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Lesen (in) der Epidemie

Herausgegeben von  
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## Quarantines: Framing Romantic Narratives of Extinction and Epidemic Experience

### Abstract

The essay situates Romantic representations of epidemics in the context of 'last man narratives' in vogue around 1800. It focuses on their shared use of 'framings' of the sort familiar from the works of Caspar David Friedrich, the *Rückenfigur*. Through this device, the unthinkable is captured and 'reined in', as the focus is directed away from the subject itself and towards its human observer. Such framings are employed, in very different fashion, in the two texts discussed centrally: Mary Shelley's 1826 novel *The Last Man* and Heinrich Heine's 1831 letters in *Französische Zustände*. The framings in these narratives of epidemics are compared to those in narratives of human extinction, including the 1777 cantata by Johann Jakob Walder and Leonhard Meister, *Der letzte Mensch*; Jean Paul's "Rede des toten Christus vom Weltgebäude herab, dass kein Gott sei"; and Jean-Baptiste Cousin de Grainville's novel *Le Dernier Homme* (1805).

**Keywords:** Rückenfigur; narrative frames; cholera; Shelley, *The Last Man*; Heine, *Französische Zustände*

Der Beitrag verortet die romantischen Darstellungen von Epidemien im Kontext der um 1800 in Mode gekommenen ‚Last Man Narratives‘. Er konzentriert sich auf deren gemeinsame Verwendung einer ‚Rahmung‘, wie sie aus den Werken Caspar David Friedrichs bekannt ist: der Rückenfigur. Durch dieses Mittel wird das Udenkbare eingefangen und ‚gebändigt‘, indem der Fokus weg vom Gegenstand selbst und hin zum menschlichen Betrachter gelenkt wird. Solche Rahmungen werden in den beiden zentral besprochenen Texten auf sehr unterschiedliche Weise eingesetzt: Mary Shelleys Roman *The Last Man* von 1826 und Heinrich Heines Briefe *der Französischen Zustände* von 1831. Die Rahmungen in diesen Epidemie-Narrativen werden mit denen in Erzählungen vom Aussterben des Menschen verglichen, darunter die Kantate *Der letzte Mensch* von 1777, Jean Pauls „Rede des toten Christus vom Weltgebäude herab, dass kein Gott sei“ und Jean-Baptiste Cousin de Grainvilles Roman *Le Dernier Homme* (1805).

As cholera spread into Europe for the first time in 1830, Goethe stopped reading the newspapers, or so he claimed.<sup>1</sup> When rising mass hysteria rendered this approach untenable, he adopted a different strategy: like many of his contemporaries, Goethe contained the disease through metaphor. In his letters, he described cholera as an "invading, invisible monster" and an "invisible, monstrous ghost"; his correspondents replied in kind, writing of an "Asian hyena", a "hydra" and a "dragon".<sup>2</sup> Olaf Briesse perceives, in this process, a double strategy: conceding the threat in this way *suggests* a sound, realistic assessment, but at the same time, the disease is banished into the realm of myth, fable, and the monstrous.<sup>3</sup> The very real danger of the epidemic is acknowledged alongside the numinous horror that follows from contemporary medicine's inability to understand cholera, let alone stop its advance. Both aspects of the disease are captured and contained, accommodating the need to address it *and* the inadequacy of scientific discourse.

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1 Johann Wolfgang Goethe: *Sämtliche Werke nach Epochen seines Schaffens* (Münchner Ausgabe). Vol. 20.2. Ed. by Edith Zehm and Sabine Schäfer, with the assistance of Jürgen Gruß and Wolfgang Ritschel. München 1998, pp. 1351, 1422, 1551.

2 For documentation, see Olaf Briesse: *Angst in den Zeiten der Cholera: Seuchen-Cordon*. Berlin 2003, pp. 29–30.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 30.

