"Infectious Diseases, Plague Palimpsests, and Writings by Lucretius, Poe, Sontag, and Heidegger"

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This essay analyzes the oscillation of plague metaphor and non-metaphor in *De Rerum Natura* (Book VI) by Lucretius and "The Masque of the Red Death" by Edgar Allan Poe. Plagues, related to mass outbreaks of infectious diseases, and their attendant etiology, treatment, and metaphors, have been a central concern of physicians, philosophers, and writers from ancient times until today. Plagues have stubbornly endured as human predicaments. Every time that a segment of humanity thinks itself freed from the scourge of infectious diseases and their sometimes-ugly cultural baggage, a new or re-emergent disease proves us wrong. As just one of myriad examples: smallpox was declared eradicated by the World Health Organization in 1979, leading some commentators to state that the era of infectious diseases was over. William McNeill writes that "in 1976 [on the cusp of worldwide smallpox elimination] many doctors believed that infectious diseases had lost their power to affect human lives seriously. Scientific medicine, they supposed, had finally won decisive victory over disease germs."[1] GRID/HIV/AIDS, however, was identified by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control just two years later in 1981, signaling public recognition of the arrival

[1] McNeill, William H. *Plagues and People*. (Garden City: Random House, 1998), 9.

of a pandemic that has killed approximately 25 million people worldwide.[2] McNeill observes of plague: "Infectious disease which antedated the emergence of humankind will last as long as humanity itself, and will surely remain, as it has been hitherto, one of the fundamental parameters and determinants of human history."[3]

De Rerum Natura (Book VI) and "The Masque of the Red Death" are plague palimpsests, with Lucretius rewriting Thucydides and his account of the Athenian plague, and Poe rewriting the literary concept of Boccaccio's *Decameron* and its portrayal of escape from the bubonic plague into a rarefied realm of bucolic story-telling. The accounts of plague in Lucretius and Poe 1) oscillate between metaphorical representations of disease and non-metaphorical representations of disease and 2)

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[2] While official public recognition of HIV/AIDS in the United States began in 1981, the virus was present in the United States by the late 1960s or earlier, given the 1969 death of Saint Louis, Missouri teenager Robert Rayford, now serologically established to have contracted HIV before his death: Kolata, Gina. "Boy's 1969 Death Suggests AIDS Invaded U.S. Several Times." *New York Times*, Oct. 28, 1987. URL: http://www.nytimes.com/1987/10/28/us/boy-s-1969-death-suggests-aids-invaded-us-several-times.html. Furthermore, a November 2016 *Nature* article with lead author Michael Worobey used bioinformatics and "RNA jackhammering" (a technique used to obtain test-able RNA from old, degraded blood samples) to establish that HIV/AIDS was present in New York City by the early 1970s (having arrived via Haiti from Congo) and that the "Patient Zero" hypothesis for the spread of the North American HIV/AIDS epidemic, which theory centered on the alleged late 1970s and early 1980s sexual adventures of French-Canadian flight attendant Gaetan Dugas (and was elaborated upon in the influential book *And the Band Played On: Politics People, and the AIDS Epidemic (1987)* by Randy Shilts) was false: Worobey, Michael et al. "1970s and Patient-0 HIV-1 Genomes Illuminate Early HIV/AIDS History in North America." *Nature* 539 (November 3, 2016): 98-101.

[3] McNeill, 295.

possess abrupt disruptions or failures of metaphor, with an uncanny sudden ending in Lucretius and the dissolution of the Red Death into nothingness in Poe. These disruptions allow for an opening of interpretation and new metaphors, but also are filled with non-metaphorical inquiry into the author's literal biographies, including their deaths. The liberatory possibilities via these textual and post-textual disruptions may allow the reader participation in an authentic Being-towards-death (*Sein-zum-tode*), which can be described as an anticipation of death and its finality to give increased meaning to the finite time span of the human life course, as understood by Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time*.[4]

Furthermore, Lucretius and Poe, as creators of as-yet-not-fully inscribed plague palimpsests, provide important literary paradigms and outlets for a future that will be defined by resurgent and seemingly endless new plagues, including the recent arrivals of Zika, West Nile Virus, and Ebola. While all literary texts may undergo novel reinterpretation, and acquire new meaning from subsequent readers, the literary characteristics of Book VI of *De Rerum Natura* and "The Masque of the Red Death" mean that these works are in a sense incomplete without further investigation of self and others, and new rounds of meaning-making by their readers.

