

The Crowd as a Pandemic Character: Determinism, Entertainment and Transgression in Literature

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Abstract

This chapter discusses the portrayal of crowds as a pandemic character. It focuses on the paradoxical perception of the masses as both the main target and the root cause of the cholera outbreaks of the 1800s. First, it presents historical reasons for the emergence of the public tumults. Then, it tackles the literary imagination of crowds, seen as an entity in itself, homogeneous and unchanging. Fictional crowds customarily laugh and drink without considering risks, with outbreaks erupting in their midst almost as a punishment for their lack of restraint. Texts mentioned at this point include Heine's *The Cholera in Paris* (1832), Belli's *Er Còllera Mòribus* (1835), Lambruschini's *Il Choléra a Roda* (1835) or De Roberto's *San Placido* (1887). Finally, I consider how the crowds are seen as ignorant and destructive by nature. They are taken as an embodied expression of the outbreak; yet, if cholera is intangible and mysterious, crowds can be easily observed, explained and held accountable.

INTRODUCTION

Cholera has exerted an enormous influence in recent history. Since it first reached continental proportions in the early 19th century, it has caused seven pandemics that resulted in millions of deaths and has influenced almost every aspect of life. Cholera induced economic and political instability, disrupted human displacement patterns (military action, pilgrimage, tourism), and encouraged major changes in culture (personal hygiene), society (public health campaigns, sanitation, re-urbanization) and science (germ theory of disease).

Cholera also gave rise to tumults and riots all around the world. In previous centuries, other contagious diseases – above all plague and smallpox –, had proved capable of unleashing turmoil. However, the cholera riots are set apart for two reasons. First, they were remarkably consistent not only in space and time, but across different cultures and political systems. Second, they were unprecedented in the consistent attacks against authorities, which they provoked: whereas previous riots motivated by epidemics tended to persecute marginalized groups, the cholera riots overwhelmingly targeted the rich and powerful (government, aristocrats, religious leaders) (cf. Cohn Jr. 2017). As such, cholera riots were feared as a political force to be reckoned with, not least for their potential to foster revolutions (cf. Evans 1992, 152).

Critics have pointed out how the French Revolution was vital for the emergence of crowds as a literary character (cf. Tumeo 2011, 44; Matucci 2003, 15). Crowds appear constantly in 19th century fiction and the literary representation of the crowd has been indispensable for the formation of ‘crowd psychology’ as a field of study. As Dufief remarks, besides drawing from history, psychology and sociology, the *psychologie des foules* also kept in constant dialogue with literature (1990, 21f.):

Le Bon [...] was an attentive reader of Zola; writers, in their turn, wrote novels in which they limit themselves on occasion to recopying Le Bon, as Rosny was to do in *The Red Wave*. Politicians served as models for writers and sociologists; Barrès, just like Le Bon, was interested in Boulanger.^{1,2}

In this chapter, I analyze the representation of crowds in a few literary texts featuring cholera, most of which belong to Italian literature, hoping to demonstrate how and why pandemic narratives employ large groups as a single character. I start with a brief discussion of historical reasons for the emergence of cholera riots. Next, I tackle some recurrent characteristics of tumults in literature: uniformity, determinism, unison. I then investigate how crowds are represented as fearless and irresponsible; they laugh and drink in times of epidemics without considering

1 Unless indicated otherwise, all translations of foreign-language quotations and italicized emphases are by the author. Original quotations are cited after each translation in the footnote.

2 “Le Bon [...] a été le lecteur attentif de Zola; les écrivains, de leur côté, écriront des romans où ils se contentent parfois de recopier Le Bon, comme le fera Rosny dans *La Vague Rouge*. Les hommes politiques servent de modèles aux écrivains et aux sociologues; Barrès, tout comme Le Bon, s’intéressera à Boulanger” (Dufief 1990, 21f.).

risks. Their search for hedonism is framed as a transgression that invites for some kind of supernatural punishment. Finally, I consider how, in their cultural context, crowds are seen as ignorant and destructive by nature. They are taken as human equivalents to the epidemic, but differ from it to the extent they can be seen, touched and imbued with intention. Thus, crowds stand opposite to the randomness of disease for being easy to understand and blame.

HISTORICAL RESPONSES TO THE ARRIVAL OF CHOLERA

Diseases are more than biomedical phenomena; they are also social and cultural constructions that are imbued with meaning through multi-layered narratives. Since knowing the root-cause of the problem is essential for treating or coping with most medical conditions, diseases naturally call for narratives of origins that may offer insights, meaning and a sense of control. This is particularly true in the case of contagious diseases, for its gratuity and randomness defy many of our beliefs about the world. Furthermore, epidemics are invasive by definition, and expectedly give rise to questions like “*where did it come from?*”, “*how did it get here?*” or “*who is to blame?*”.

In the case of the cholera pandemics, European sources have routinely attributed these to Asia since at least the 16th century – although, as shown by recent scholarship (cf. Hamlin 2009, 39-50), upon scant and problematic evidence. The cholera *vibrio* kills through severe dehydration: an infected person suffers from uncontrollable diarrhoea and vomiting, which results in weakness and lethargy. It also causes the victim to look ‘mummified’ through apparent sudden weight loss, sunken eyes, leathery and wrinkled skin and a bluish colouring of the face, hands and feet. If not treated, it can cause death in up to 50% of cases. To put it simply, in the 19th century, cholera was a humiliating and terrifying condition.