In spite of this widely adopted coping strategy,<sup>4</sup> not many Romantic writers engaged with the cholera epidemics of the early nineteenth century in their published work. A recent history of epidemics suggests that this was due to the disease's gruesome pathology: unlike the much-romanticised tuberculosis, cholera "was too foul and degrading to give rise to extensive treatment in operas, novels, and paintings in the manner of some other infectious diseases".<sup>5</sup> This makes the instances in which the subject did receive attention all the more poignant. In the following, I situate two Romantic representations of epidemics in the context of several others imagining the end of the human species. The two groups overlap and mutually inform each other, and encompass both literary and pictorial representations. I argue that narrative representations of the plague and of the end of the human species employ 'framings' of the sort familiar from the works of Caspar David Friedrich, the *Rückenfigur*. Through this device, the unthinkable is captured and 'reined in', as the focus is directed away from the subject itself (plague and extinction) and towards its human observer. Such framings are employed, in very different ways, in the two texts I discuss centrally: Mary Shelley's 1826 novel *The Last Man*, in which a 'plague' originating, like cholera, in Asia, eliminates all humans but one; and Heinrich Heine's 1831 letters in *Französische Zustände*, sketching the response of ordinary citizens in cholera-ridden Paris to the threat. The framing in these narratives of epidemics is compared to framings of the earlier second group, narratives of human extinction, including the 1777 cantata by Johann Jakob Walder and Leonhard Meister, *Der letzte Mensch*; Jean Paul's "Rede des toten Christus vom Weltgebäude herab, dass kein Gott sei" included in his 1796/7 novel, *Siebenkäs* (rev. 1818), and Jean-Baptiste François Xavier Cousin de Grainville's novel, *Le Dernier Homme* (1805).

These Romantic narratives of extinction mark a turning point: earlier extinction narratives were apocalyptic in that they entailed a religious eschatology. From around 1800 onwards, and in part anticipating the discoveries of Charles Lyell and Georges Cuvier, the extinction of the human species was imagined as part of long-term developments in the history of earth, and not necessarily synonymous with 'the end of the world'. Jonathan Sachs has recently described the preoccupation of Romanticism with decline, "a sense of ongoing loss or reduction that seems likely to extend into the future" articulated in the obsession with ruins, decay, and fragments.<sup>6</sup> Given these material icons, it is unsurprising that decline should be seen as "a shorthand for discussing a generalized outlook on the future and, more specifically, a reaction to the new contingencies, confusions, and contradictions of an expanding commercial economy".<sup>7</sup> However, the focus on the material (architectural and literary) remains of the past is usefully complemented by an exploration of the body and corporeality.

Global imperial commerce affected the body in many ways, with disease prominent among them. The first European medical practitioners to encounter the cholera threat of the early nineteenth century were British doctors in the Ganges delta, in 1817. Over the following years, the so-called first cholera pandemic (1817–1826) spread mainly in Asia and African coastal regions, but global trade and military operations contributed in the

4 See Davina Höll: The Specter of the Pandemic: Politics and Poetics of Cholera in 19th-Century Literature – An Introduction. In: *Journal of Transnational American Studies*. 13/2022, no. 2, pp. 51–91.

5 Frank M. Snowden: *Epidemics and Society: From the Black Death to the Present*. New Haven 2019, p. 239.

6 Jonathan Sachs: *The Poetics of Decline in British Romanticism*. Cambridge 2018, p. 4.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

early 1820s to bringing the disease further westward, as well as northward. The second pandemic (1828–1836) was effectively a “global event”<sup>8</sup>, arriving in Hamburg and crossing the channel to England in 1831. The death toll was fearsome: in Prussia, cholera deaths in 1831/32 officially numbered over 40,000, and Paris alone saw some 18,000 dead within a few weeks.<sup>9</sup> During the first cholera occurrences in Europe, some medical practitioners considered the possibility that this disease might wipe out all of humankind,<sup>10</sup> while others raged against such fearmongering, particularly in the popular press.<sup>11</sup>

## I. Narrating epidemic experience

In recent years, the narrative shaping of epidemic experience has been described from various angles. Elana Gomel observes, in what she calls “the plot of pestilence”, a tendency towards “narrative exhaustion” born from “an accumulation of repetitive episodes, deferring any kind of meaningful closure”.<sup>12</sup> Fragmented into repetitive accounts of individual cases, these plots revolve around “protracted dying, narrative entropy, and interminable duration,” and they are “structured by the logic of iterative mortality that undermines the teleological progression of the apocalypse”.<sup>13</sup> As such, they are mimetic of epidemic experience in reflecting the sheer mass of suffering and the onerous similarity of individual fates, as well as the sense of inescapability, the necessity of persevering, and the difficulty of making sense of events. Similarly, Jennifer Cooke has drawn attention to ‘bubonic narratives’ of “victims whose appearance is necessarily brief and terminal,” short ‘flash’ tales “erupting from the surface of the

