious disease as well as its contemporary literary depictions primarily show the historically invariable human need and inability to take full control of our individual and collective bodies. Neither the arrival, nor the departure of such calamities is ever to be fully disciplined, and Roy Porter's point about the plague and cholera could stand for all massive epidemic outbreaks: "[t]he plague was not conquered; it disappeared from Britain after 1666, but this had nothing to do with medicine [...] The same applies to cholera in the nineteenth century. It came; it conquered; it receded. Cleaner towns and water supplies had some impact, medicine none" (*Epidemics* 60). The point that

“cholera was a concept before it was a disease” (Hamlin 22) is similarly universal, as it emphasizes how current socio-cultural tensions continuously breed discourses of disease.

By the 20th century, technological, scientific and social advancement increasingly created a normalized belief in the West’s biopolitical power, its control gradually permeating citizens’ bodies, as Nicolas Rose explains:

the vital politics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was a politics of health—of rates of birth and death, of diseases and epidemics, of the policing of water, sewage, foodstuffs, graveyards, and of the vitality of those agglomerated in towns and cities. Across the first half of the twentieth century this concern with the health of the population and its quality became infused with a particular understanding of the inheritance of a biological constitution and the consequences of differential reproduction of different subpopulations; this seemed to oblige politicians in so many countries to try to manage the quality of the population, often coercively and sometimes murderously, in the name of the future of the race. But the vital politics of our own century looks rather different. It is neither delimited by the poles of illness and health, nor focused on eliminating pathology to protect the destiny of the nation. Rather, it is concerned with our growing capacities to control, manage, engineer, reshape, and modulate the very vital capacities of human beings as living creatures. It is, I suggest, a politics of “life itself” (*The Politics of Life Itself* 3)

Today, however, when global health and the symbolic and physical “filth” of the nations are in constant struggle with each other amidst the still ongoing migration crisis, the spatial and somatic boundaries of cleanliness and safety are more questionable than ever, as “the modern counterpart of the plague ship is an airliner *en route* to a major city” (Gilman “The Subject of the Plague” 40). This is where modern embodiment and spatiality contagiously intersect each other in today’s “supraterritorial” or “deterritorialized” (Bashford *Medicine at the Border* 11) world, since “[w]hat has changed under the regime of ‘biosecurity’ is the geography of health security, for in an age of globalization it is neither enough nor possible to safeguard borders, the fight must be taken ‘over there’, before it ‘reaches here’” (Rose *The Politics of Life Itself* 22).

Consequently, we are witnessing the birth of surveillance medicine today, the brave new world of preventive body policing where medicine “turns increasingly to an extracorporeal space—often represented by the notion of lifestyle—to identify the precursors of future illness” (Waldby 120), often implying the medicalizing of nondisease conditions, too. Also, sociologists

widely agree that we live in a risk society, and its biosecurity regulations (in constant fear of the so called “super” germs’ invasion, for example) create ever stricter bio-military and normative concepts—potentially enhancing the interest of today’s novelists in past eras’ epidemics, reinscribing their discursive construction into 21st century consciousness. Within this new biopolitical age of security, Elizabeth Grosz differentiates between the present *global* age of security, and a *total* age of security to come in the future, where “there will be no more discussion of the state’s interests in an international milieu, but instead solely of the circulation of flows in a globalized world (26). Thus, the question needs to be asked “in what way is social insecurity currently becoming a component of social normality?” (Lorey 42).

The cultural imagery of precarious sameness/otherness has found its epochal biopolitical metaphor in the immune system recently, as “the point of intersection between political knowledge and medical knowledge is the common problem of preserving the body” (Esposito *Immunitas* 121-122). This immunitary semiosis is partly built on the military metaphors of the Same: “aliens now appear as germs and germs now literally as aliens, and the war for planetary control takes place at the cellular and biochemical levels. In this context, biological immunity appears as a radically potent physiological actor that defends humanity against a hostile otherness, which threatens to eradicate its existence as a species” (Cohen “Metaphorical Immunity” 142). Peter Sloterdijk also underlines the role of the individual’s body performance in the space of the globalized present:

[i]n this context [of globalization] the epochal tendency towards forms of individualistic life discloses its immunological meaning: in today’s advanced ‘societies’ it is individuals, perhaps for the first time in the history of the convergence among hominids, who, inasmuch as they are bearers of immunitarian competencies, break away from collective bodies (which they have until that protected) and *en masse* now want to separate their own happiness and unhappiness from the preservation of the form of common politics .Today we are probably living the irreversible transformation of a collective politics addressed to the security of groups with an individualist immunitarian design.” (qtd. in Campbell *Improper Life* 90)

In connection with public health, the meanings of risk and responsibility have radically changed in the past decades, when in the face of global threats the individual’s decisions are ever more important with the achievements of biological reproduction, genetic engineering, plastic surgery and sports science. The stakes of the subject’s alleged power over its own embodiment represent the climax of the modern biopolitical project, as “the relative absence of religious

survival strategies in the face of death is now compensated for by a policy of self-care” (Shilling 191). The care of the self and being taken care of culminates in the experience of death. As Elias argues, advancement has paradoxically brought the increasing dehumanization of death as well—by hyperhygiene: [t]he fact that, without being specifically intended, the early isolation of the dying occurs with particular frequency in the more advanced societies is one of the weaknesses of these societies. (*Loneliness of the Dying* 2).