Cholera’s assault on the digestive system and its spread via the faecal-oral route make it a disease of poverty. Its transmission relies on defective sanitary infrastructures and contaminated food and water. Furthermore, it targets the undernourished and those with compromised immune-systems (the young, the old or the sick). This means that the poor are more likely to develop an infection and less likely to recover from it – and this was especially the case in the 1800s, when sanitary standards in overcrowded cities were notoriously low. A few statistics can prove this point: if, during the Naples outbreak of 1836, casualties among ‘the affluent and property owners’ accounted for 9.5% of deaths, but 87.8% among ‘artisans, traders and others’ (cf. Tognotti 2000, 151). Similarly, during the

Hamburg outbreak of 1892, people earning 800 to 1 000 marks were twelve times more likely to die than those with an income of 50 000 or more (a death rate of 62‰ against 5‰) (cf. Evans 2017, ch. 4).

Both rich and poor were quick to understand that cholera preferred the socially vulnerable but they interpreted the phenomenon in quite different ways. The bourgeoisie saw their resistance as a biological counterpart to their economic privilege, in some instances even exaggerating their advantage to claim immunity. For instance, a Parisian newspaper asserted in 1832 that “*all the men* stricken with this epidemic ... come from the class of the people” (Kudlick 1996, 55); while the chronicler Raffaello Mastriani, declared in 1836 that the populace of Naples had reasons to fear, “because this evil raged *exclusively* among the miserable” (Mastriani 1836, 63).³ The belief in the invulnerability of the upper classes was disseminated enough for Octave Mirbeau to satirize it in *L'Épidémie* (1898), in which a so-called “anti-scientific” event takes place: “Gentlemen... an unbelievable novelty... frightful ... overwhelming! [...] A bourgeois has died!” (27).⁴ Furthermore, cholera’s humiliating symptoms encouraged affluent families to keep silent about it and, if there were deaths, to attribute the *causa mortis* to other more respectable conditions – that is likely the case of Leopardi, who allegedly died of digestive complications during the Naples outbreak of 1837 and whose body went notoriously missing.

On the other hand, the poor, horrified by cholera and suspicious of government action, interpreted the health inequalities as intentional and designed. Widely disseminated rumours claimed that outbreaks were, in fact, the result of poisoning campaigns devised by states to control the growth of the population. Such conspiracy theories sprang spontaneously around the world and shared remarkable similarities in their composition and scope, even if they were not connected in any way (cf. Cohn Jr. 2017). Indeed, multiple factors gave credence to such beliefs in an age when the very concepts of public health and scientific medicine were still in the making. By the time the pandemic arrived in Europe, Malthusian ideas about demographic control had been in circulation for over three decades. Additionally, government actions often came across to the populace as arbitrary and excessively harsh – forced hospitalizations or confiscation of dead bodies were not uncommon, for example. Furthermore, private physicians regularly fled or even denied

3 “[...] ben n’avevan d’onde, inferocendo il male esclusivamente fra la misera gente, più necessariamente priva di mezzi, mancante di ogni agio del comun vivere, pascentesi per necessità di malsani cibi” (Mastriani 1836, 63).

4 “Messieurs... Une nouvelle incroyable... affreuse... foudroyante ! [...] Un bourgeois est mort!” (Mirbeau 1898, 27).

assistance for fear of contagion (cf. Sorcinelli 1986, 63-88). The poor also suffered the most with the reverberations of preventive strategies (restricted mobility, product shortages, economic losses), while social inequality and corruption meant that rules would apply differently to different social groups. Moreover, conspiracy theories were generally well received because they were built upon deeply-rooted beliefs about secret groups willingly trying to damage society (plague-spreaders, witches, Jews).

Once conspiracy theories collided with the general feelings of fear, helplessness and abandonment, riots swiftly followed. The first of these took place in the Russian countryside as soon as the pandemic reached Europe in 1830 and 1831; and continued to flare up from this point onwards. Samuel Cohn Jr. (2017, 164) calculates that, in a timespan of only fourteen months, at least seventy-two cholera riots took place in the United Kingdom alone. In Canada, in 1832, the police had to summon the military after an unruly crowd dismantled Quebec City's hospital (ibid., 169). In Paris, the carnival and riots attracted enormous international attention, in part for the city's revolutionary history and cultural relevance as the *ville lumière*, but in part also due to a vivid journalistic description by Heinrich Heine that had circulated broadly around the continent. Riots spiked in the 1830s, and continued to emerge until the end of the century, especially in Italy.

LITERARY RESPONSES TO CHOLERA: DETERMINISM, GROUP UNISON AND PEDAGOGY

These disturbances intrigued literary authors who felt an immediate urge to describe and explain them in narratives. A great number – if not a majority – of the cholera texts I have identified elsewhere (cf. Guerios 2021) feature crowds and tumults in some form or another. That happens to such an extent, that texts rarely focus on convalescence itself; rather, cholera is a social ailment that usually serves to create a tumultuous background against which characters can be tested. Once that happens, they can triumph – as Angelo in *Le Hussard sur le toit* or the physician Axel Munthe in his *Letters from a Mourning City* – or fall – as Lydgate in *Middlemarch* or Aschenbach in *Death in Venice*. Thus, cholera is overwhelmingly portrayed as a disease of the social body, quite unlike tuberculosis or cancer, which are generally seen as conditions of the individual. That is already evident in the titles: instead of focusing on individuals – *Dombey and Son*, *La Dame aux camélias*, *The Death of Ivan Ilyitch* –, texts about cholera usually name the disease, its location and time.