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- 8 Myron J. Echenberg: *Africa in the Time of Cholera: A History of Pandemics from 1817 to the Present*. Cambridge 2011, p. 18.
- 9 Briese: *Angst*, p. 11.
- 10 See *ibid.*, p. 13. As early as 1820, James Jameson pointed out that the novelty and danger of the cholera outbreak since 1817 in India was “that there it, for the first time, assumed the Epidemical form; and by the universality of its attacks, became a much more general and grievous scourge, than it had hitherto been” (*Report on the Epidemick Cholera Morbus, as it Visited the Territories Subject to the Presidency of Bengal, in the Years 1817, 1818, and 1819*. Calcutta 1820, pp. xiv-xvi). J. C. Roettger argued that, given the lack of fear especially among the lower classes, it was only thanks to individual disposition that cholera was *not* a universal scourge: “Wäre die Receptivität zur Cholera nicht so sehr durch Qualification bedingt, so wäre es möglich, daß diese Seuche das Menschengeschlecht nicht etwa decimirte, sondern [...] gar ganz von der Erde vertilgte; so ungeheuer stark ist sie zugleich in der Ansteckungskraft und Tödtlichkeit” (*Kritik der Cholera nach physikalischen Gründen* [...]. Halle 1832, p. 10).
- 11 Thus James Johnson in 1831: “The conductors of the daily and weekly press incur a fearful responsibility by lending their aid in sounding the tocsin of alarm, and thus generating an atmosphere of terror around every individual; an atmosphere which will render contagion, if it exist, ten times more virulent; and if it exist not, will render the individual ten times more susceptible to the inscrutable cause of the pestilence!” (originally a letter to the *Times* in October 1831, reprinted in *Interesting Original and Selected Notices of the Cholera Morbus*. Liverpool 1831, pp. 26–31, here p. 30). Cp. Theodor Friedrich Baltz, in 1832: “Von Seiten der medicinischen Polizei muss nie geduldet werden, dass über diese Krankheit und besonders unter dem so verhassten und noch obenein ganz falschen Namen – Cholera – so viele unnütze und nachtheilige Beschreibungen durch den Druck in Umlauf kommen, und dass das Bild derselben so grässlich, nur Furcht und Schrecken im Publikum hervorbringend so wohlfeilen Preises z.B. für 9 Pfennige, gemalt werde was unsägliches Unheil angerichtet hat” (*Meinungen über die Entstehung, das Wesen und die Möglichkeit einer Verhütung der sogenannten Cholera* [...]. Berlin 1832, p. 74).
- 12 Elana Gomel: The Plague of Utopias: Pestilence and the Apocalyptic Body. In: *Twentieth Century Literature*. 46/2000, no. 4, pp. 405–433, here pp. 409–410.
- 13 *Ibid.*

narrative” like plague buboes.<sup>14</sup> Cooke sees such “episodicity” as “a direct effect of writing plague,” and for her, the particular contribution that literary writing can offer lies in the way it “step[s] into the gap between the official account and the eye-witness, whose perspective is personal and therefore limited, and provide[s] a narrative which gives the impression of having official and myriad eyewitness positions at its command”.<sup>15</sup> In doing so, epidemic fiction – provoked by the ubiquity of death during an epidemic – seeks to find a balance between mortality as an inescapable fact of individual existence and as a, if not the, great universal.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, individual experience is placed on the largest possible canvas, as the epidemic/pandemic creates an awareness of death as the great leveller.