Parallel with the biopolitical changes of the body, the legal concept of the citizen has also been transformed. Agamben has already warned that the “separation between humanitarianism and politics that we are experiencing today is the extreme phase of the separation of the rights of man from the rights of the citizen” (*Homo Sacer* 133); while Rose defines “biological citizenship” as both individualizing and collectivizing (134), and he has also coined other notions of 21st-century personhood:

[t]he forms of citizenship entailed here often involve quite specialized scientific and medical knowledge of one’s condition: one might term this “informational biocitizenship.” They involve the usual forms of activism such as campaigning for better treatment, ending stigma, gaining access to services, and the like: one might term this “rights biocitizenship.” But they also involve new ways of making citizenship by incorporation into communities linked electronically by email lists and websites: one might term this “digital biocitizenship.” (135)

On the whole, 21st-century late capitalism is expected to offer a comprehensive sense of safety to its citizen-consumers along with the right of isolated individualism, as Žižek argues: “this is emerging as the central ‘human right’ in late-capitalist society: the right not to be harassed, to be kept at a safe distance from others. (‘From Politics to Biopolitics’ 508). The futuristic anxiety of invasion, or “cyberepidemiology (Gilman “The Subject of the Plague” 33) also poses the threat of a digital plague, where the “viral anxieties provoked by the second Gutenberg revolution recapitulate the pestilential anxieties provoked by the first plague and cyberplague” (*Representing the Plague* 230). The staggering fact that the United States of America spends four times as much money on informational safety than on AIDS (Esposito *Immunitas* 3) also seems to support this idea. This perennial, global condition of health anxiety is what Sontag calls in connection with AIDS the era or condition of “Apocalypse from Now On” (*Illness* 173). Jean Baudrillard in *The Agony of Power* in a similar vein articulates the moral, ethical task of today’s medically endangered and economically welfare-provided first world citizen as follows:

[w]e are not succumbing to oppression or exploitation, but to profusion and unconditional care [to the power of those who make sovereign decisions about our well-being. From there, revolt has a different meaning: it no longer targets the forbidden, but permissiveness, tolerance, excessive transparency—the Empire of Good. For better or worse. Now you must fight against everything that wants to help you. (88)

Baudrillard here describes a desirable auto-immune reaction within the current social body, taking the modern project of security and individualism to its logical extreme. Elias claims something similar about the modern subject's internalized confrontational impulses in general: [b]ut drives, the passionate affects, that can no longer directly manifest themselves in the relationships between people, often struggle no less violently within the individual against this supervising part of themselves (*The Civilizing Process* 375). The increasing 21st-century tendency to distrust welfare and security services is symptomatically represented by the recent upsurge of a genre which might be called the anti-wellness dystopia film, such as *The Road to Wellville* (Alan Parker, 1994), *Hotel Splendide* (Terence Gross, 2000), *Youth* (Paolo Sorrentino, 2015), *The Cure for Wellness* (Gore Verbinski, 2016) and *Scarred Hearts* (Radu Jude, 2016). These films thematise the anxiety of individualized and mechanized wellbeing, and seem to offer an organic continuation of the insights of the present study, along with the contemporary literary depictions of health and disease, for instance the works of Oliver Sacks, Lewis Thomas and Sherwin Nuland, Atul Gawande, Abraham Verghese, Henry Marsh, Danielle Ofri, Siddhartha Mukherjee, Paul Kalanithi and Gavin Francis.

The above realization about the lethal dangers of safety, health and civilization does not mean a step back for our study to square one, to the moment before the establishment of the first pesthouse, as “history is not the recovery of the truth of bodies or lives in the past; it is the engendering of new kinds of bodies and new kinds of lives” (Grosz “Histories of the Present” 23). What reading contagious fiction today can ultimately show our sense and senses is that “to have pain is to have certainty; to hear about pain is to have doubt” (Scarry 13), a constructive doubt concerning the biopolitical “given” we all dwell in. Within the Western heritage of biopolitical evolution, the past experience of epidemics thus reveal these diseases as amoral and timeless entities which biologically precede and morally transcend human history, and whose essentially transgressive and uncontainable nature again and again forces human culture to redefine its own somato-spatial boundaries.

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