These texts are usually interested in exploring the outbreak as a collective problem, trying to embrace the epidemic as a phenomenon in itself, instead of adopting the partial perspective of one single character. As we shall shortly observe, some of them are entirely constructed around collective characters, sometimes lacking individual ones altogether. That applies to contagious diseases in general – plague, yellow fever, typhus, influenza – and encompasses many canonical epidemic narratives, including Thucydides’ description of the Plague of Athens, the prologue of the *Decameron*, or Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year*, all of which describe a mosaic of human reactions towards pestilence without following anyone in particular. Plague images (triumphs of death, *dances macabres*) are also cases in point, since they commonly portray the demise of large groups of anonymous individuals who personify entire social groups.

Investigating the representation of riots in fiction, Birchall (2015, 57) shows how violent crowds are repeatedly described from the outside by an external observer who takes a position of distance from it. Main characters rarely mix with the anonymous group and, when they do, are taken aback by its irrationality, drunkenness and cruelty. That is very much the case for the cholera riots too. All the texts I could locate treat the theme by simplistic oppositions between civilization and barbarity, notwithstanding their occasional acknowledgement of the populace’s suffering and despair. Even when no violence takes place – as is the case of the *partying crowds* –, individuals within the group are dehumanized and prove incapable of identity and thought. Moreover, despite emerging spontaneously and proving impossible to calm down, crowds are, at the same time, manoeuvred by malicious agitators who stir them into violence. If rare voices of dissent arise, they are either ignored or attacked by the ‘fanatics’. For example, in Verga’s *Quelli dei Colèra* (1887), a “good soul” gets ahead of the crowd to urge the soon-to-be-killed actors to escape.⁵ Later, yet another effort to prevent violence makes the narrator to comment as if in surprise: “there were also some good souls in that mob. But the others did not want to hear reason”.⁶ In other words, crowds can be directed only towards ‘evil’: if they are *partying crowds* they tend towards recklessness and debauchery; if *rioting crowds*, towards violence and destruction.

A key mechanism to build such representations is to treat conspiracy theories and riots as inevitable repercussions of outbreaks; ones which are unchanging and

5 “Un’anima buona si mise le gambe in spalla, e corse [...] a dirgli che scappasse” (Verga 1887, 295).

6 “—No! no! non li ammazzate ancora! Vediamo prima se sono innocenti! vediamo prima se portano il colèra! [sic] — C’erano pure delle anime buone in quella ressa. Ma gli altri non volevano intender ragioni” (Verga 1887, 296).

constant throughout history. For instance, in *I Misteri di Napoli* (1870) by Francesco Mastriani, it is said that “*wherever* a plague erupted, the people believed in poisoning” (185);⁷ in *L'Esercito Italiano Durante il Colera del 1867* (1869), De Amicis reports that “superstition, fear and misery, are assiduous company to the great dying *in all peoples and in all ages*” (286);⁸ while in *Contes Nouveaux* (1833), Jules Janin laments that “[t]he crowd is so cruel and so stupid! *Everywhere and always* the same, in London, in Saint Petersburg, in Paris; *always the same*” (63).⁹ Given that the populace is inherently credulous, and that tumults are among an outbreak’s inescapable consequences, no further analysis is necessary. There is no need to address the situation beyond dispersing groups by force.

Another way to naturalize tumult is to pretend the crowd is capable of single and unified speech. This is achieved by group members somehow speaking in unison, similar to the implementation of the *chorus* in classic tragedy. That is the case of the *Quadri Storici del Cholera di Napoli* (1837), which was published by the Count Sterlich immediately after the disease subsided. The text presents itself as a historical chronicle, even if its brief chapters are anecdotal and rarely reference any sources. In his account, once cholera reaches Naples, “a chorus of four hundred thousand voices echoed in unison” and screamed “‘the Cholera!’” (19).¹⁰ The statement can only be taken as figurative, since it is clearly impossible for individuals to tacitly coordinate themselves on a scale such as this. Authors often count on the good will of the public to accept some freedom of expression: readers are expected to understand that not everybody is actually pronouncing words at the same time; this is a textual liberty, which is nevertheless supposed to encapsulate the crowd’s ‘true spirit’. Readers should accept that as part of the fictional pact – and the pattern is so widespread that one presumes they often did. As Birchall noticed, “[i]f such depictions [of crowds] appeal to readers, it is because they comfort them by confirming and flattering prejudices they already hold” (2015, 56). This effect is even more remarkable if we consider this trope’s

7 “Dovunque scoppiò una peste, il popolo credé agli avvelenamenti” (Mastriani 1870, 185).

8 “Ma per quanto fossero disposti a fare pel bene del paese l’esercito e i cittadini animosi ed onesti, tre grandi forze nemiche dovevano rendere per molta parte e per lungo tempo inefficace l’opera loro: la superstizione, la paura, la miseria, assidue compagne della moria presso tutti i popoli e in tutti i tempi” (De Amicis 1869, 286).

9 “Elle est si cruelle et si stupide, la foule! Partout et toujours la même, à Londres, à Saint-Petersburg, à Paris; toujours la même” (Janin 1833, 63).

10 “— Il cholera! — era l’eco di quattrocentomila cittadini, era l’unisono d’un coro di quattrocentomila voci. — Il cholera!” (Sterlich 1837, 19).

presence in many non-fictional and journalistic discourses that have presumably, a different relationship to truth.