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[4] Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. First published: 1927. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

A palimpsest is, literally speaking, a piece of parchment or manuscript upon which multiple writings have occurred, often with prior writings first scrubbed off. The word "palimpsest" had emerged in English language usage by the 1660s, from "Latin *palimpsestus*, from Greek *palimpsestos* 'scraped again,' from *palin* 'again' . . . + verbal adjective of *psen* 'to rub smooth.'"[5] This reuse occurred because of the expense of paper or parchment in the pre-contemporary world. A signal moment in the metaphorization of the palimpsest, as a conceptual model undergoing rounds of rewriting and re-inscription by subsequent readers or investigators, occurred with English essayist Thomas De Quincey's 1845 article "The Palimpsest."[6] Since that essay appeared in the mid-nineteenth century, "the concept of the palimpsest has been employed in contexts as diverse as architecture, geography, geology, paleontology, glaciology, astrophysics, biochemistry, genetics, neuroscience, neurobiology, neuro-computing and information technology."[7]

In the context of textual criticism, René Gerette defines literary palimpsests as texts that "reread and rewrite one another."[8] Gerette explores many instances of

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[5] *Online Etymology Dictionary, s.v.* "palimpsest," accessed March 14, 2017, http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=palimpsest.
[6] Dillon, Sarah. "Reinscribing De Quincey's Palimpsest: The Significance of the Palimpsest in Contemporary Literary and Cultural Study." *Textual Practice* 19(3), (2005): 243.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Gerette, René. *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), ix.

palimpsests that are parodic, but the analyzed works of Lucretius and Poe fall firmly into the category of earnest palimpsests, exploring serious moral and ethical issues and the implications of plague within their respective societies, and perhaps trans-historically as well.

Lucretius describes the classically well-known oblivion of the Athenian plague. In so doing, Lucretius emulated the narrative content of the plague's prose history in Greek as recorded by Thucydides. Lucretius also, however, transformed the treatment into epic verse in Latin as the conclusion of his poetic masterwork *De Rerum Natura*.[9] In the case of Poe, commentators have argued that many literary influences, including Disraeli and Manzoni, can be observed in "The Masque of the Red Death," but arguably the most decisive influence was Boccaccio and his *Decameron*.[10] Poe's central character of Prospero and the Italian setting evoke the *Decameron*[11], but Poe transforms Boccaccio's bucolic locale, where one hundred stories are spun far from the reaches of plague, into a morally corrupt locus of luxury that meets its doom as it abdicates responsibility for the Red Death. In summary, Book VI of *De Rerum Natura* and "The

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[9] Finnegan, Rachel. "Plagues in Classical Literature." *Classics Ireland* Volume 6 (1999). Accessed May 30, 2016. URL: http://www.ucd.ie/cai/classicsireland/1999/finnegan.html.
[10] Holsapple, Cortell K. "'The Masque of the Red Death' and 'I Promessi Sposi'" *Studies in English* No. 18 (1938), 137-139. URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/20779501.
[11] The *Decameron* itself is arguably a literary palimpsest of the Arabic classic *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*. Literary palimpsests at times appear to be nearly endlessly recursive.

Masque of the Red Death" are thus literary palimpsests that rewrite and redefine earlier masterworks of plague literature by Thucydides and Boccaccio.

I now turn to a consideration of plague metaphor within these texts. Susan Sontag, in *Illness as Metaphor* and its own literary palimpsest *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, defines metaphor, citing Aristotle's *Poetics*, as "giving the thing a name that belongs to something else."[12] Sontag positions herself as skeptical of, or even hostile to plague metaphors, due to her own experiences as a cancer patient and the ways in which plague metaphors were sometimes used to stigmatize HIV/AIDS patients in the earlier days of the pandemic. Sontag writes: "My point is that illness is *not* a metaphor, and that the healthiest way of being ill—is the one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking."[13] Sontag's project of discarding metaphor in describing infectious diseases is perhaps both quixotic and radical. After all, plague metaphors have shown enduring meaning across many societies, ancient and modern. Moreover, as observed by Saussure, all language, except perhaps for onomatopoeia, is metaphorical in at least one sense because it establishes an arbitrary relationship

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[12] Sontag, Susan. *Illness as Metaphor* and *AIDS and Its Metaphors*. (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1990), 93.
Sontag does not provide footnotes or otherwise specify the translation of Aristotle's *Poetics* that she cites.
[13] Ibid., 3.

between the signifier and the signified;[14] thus human language represents that which it literally is *not*, a project of metaphorization. Accordingly, Sontag's perhaps laudable goal of humanizing the victims of plague by the de-metaphorization of disease runs up against the fundamentally metaphorical nature of language, alongside the endurance trans-culturally of plague metaphor. As Sontag's anti-metaphorical quest is ultimately unsustainable, Lucretius and Poe's alternation between metaphor and non-metaphor in the plague context is ultimately a more fruitful and sustainable project.