These tendencies can also be spotted in Luigi Settembrini's autobiography *Ricordanze della mia Vita* (written in 1849-1851, published in 1879). It contains a chapter dedicated to cholera, which starts by avowing that "*Always and anywhere* it has been a plague not previously known, the people [...] *always* believe that it is poison, and accuse its enemies" (38).¹¹ It proceeds to describe how "finding myself helpless in the midst of so many who wanted to shoot cholera" (80),¹² Settembrini tried to reason with the crowd, hoping to appease the spirits by quoting from Thucydides and Manzoni. They answer as one (*mi rispuosero*) and, when they start to speak, their individual sentences are reported in bulk without any differentiation. This common strategy serves the purpose of maintaining the individual identity as opaque and imprecise as possible:

They were reasonable people, but spoke as if they were mad: their faces were transformed, their eyes wide open. "I saw a dog die ten minutes after a woman threw him a piece of bread." "And the woman?" "She was already gone." "Here is a letter from Cosenza: 'Dearest friend, beware because our enemies want to poison us like rats. [...]" "I spoke to a man of standing who [...] saw a man [throw a white matter into the fountain]" "Fool! when you see him flee, shoot him [...]" (80f).¹³

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- 11 "Sempre e dovunque è stata una peste non conosciuta prima, il popolo che vede in un subito morire e non sa come e perché, crede sempre che sia veleno, e ne accagiona i nemici, se ne ha, o quelli che egli odia. Il nostro popolo credette che fosse veleno e che il governo lo facesse spargere, mandandone le casse agl'intendenti, e questi lo dividesero tra i loro cagnotti i quali lo gittavano nella acque" (Settembrini 1964, 38).
- 12 "Trovandomi inerme in mezzo a tanti che volevano fare a schioppettate col cholera, io mi provai una volta a dire [...]" (Settembrini 1964, 80).
- 13 "Erano uomini di senno, e parlavano come matti: avevano le facce trasformate, gli occhi spalancati. «Ho visto io morire un cane dieci minuti dopo che una donna gli ha gittato un pezzo di pane». «E la donna?». «Era già scomparsa». «Ecco qui una lettera da Cosenza: 'Amico carissimo, guardatevi perché i nostri nemici ci vogliono attossicare come topi. Moriamo almeno con le armi in mano'. E chi mi scrive non è uno sciocco». «Ho parlato con un proprietario il quale co' suoi guardiani è andato in campagna, ed ha veduto un uomo vestito come un calderaio che beveva a una fontana: egli ha sospettato, ha detto: 'ferma lá', e quegli è fuggito come una lepre. Hanno guardato l'acqua, e v'era una materia bianca gettatavi da colui». «Sciocco! quando lo vedi fuggire, tiragli una fucilata, e fallo cadere. Se m'accade a me, io gli tiro al volo" (Settembrini 1964, 80f.).

On occasion, the group is capable of acting together, as if its individual members were a single organic entity with multiple legs and arms. That is how De Amicis portrays the attack on a soldier who was believed to be spreading poison:

He was reached, *seized by ten hands*, [...] [and] threatened with death. — Where do you keep the poison? — *ten voices asked in one*. — I have no poison... — the soldier stammered, white as a corpse. — Where do you keep the poison? — insisted the others menacingly.¹⁴ (317)

These characteristics are also evident in the short story *Il Cholera a Roda* (1835) by Raffaello Lambruschini. The text was published independently in Florence in the year Italy experienced its first outbreaks. It tells the story of how a small town in the outskirts of Barcelona was afflicted by violence. In a preface addressed ‘To the Tuscan people’, the author attests that his story is based on actual events and he urges his fellow citizens to avoid repeating these by uniting, trusting God and respecting the authorities. Moved by the sudden multiplication of riots, the author decides to write a short moral tale, which he hopes, might help prevent havoc in Tuscany. His aim is to achieve this by means of education, as evident in the text’s subtitle: *racconto istruttivo* (an instructive story). As if speaking with disorderly children, Lambruschini tries to convince the populace to behave: “[Tuscan people,] I wanted to teach you (*ammaestrare*), so that you do not let yourself be seduced, should it ever happen that anyone proclaims the same nonsense among us. Learn, oh good and docile people [...]” (3).¹⁵ The paternalistic tone is reinforced by the choice of the verb: instead of the more common and neutral *insegnare* (to teach), the author prefers *ammaestrare*, that can also mean ‘to tame or train animals’ – in effect, crowds are regularly compared to flocks of animals in the cholera texts. Despite presenting itself as a preventive strategy, the story engages very much with the *topoi* of unison and determinism. The author treats ‘the people’ as a single entity and, if he hopes to prevent turmoil, is precisely because he believes it is forthcoming.

14 “Fu raggiunto, afferrato da dieci mani, tradotto dietro una casa romita, messo colle spalle al muro, minacciato di morte. — Dove tieni il veleno? — gli domandarono dieci voci in una. — Io non ho veleno... — rispose balbettando il soldato, bianco come un cadavere. — Dove tieni il veleno? — insisterono gli altri minacciosamente” (De Amicis 1869, 317).

15 “io ho voluto ammaestrarti, perché tu non ti lasci sedurre, se avverrà mai che alcuno spacci tra noi le medesime assurdità. Impara, o popolo, buono, docile, [...]” (Lambruschini 1835, 3).