Accordingly, Poe and Lucretius oscillate between utilizing plague metaphors within *De Rerum Natura* and "The Masque of the Red Death," while alternatively (and at times even simultaneously) writing non-metaphorical descriptions of disease. Poe metaphorically describes the "Red Death" as a "thief in the night," cruelly killing its victims.[15] Yet Poe is also highly specific and non-metaphorical about the physical consequences of his made-up malady of the Red Death: "There were sharp pains, and sudden dizziness, and then profuse bleeding at the pores . . . And the whole seizure, progress, and termination of the disease, were the incidents of half an hour."[16] Poe thus

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[14] Saussure, Ferdinand de. *Course in General Linguistics.* First published: 1916. Translated by Roy Harris. (Chicago: Open Court), 110. URL: https://books.google.com/books?id=lDmOvAAD7CMC.
[15] Poe, Edgar A. "The Masque of the Red Death." First published: 1842. URL: http://www.ibiblio.org/ebooks/Poe/Red_Death.pdf, 10.
[16] Ibid., 3.

gives nearly scientific specificity to his imagined plague both in terms of its gestational period and its symptoms.

In the following sentence, Poe all-at-once describes the Red Death in a manner both metaphorical and non-metaphorical: "Blood was its Avatar and its seal—the redness and horror of blood."[17] With the words of "Avatar" and "horror," Poe conjures the metaphorical resonance of the sight of blood as a harbinger of disease, massacre, and terror. On the other hand, this sentence also non-metaphorically describes the actual symptoms of the Red Death, which include hemorrhaging and blood sweats.

Lucretius, for his part, at times describes the Athenian plague in non-metaphorical terms: "With sores, the pathway of the voice would clog and choke. The tongue…oozed pus…"[18] Yet Lucretius, sometimes even within the very same partially non-metaphorical line of verse, inscribes plague into metaphor in Book VI: "At no time did the greedy disease let up. It caught and spread / From one man to another, as though they were so many head of fleecy sheep or cattle."[19]

Lucretius' depiction of plague in epic Latin verse takes greater license with such metaphorical representations than the Greek prose written by Thucydides as a work of history.[20] Thucydides, as the father of scientific history, had a preoccupation with

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[17] Ibid.
[18] Lucretius. *The Nature of Things.* (London: Penguin Classics, 2007), 233. Book VI: lines 1148-49.
[19] Ibid., 236. Book VI: lines 1236-38.
[20] Finnegan, "Plagues in Classical Literature."

differentiating his writing on the Peloponnesian War from the fable-encrusted historical writing of Herodotus on the Persian Wars.[21] By contrast with Thucydides' narration of the plague, in Lucretius' telling, the doomed Athenians become so many "fleecy sheep or cattle" headed for slaughter. As is the case in Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death," Lucretius sometimes writes the metaphor and non-metaphor of plague in near proximity, or even within the same pair of lines. Lucretius writes that for the victims of plague: "The skin was red and broken out with blisters as though burned, / Or else as when the Sacred Fire covers all the frame."[22] In this textual instance, the specific non-metaphorical symptom of blistering is described; simultaneously, however, this blistering is being narrated as an instance of the *sacer ignis* or "Sacred Flame" that is metaphorically consuming the bodies of the afflicted.

Accordingly, the literary projects of Poe and Lucretius in these works oscillate, sometimes within the very same sentence or couplet, between rounds of metaphor that indelibly inscribe the suffering and pathos of plague victims into the reader's consciousness, juxtaposed against non-metaphorical depictions of specific disease symptoms. In this latter non-metaphorical aspect of their writings, Poe and Lucretius undertake depictions that would be lauded by Sontag, given her "just-the-facts"

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[21] Priestley, Jessica. *Herodotus and Hellenistic Culture*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 61.

[22] Lucretius, 234. Book VI: lines 1165-66.

approach to disease to avoid stigmatizing the sufferers, yet they also indelibly inscribe plague in metaphor.

These plague-related metaphorical and non-metaphorical oscillations pass into oblivion via the weird disruptions that jolt the readers of these texts. In "The Masque of the Red Death," after Prince Prospero is seized by sudden death, the ghoul representing the Red Death entirely dissipates into thin air: "A throng of the revelers at once threw themselves into the black apartment, and, seizing the mummer, whose tall figure stood erect and motionless within the shadow of the ebony cloak, gasped in unutterable horror at finding the grave cerements and corpse-like mask, which they handled with so violent a rudeness, untenanted by any tangible form."[23] The Red Death, and its metaphors and non-metaphors, disappears into the nothingness of a conceptual lacuna as the reader is transfixed in horror and wonder.