The development of the story is in harmony with the didacticism of the preface. The first paragraph offers all the required background information – time, place, the anomalous event – by following the conventions of fairy tales. Then, the narrator turns to the “malevolous fools” spreading rumours of poisoning to the multitude, who “immediately believe whatever is said to them, and never reflect whether it can or cannot be” (6).¹⁶ Then, the crowd unifies and sparks out of control as a force of nature – another common trope:

“We are poisoned, we are poisoned,” was a voice that burst out like thunder that spread over everything and gradually increased, like the flood of a river, which swells when it receives the waters of the ravines, and roars and breaks the banks and floods and deserts a country. “We are poisoned, we are poisoned” – and woe to anyone who dared to answer “but who said so? how do you know?” Reason was not followed; they screamed, cursed and sought nothing but the poisoner.¹⁷ (6f.)

The emotional contagion is irresistible to every member who blindly follows the group’s least reasonable actors. Their identities dissolve within this uniformed mass, so much so that their screams are described in Italian by impersonal verb constructions (*si urlava, si bestemmiava*), a nuance which can not be immediately rendered into English. If translated word for word, the structure would be similar to those that express weather (‘it rains’), yet it would result in the ungrammatical formulation “it screamed, it cursed”, in which the pronoun ‘it’ would not designate a subject but rather the lack of one.

CHOLERA, DRINKING AND CARNIVAL

Not all literary tumults are violent, though. When cholera first appeared, a part of the population was not afraid of it. Many doubted it could even reach Europe, belittled its seriousness, or thought they could prevent it (cf. Guerios 2022).

16 “Gli ignoranti han questo difetto che credono subito qualunque cosa è detta loro, e non riflettono mai s’ella possa o non possa essere [...]” (Lambruschini 1835, 6).

17 “— Siamo avvelenati, siamo avvelenati, — fu una voce che scoppiò come un tuono, e si sparse per tutto, e s’accrebbe via via, come la piena d’un fiume, che ingrossa al ricevere giù le acque de’ borri, e muggia e rompe gli argini e allaga e diserta un paese. — Siamo avvelenati, siamo avvelenati: — e guai a chi avesse ardito rispondere «ma chi l’ha detto; come lo sapete?» Non si intendeva ragione; si urlava, si bestemmiava, e non si cercava d’altro che dell’avvelenatore” (Lambruschini 1835, 6f.).

Effectively, innumerable physicians and politicians were certain that the continent would evade the second cholera pandemic (1826-1838), as it had already done during the first (1817-1824). The so-called ‘Asiatic’ or ‘Indian’ cholera was perceived as Tropical and – as its very name ensured – would not thrive in the European colder climate. One such reassuring prediction is found in a letter from Leopardi to his sister; he mentions that “in here, the physicians laugh [at the prediction that cholera could enter Italy] because they don’t believe it” (Tognotti 2000, 28).¹⁸ Not only that, but even after outbreaks erupted, governments would deny or downplay its seriousness as a way to prevent panic.

Additionally, many people both within and without medicine believed that contagion could be avoided by strong alcohol. The idea captured the popular imagination because it promised to combine prevention and entertainment. Many caricatures explored the theme humorously (cf. Guerios 2021, 163-166), and so did G. G. Belli in *Er Còllera Mòribbus, Converzazione a l’osteria de la ggènzola indisposta e ariccontata co trentaquattro sonetti, e tutti de grinza* (written in 1835). This is a cycle of thirty-four sonnets written in the Roman dialect. It aims at creating a panorama of popular opinions by presenting the reader with a cacophony of unidentified voices – as stated in the subtitle, “dialogues in a tavern by the indisposed people”. The commoners who speak are seen with a certain paternalist sympathy, yet are also derided at the same time. Their opinions are often based on absurd assumptions, and arguments are presented using defective grammar and vocabulary – as such, readers are invited to laugh *with* and *at* the characters. The text seems to be conceived as a sort of anthropological document, which, despite containing fictional dialogues, is truthful to the ‘spirit of the masses’. Hence, it is unsurprising that it follows a similar pattern to others already mentioned. The first poem denies the existence of the disease (“this epidemic in my view, / is not among us, if it exists at all”) (848),¹⁹ while another builds up tension by assuring that “a rumour spreads that cholera is nothing less / than the effects of poison” (845).²⁰ However, rather than violence, the speaker instigates laughter by

18 “L’altra sera parlai colla commissione medica mandata da Roma a complimentare il Cholèra a Parigi, la quale ci promette la venuta del morbo in Italia: predizione di cui ridono i medici di qui, perché non ci credono” (Foschi 1983, 161 and Tognotti 2000, 28).

19 “che sta pidemia sarvo me tocco, / cqua da noi nun ce viè, sippuro è vvera” 1749. [Er còllera mòribbus] 1°.

20 “curre la sciarla mó ggnente de meno / ch’er collèra è l’affetto d’un veleno” 1756. [Er còllera mòribbus] 8°.

concluding: “to water, they can do as they wish, / on condition that they do not poison my wine” (845).²¹

There is a long cultural tradition that sees epidemics and festivities in relationship to one another: the *Decameron* is notoriously filled with stories and banquets; Brueghel’s paintings of plague and public celebrations are astoundingly similar; while medieval plague masks have turned from medical instruments into carnival costumes. A great majority of epidemic texts feature at least one party and some, as Pushkin’s *A Feast During the Plague* (2000 [1830]), are entirely built around the subject. The search for pleasures during a serious crisis comes across in these narratives as signs of natural irresponsibility and supernatural provocation. The festive behaviour, we are led to believe, calls for heavenly retribution; and, in fact, punishment usually arrives to those involved without delay. An illustration of this is found in Poe’s *The Mask of the Red Death* (1850 [1842]), a short story that was based on written cholera sources, as well as in the author’s own experience with the 1832 outbreaks in Boston and Philadelphia. In it, Prince Prospero hopes to escape the deadly pestilence by remaining isolated in a monastery with a thousand of his court nobles. They throw decadent feasts and masked balls every day; until, the Red Death itself appears at the party, and all revellers fall dead without exception. The dialect of transgression and retribution could not be clearer.