In turn, Lucretius, in Book VI of *De Rerum Natura*, creates an ending so abrupt that its intentionality is still hotly debated. Did Lucretius intend to conclude an Epicurean work, otherwise suggesting that death should not be feared, on a note of such pronounced physical suffering and dissipation? Or could such a seemingly incongruous ending to *De Rerum Natura* only be explained by a cause — perhaps death, disease, or exile — that forced Lucretius to stop writing? David Bright states: "The

[23] Poe, 10.

passage ends so abruptly, almost, it seems, in mid-sentence . . . We are left staring at the collapse of morals, society, and human life with no relieving note of hope, and this after six books dedicated to the proposition that nature is generous . . . The passage, in short, seems an undermining of the whole Epicurean doctrine, hardly conducive to *ataraxia*."[24] "Ataraxia" is a Greek word important in Epicurean philosophy meaning "freedom from emotional disturbance."[25] The concluding disruption of *De Rerum Natura* is fundamentally at odds with such a feeling of Epicurean *ataraxia* in the reader.

The very last word of Book VI of *De Rerum Natura* is *desererentur* (Book VI, line 1286), a Latin verb in the imperfect subjunctive; the root verb of *deserere* can be translated as "to abandon" or "to desert." Thus, while Poe ends his plague tale with a conceptual disruption as the mummer dissipates into thin air, Lucretius concludes his epic poem with a lexical and structural lacuna, as language and humankind fail simultaneously in the wake of plague. Lucretius underscores a sense of uncertainty and dislocation by the subjunctive mood of *desererentur.* In further regard to verbs, Lucretius's source, Thucydides, frequently inserted metaphorically rich Greek verbs in his account of the Athenian plague.[26] Mitchell-Boyask points out, as an example,

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[24] Bright, David F. "The Plague and the Structure of 'De Rerum Natura.'" *Latomus* T. 30, Fasc. 3, 607-609 (1971). URL: http://www.jstor.org.proxy.wexler.hunter.cuny.edu/stable/41528070, 607.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Mitchell-Boyask, Robin. *Plague and the Athenian Imagination: Drama, History, and the Cult of Asclepius.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 85.

Thucydides' use of the Greek verb *kateskêpte* meaning "blasting its way down" to describe the damage to the male genitalia, akin to castration, from the plague.[27] By contrast, in this concluding instance, Lucretius uses the Latin verb *desererentur* as a stoppage of all metaphor or even as anti-metaphor in terminating *De Rerum Natura* at a moment of uncanny textual disruption, in an ultimate challenge or complication of the Epicurean project.

The enduring power of the literary palimpsests of Poe and Lucretius is that the reader must attempt to fill these disruptions with meaning, and perhaps with other rounds of metaphor and non-metaphor, thereby creating texts that are literary and philosophical palimpsests, with a need for yet further scratching down and re-inscription. In inaugurating these projects, Poe and Lucretius created texts that might be best understood via the idea of an authentic participation of Being-towards-death (*Sein-zum-tode*) as understood by Heidegger in *Being and Time*. For Heidegger, death must be confronted to live an authentic life: "As soon as man comes to life, he is at once old enough to die."[28] Heidegger's statement occurs within his more general project of situating the particularity of human existence within the context of a coming to terms with our limited temporal horizon of earthly being: "behavior is to be Interpreted in terms of its Being—that is, in terms of temporality."[29] Regarding Heidegger's

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[27] Ibid.
[28] Heidegger, 289.
[29] Ibid., 457. Capitalization in the original.

conceptualization of an authentic relationship to death, philosopher Simon Critchley states that there are "four rather formal criteria in Heidegger's conception of being-towards-death: it is non-relational, certain, indefinite and not to be outstripped."[30] Focusing initially on the latter three of Heidegger's criteria, death in Lucretius and Poe is certain as there is no escape from the Red Death or from the physical or social ravages of the Athenian plague; death is indefinite as the exact moment of death is unknown for the plague sufferers both in Poe and Lucretius; and not to be outstripped (*unüberholbar* in the original German, which can be translated as "unrivaled in importance"), which is a fitting description of the effects of the unrelenting Red Death and Athenian plague, as these events fundamentally alter the existence of all those in their wake, whether by death, disfigurement, or resultant lawlessness; these plagues are thus "unrivaled in importance" for the afflicted.