Interestingly, stories of the same kind are found in non-fictional reports. This is the case with Chateaubriand’s autobiography *Mémoires d’outre-tombe* (1900 [1849-1850]), which includes descriptions of the first Paris outbreak of 1832. Chateaubriand decries “the indifference of the crowd” because adults kept attending theaters during the crisis and children “played cholera, which they called the *Nicolas Morbus* and the *scoundrel Morbus*” (emphasis by Chateaubriand) (486).²² He even claims to have witnessed the strangest of deaths: “I saw drunkards at Barrière Street, sitting in front of a tavern door, drinking on a small wooden table and saying as they raised their glasses, ‘To your health, *Morbus!*’ *Morbus*, out of gratitude, rushed up, and they fell dead under the table” (486).²³ The description is certainly exaggerated, if not completely made up. We can declare that with

21 “Sull’acqua ponno fà cquanto j’aggrada, / purché nun zia d’avvenamme er vino” 1756. [Er còllera mòrribbus] 8°.

22 “Les enfants jouaient au choléra, qu’ils appelaient le *Nicolas Morbus* et le *scélérat Morbus*” (Chateaubriand 1900, 486).

23 “Et chacun continuait de vaquer à ses affaires, et les salles de spectacle étaient pleines. J’ai vu des ivrognes à la barrière, assis devant la porte du cabaret, buvant sur une petite table de bois et disant en élevant leur verre: « À ta santé, *Morbus!* » *Morbus*, par reconnaissance, accourait, et ils tombaient morts sous la table” (Chateaubriand 1900, 486).

confidence because the narrated facts are not consistent with biology. Cholera is abrupt and swift, to be sure, but even in the worst cases it requires a timespan of at least a few hours to kill. Moreover, symptoms only begin after an incubation period of between 18 to 120 hours (cf. Sack et al. 2004, 224). It is simply not possible for people to drop dead on the spot, struck down by it as if from a heart attack. Rather than describing a true event, this anecdote serves the purpose of conveying a just and immediate punishment for a transgression. Besides, it also evinces the temerity and irresponsibility of the drunkards – who appear to see little value in their own lives – and also bestows authority upon the alleged eyewitness.

The pattern of hedonistic behaviour followed by instant punishment surfaces quite often in pandemic narratives when the origins of an outbreak is brought to the fore – in what Priscilla Wald (2008) has defined as the ‘outbreak narrative’. In this particular case, the punishment goes beyond the irresponsible revellers, because the epidemic continues to spread after they die. Thus, this type of origin myth is used in both a direct and indirect way to blame, at least partially, certain behaviours, individuals or groups as being responsible for the outbreak.

The best example of that is found in Heinrich Heine’s so-called *The Cholera in Paris* (letter VI, dated April 19th 1832), part of a series of nine long journalistic texts that circulated in a German newspaper in 1831 and 1832, and achieved great acclaim when published in book form in 1833, both in German (*Französische Zustände*) and French (*De la France*). These were ‘letters to the public’ that commented on French politics and society by combining different elements of travel narratives, cultural essays and epistolary novels. Heine’s status as a privileged observer allowed him to report events as they unfold, presumably for being an eyewitness. Indeed, he says he was present in many instances, but in others he only refers to rumours and in some – as in the one we are about to discuss – he says nothing about his sources.

Heine describes the Paris outbreak in over twenty pages, from the moment it officially started to a mid-way point into the epidemic, about three weeks later, when no resolution is yet in sight. The letter contains many bleak passages of suffering and death, but they are accompanied with Heine’s characteristic irony, which occasionally creates humorous effects. The text follows a similar pattern of development to those already discussed: the great anxiety of contagion – or the lack of it –; references to Thucydides and Boccaccio – whom Heine mockingly promises to surpass –; and the unidentified crowd – the “merry people” from the week before, had now given way to “grim indifference”, “most terrible voices”, and “sorrowful faces” (Heine 1893, 163).

From the beginning, cholera is portrayed in relationship to the French Revolution in Heine’s letters: the disease is “a masked executioner who passed through

Paris with an invisible *guillotine ambulante*” (ibid., 162) and its “reign of terror [was] far more dreadful than the first, because the executions took place rapidly and mysteriously” (ibid.). Such comparisons made sense in view of recent events – cholera did spread during the *Age of Revolutions* (cf. Evans 1992) – but they also tackled deeper fears of the poor, of instability and social change.

According to Heine, apprehension in the population was initially not particularly great, because the London outbreak was said to have been mild and because the spring weather was sunny with clear skies, with the assumed result that the noxious clouds of miasmas were nowhere in sight. Consequently, Parisians celebrated the traditional carnival of the *Mi-Carême*, and merrily took to the streets “where one could even see maskers, who in caricatures of livid colour and sickly mien, mocked the fear of the cholera and the disease itself” (Heine 1893, 167). A sense of transgression is already noticeable in these remarks, and it only grows as the dancing and music begin:

That night the balls were more crowded than usual; excessive laughter (*übermütiges Gelächter*) almost drowned the roar of music; people grew hot in the *chahut*; a dance of anything but equivocal character; all kinds of ices and cold beverages were in great demand – when all at once the merriest of the harlequins felt that his legs were becoming much too cold, and took off his mask, when, to the amazement of all, a violet-blue face became visible. (Heine 1893, 166f.)