Heidegger's fourth criterion is that death is non-relational, which means that we can only understand death by contemplating our own deaths and eventually experiencing our own deaths within the temporal limitations of *Dasein*. In a related vein, the reader, via the textual disruptions in Poe and Lucretius, interrogates the implications of his own future death to fill the lacuna of disruption. The reader

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[30] Critchley, Simon. "Being and Time: Part 6." *The Guardian*, July 13, 2009. URL:https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/jul/13/heidegger-being-time. Accessed March 14, 2017.

examines questions such as: under similar circumstances as those of the Red Death, would I have left others to die of plague in a desperate attempt to escape its ravages and my own potential death? What was it that killed Poe's revelers and then disappeared into nothingness – was it their own lack of moral concern for fellow creatures threatened with plague? Would I act in a similarly ignominious manner when confronted by the potentiality of my own death? And via Lucretius, a similar round of questions related to our non-relational attitude toward death is implied: would we similarly have abandoned moral attributes if confronted by the potential of our own horrendous deaths from the Athenian plague? Would our philosophical projects fail in such circumstances as we confronted our own deaths, as Lucretius' own poetic project may have collapsed into suicide under the weight of such contemplation?

One result of such an inquiry regarding the nature of these metaphors, is that one naturally is inclined to research the literal details of the deaths of Lucretius and Poe as historical human beings; one turns to the biographical details as a potential reflective mirror for signs of how these plague literature progenitors responded to similar self-interrogation. Thus, while on the one hand, we re-inscribe these plague palimpsests by inquiring into our own values, motivations, and non-relational positioning toward death, we may also contrastingly seek to fill the textual lacunae via inquiries into the biographies of Lucretius and Poe themselves.

David Bright suggests that Lucretius' ending of Book VI on such wild terms of abandonment can only be understood via the supposition that he himself committed suicide before finishing *De Rerum Natura* and thus left the text unfinished.[31] Similarly, investigations to fill Poe's textual lacuna (what does the Red Death mean? what disease does its devastation emulate?) might focus on biographical details of Poe's life, including his wife's early death from tuberculosis, and wide-ranging investigations about the cause of Poe's own early death at forty, variously speculated to have occurred because of a myriad of potential infectious diseases, including possibly cholera, tuberculosis, or another disease agent.[32]

Such an investigation ironically calls to mind the non-literal "Death of the Author" vein of literary criticism set forth by the French post-structuralists Maurice Blanchot and Roland Barthes. Their critical project attempted to dethrone the Author and replace him with the Writer/Reader, ignorant and unheeding of authorial biography. In delineation of this project, Barthes wrote:

> The image of literature to be found in contemporary culture is tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his history, his tastes, his passions; criticism still largely consists in saying that Baudelaire's oeuvre is the failure of the man Baudelaire, Van Gogh's is his madness, Tchaikovsky's his vice: *explanation* of the work is still sought in the person of its producer, as if, through the more or less

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[31] Bright, 607.
[32] Meyers, Jeffrey. *Edgar Allan Poe: His Life and Legacy*. (New York: Cooper Square Press, 1992), 241-257.

> transparent allegory of fiction, it was always, ultimately, the voice of one and the same person, the *author*, which was transmitting his confidences.[33]

Via the existence of the textual disruptions in Poe and Lucretius, the investigation into the details of the literal deaths of these authors enacts the very project against which Barthes protested: probing into authorial biography to find the answers. Perhaps surprisingly, these literal readerly inquiries into the deaths of the authors of the analyzed texts initiate a precisely opposite trajectory from that suggested by Barthes, as the Reader searches back towards the authors, their biographies, and their flesh-and-blood, non-metaphorical deaths, to fill the lacunae.

In conclusion, Lucretius and Poe, as creators of as-yet-not-fully inscribed plague palimpsests, provide important models for a future that will be defined by seemingly endless new plagues, zoonotic and otherwise, and virulent re-emergences of plagues of older infectious diseases. We need literature in the paradigm of Lucretius and Poe that 1) never shrinks from the non-metaphor of medical facts, and may even serve to provide occasional doses of Sontag-desired anti-metaphor when needed, 2) yet inscribes plagues in metaphors that fully represent their horrors and the related need for empathy and cure, 3) while also creating textual and beyond-textual space in the disruptions for individuality, new rounds of meaning, and perhaps even liberation via

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[33] Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." First published: 1968. Translated by Richard Howard. *The Rustle of Language.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 50.

Heideggerian authenticity in contemplation of death within the space above and beyond the text. The contemplation of our actual future deaths, alongside those of plague victims past and present, with the interrelated moral, ethical, and social implications, may inaugurate a more authentic human relationship to both death and temporality. If plague literature by Poe and Lucretius can initiate these tasks, it will prove extraordinarily useful as we encounter the many challenges of a twenty-first century future still circumscribed and defined by infectious diseases.

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