The amusement is portrayed as excessive and overconfident, even if it is not clear why. Hitherto, no cases had been reported, so laughter itself seems to be the problem. That is proven by the prompt collapse of the “merriest” – i.e., most accountable person. His transgression is presumably an offense against cholera itself, who punished the misdeed on the spot. It is very relevant that this is a *harlequin*: the mask prevents the formation of a personal identity by conjuring up the collective identity of a John Doe – and this harlequin is indeed accompanied by others. Besides, the *Arlecchino* also embodies the common folk in general since he is a servant and the trickster of the *Commedia dell’Arte*. Not only that, but the mask originally personified a demon – as the devil *Alichino*, who Dante sees brawling in *Inferno XXII* –, so it is transgressive in itself (cf. Scuderi 2000).

The infection erupts dramatically: the reveller has a bout of diarrhoea and, in an instant, unmask himself to reveal a countenance already tainted by blue. As in the case of Chateaubriand, it is simply not possible for cholera to do so much harm in so little time. At best, the episode was exaggerated for theatrical effect, but it is most likely apocryphal. To the best of my knowledge, no other chronicler reports this story and Heine does not claim to have been present, nor does he mention any

viable source. Rather, the narrative is simply given as a fact from a bird's-eye view; a problematic stance for a text posing as 'truth' – and Heine certainly expects his letter to be taken "as a source of history" in the future; he even claims in the preface, that this is already being "extensively" done "by French historiographers" (Heine 1893, 26f.). More importantly, however, is that the pattern fits the literary imagination of cholera to perfection. Immediate changes in colour, especially in the face, are relatively common in fictional texts, with death quickly following – as in this case (cf. Guerios 2021, 200-206). Not only that, but Heine's description of the reveller's diarrhoea as being a 'refreshment' is unmistakably sarcastic, and turns the joke against the joker. The idea of a *contrapasso* – punishment by means somehow related to the sin itself – is already strong and it becomes even more pronounced as cases inexplicably multiply in the following instants:

It was at once seen that there was no jest in this; the laughter died away, and at once several carriages conveyed men and women from the ball to the *Hôtel Dieu*, the Central Hospital, where they, still arrayed in mask attire, soon died. [...] it is said that these dead were buried so promptly that even their fantastic fools' garments were left on them so that as they lived they now lie merrily in the grave. (Heine 1893, 167)

The harlequin gives way to a large and unspecified mass of people, who are rushed into the hospital just in time to die. The text emphasizes the displacement (*from the ball into the hospital*) to, again, highlight the transgression. Shortly afterwards, all these victims die; an occurrence that starkly contradicts the statistics, which would predict a recovery rate of at least half – and most likely more. Not only that, but they all expire while still in costume, as is remarked twice in the text. Finally, the supernatural retribution is further emphasized by a last ironic remark that, almost bordering on the glee of *schadenfreude*, directly links their exultation at the party to their 'merry' disposition – that is, 'dressed in costume' – at their graves.²⁴

Heine seems to be building upon other examples of *hubris* avenged by pestilence that are found in the classical and Christian traditions. In the *Second Book of Samuel* and *First Chronicles*, for instance, God exhorts David to choose the ways of his own demise: three years of famine, three months pursued by an enemy, or three days of plague. David chooses the latter. In the *Iliad*, Apollo punishes the

24 The parallelism of this final comment is even more pronounced in German, since it repeats the word 'merry' (*lustig*) and also has an interesting cadence and assonance (*haben, Grabe*): "und lustig, wie sie gelebt haben, liegen sie auch lustig im Grabe" (Heine 1833, 152f.).

Greeks with pestilence due to Agamemnon's rebuttal of the rescue offer made by Chryses. In *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus' inadvertent misdeeds are responsible for unleashing the Plague of Thebes. However, these transgressions are committed unknowingly, and in all cases, the punishment goes way beyond the individual to afflict the entire society. What is more, those who perish are the thousands of the general populace and not those guilty individuals who summoned pestilence in the first place.

In Heine's description, this dialect is transformed because the Parisian revellers neither offended the gods nor broke any taboo. Their guilt appears to lie in their simply having fun, even if the text itself admits there were no particular reasons for fear – quite the contrary. Nevertheless, retribution is instantaneous and unforgiving and it seems designed to blame the party goers for their own demise. Here the social body is portrayed as 'having brought disgrace upon itself', in the very same way that syphilis is often seen in literature as just retribution for an individual's sins (cf. Schonlau 2005). In this way, the revellers unleash an almost supernatural force that kills them as punishment, but which despite this job done, subsequently continues to spread through society as a whole. What is more, given that the revellers are a collective entity that symbolizes 'the populace' at large, it can be concluded that the population is itself responsible for the epidemic to which it falls prey.

Tropes of this kind appear repeatedly in later pandemic texts. In De Roberto's short story *San Placido* (1891 [1887]), a crowd threatens the mayor who wishes to cancel the feast of the city's saint as a preventive sanitary measure: "We want the feast!... Long live the feast! ... Long live San Placido, or we'll burn down the townhall!" (99);²⁵ as a consequence, an outbreak of cholera erupts at the height of the celebration. In Bruno Jasiński's futurist novel *I Burn Paris* (2017 [1928]), people fall down killed by the plague while others continue dancing in a carnival frenzy. In Lúcio Cardoso's *Maleita* (1934), a smallpox outbreak erupts during a play in the theatre when the lead actor collapses on stage. This trope is also used in cinema. In the first scenes of Murnau's *Faust* (1926), Mephistopheles kindles a plague in a city, and its first victim is a circus acrobat who collapses during the spectacle. The public rushes on stage to help but, after taking his mask off and looking at his face, runs out in alarm. The scene is remarkably similar to the one described by Heine, with the focus on the face arguably relating to cholera and not to the plague: if the buboes that are characteristic of the plague appear only in the

25 "Vogliamo la festa!... Viva la festa!... Viva San Placido, o diamo fuoco al Municipio!..." (De Roberto 1891, 99).

neck, armpit or groin, it is cholera that normally leaves its victims with blueish tinted faces – but not instantaneously.

CHOLERA, CROWDS AND DEBAUCHERY

This pattern is taken one step further in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (2004 [1912]). In the novel, a cholera outbreak erupts in a swampy and insalubrious Venice, and serves as a symbolic background for Aschenbach's infatuation – which the narrator calls “absurd”, “perverse” and “ridiculous” (ibid., 96) – with a fourteen-year-old boy. Yet, the epidemic is not caused by ordinary cholera, but by an alleged rare variant called *cholera sicca*, in which fluids accumulate in the intestines to cause death by dehydration yet without any diarrhoea or vomiting. Despite being found in medical treatises of the 19th century, this variant is likely a fictional creation resulting from the will to preserve the honour of victims – the depiction of cholera as ‘dry’ seeming a simple inversion of its main symptom. As demonstrated by Otis (2000, 148-167), Mann was aware of *cholera sicca*'s questionable scientific status, but opted for it as a way to bypass the presence of bodily fluids. In the text, Aschenbach is struck down in an instant and without a trace of diarrhoea, in similar fashion to Chateaubriand's drunkards.

Before his downfall, Aschenbach had been warned in conspiratorial tones by an English Clerk, who had access to privileged information, presumably, due to England's colonial ties to India. The clerk stresses that, given the variant's “utmost ferocity”, “[r]ecover[er] was rare” (Mann 2004, 121f.). Not only was the mortality rate significantly higher than usual (“eighty out of a hundred”), but a “patient would shrivel up and choke” to the point that those who “fell into a deep coma” should consider themselves “fortunate” (ibid.).

It is important to note that Mann's novella is set at the turn of the 20th century, a period when the vibrio and its contagion mechanism were already known and effective prevention strategies could – and had already been – implemented. In the context of such knowledge, one might expect cholera to be less rather than more menacing. Yet, the clerk does not provide a biological reason for this burst in virulence; instead, he immediately describes the social disturbances which accompany the outbreak:

The populace knew all this [the cover-up of the epidemic], and corruption in high places together with the prevailing insecurity and the state of emergency into which death stalking the streets had plunged the city led to a certain degeneracy among the lower classes, the encouragement of dark, antisocial impulses that made itself

felt in self-indulgence, debauchery, and growing criminality. There was an unusually high number of drunkards abroad in the evening; vicious bands of rabble were said to make the streets unsafe at night; muggings were not uncommon and even murders, for it had been shown that on two occasions people who had allegedly fallen victim to the epidemic had in fact been done in, poisoned, by their relatives; and prostitution now assumed blatant and dissolute forms hitherto unknown here, at home only in the south of the country and the Orient. (ibid., 122f.)

The clerk's fearmongering about crime takes place immediately after his alerts about the disease's severity. This overlapping implicitly suggests that the higher virulence was caused by the 'degeneracy' of the populace – in particular as a result of the absence of medical justifications. In the eyes of the clerk, 'the lower classes' – understood as an unidentified and homogeneous group – are inclined to moral failings of all sorts (dissipation, violence, prostitution). And this in turn, seems to augment the virulence of the pathogen in some mysterious way. The fact that sexual mores 'deteriorate' into forms only known "in the South [of Italy] and in the Orient" – precisely those areas which are traditionally associated with the disease and which were mentioned shortly before when the itinerary of the pandemic was described – suggests a parallel connection between the two.

Under these lights, the epidemic and the crowd are both a cause and an effect: the disease prompts the poor to follow their base instincts, which, in turn, somehow augments the infection's ferocity. If in the narratives of Heine or De Roberto the crowds were responsible for the final arrival of a much-anticipated epidemic, in *Death in Venice*, they go beyond this by sustaining and catalysing its deadliness.

Ultimately, crowds as pandemic characters are used to embody disease: they assign to the invisible germs not only faces and bodies, but also intentionality. It follows that the capriciousness of the epidemic can be explained in simple terms of transgression and punishment; narrative tropes which have a long history that expands well beyond literature to embrace various forms of storytelling in folklore, religion, myth and so forth. In this way, these collective characters can be seen as coping mechanisms aimed at explaining biological randomness by appealing to the social and cultural.

As repeatedly shown by medical anthropology, individuals and societies often interpret diseases within moral, cultural or spiritual frames. At the individual level, it is not uncommon for life-threatening diagnoses to be accompanied by existential questions ('why me?', 'what have I done?', 'how could I have prevented it?') and this may result in feelings of blame and guilt. When epidemic outbreaks are the issue at hand, such questions are not individual, but collective; and in literary texts,

they may be answered via festive or violent crowds that act in a predictable – if irresponsible – fashion.

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