Based on her reading experience of the *Decameron* during the COVID-19 pandemic, Millicent Marcus has drawn attention to the fact that narratives of epidemic experience may usually encourage what she calls ‘literary distancing’, the wilful refusal by readers to identify with literary characters. Marcus argues that in times of *social distancing* (i.e., for readers directly affected by a pandemic), forgoing this *literary distancing* can be “critically fruitful, enabling [readers] to acknowledge our shared human vulnerability to natural disasters across time”.<sup>17</sup> A similarly transhistorical sense of connection is proposed by Nishi Pulgurtha, who argues that narratives of epidemics show “the similarity in human response over the centuries and across geographical spaces” in normalizing “fear, anxiety, panic and hysteria” in the face of the disease.<sup>18</sup> Pragmatically, narrativizing epidemic experience can also serve as ‘bibliotherapy’, as Stephanie Downes and Juliane Römhild argue: “Pandemic fiction, like pandemic reading, makes space for playful distraction, anxious confrontation, and future-oriented resolution.”<sup>19</sup> Eva Horn likewise holds that fictions of extinction may not “master the uncanniness of looming catastrophe, but at least [they] keep it in sight”.<sup>20</sup> The formal process behind this ‘keeping in sight’ is precisely what interests me in the texts at hand: I argue that their various strategies of framing highlight their fictionality and artificiality, thus rendering the catastrophe, if not bearable, then at least contemplable. Epidemic experience is presented as already processed, lived-through, and therefore contained.

## II. Narrative frames, Rückenfiguren, and last men

As a narrative of epidemic experience, the *Decameron* is exceptional insofar as it is its frame, rather than the individual stories, that registers the experience of epidemic

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14 Jennifer Cooke: Writing Plague: Transforming Narrative, Witnessing, and History. In: *The Tapestry of Health, Illness and Disease*. Ed. by Vera Kalitzkus/Peter L. Twohig. Leiden 2009, pp. 21–42, here p. 26.

15 Ibid., p. 33.

16 See Michael Meng: Writing on Death: Plague Narratives. A Review Essay. In: *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. 64/2022, no. 1, pp. 238–258, here p. 239.

17 Millicent Marcus: Reading *The Decameron* Through the Lens of COVID-19. In: *A World Out of Reach: Dispatches from Life Under Lockdown; Selections from the Yale Review's 'Pandemic Files'*. Ed. by Meghan O'Rourke. New Haven 2020, pp. 86–90, here p. 90.

18 Nishi Pulgurtha: Introduction. In: *Literary Representations of Pandemics, Epidemics and Pestilence*. Ed. by id. London 2023, pp. 1–13, here p. 7.

19 Stephanie Downes/Juliane Römhild: Pandemic Fiction as Therapeutic Play: The New York Times Magazine's *The Decameron Project* (2020). In: *Thesis Eleven*. 169/2022, no. 1, pp. 45–61, here pp. 58–59.

20 Eva Horn: *The Future as Catastrophe: Imagining Disaster in the Modern Age*. New York 2018, p. 15.

disease. The plague from which the characters flee is the occasion for narrating, not the (direct) object of narration. For Viktor Sklovskij, the narrative frame of the *Decameron* represents the birth of “a European type of framing device [...], motivated by the desire to *tell the story for the sake of storytelling itself*”.<sup>21</sup> In this type of frame, “the individual episodes comprising [the narrative] are not linked to each other by the unity of their characters. [...] The focus is entirely on the unfolding action, while the bearer of the action serves merely as a pretext for the realization of the plot.”<sup>22</sup> Although Boccaccio relegates the epidemic to the frame, this formal structure recalls, in striking fashion, the observations on the ‘episodemic’ nature of plague narratives discussed above, and – as Pia Doering and Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf show in their contribution to this volume – the *Decameron* also comments on the therapeutic function of reading.<sup>23</sup> In the Romantic narratives of epidemic experience at issue here, the framing role of the narrator-as-witness, however, seems to me different and more central. As Daniel Schäbler has observed, framing devices are usefully thought of in Luhmann’s terms as “staging and thus foregrounding a process of second- (or multiple-)order observation”.<sup>24</sup> The most prominent Romantic device for rendering second-order observation is surely the *Rückenfigur* in painting, particularly in the work of Caspar David Friedrich.

Joseph Leo Koerner describes the effect of figures such as the famous *Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* (c. 1818) as intermediary between the viewer and the ostensible object of the painting: the turned figure is shown in contemplation of the scene, rendering that scene “as already the consequence of a prior experience. This visual conceit endows the picture with a complex temporal fabric. In our encounter with the *Rückenfigur* and his vision, we feel ourselves late, and therefore estranged, *vis-à-vis* the fullness of nature”.<sup>25</sup> Through this mediatory and estranging function, the *Rückenfigur* enacts a ‘critical’ turn, suggesting that sublimity derives from the effect of a particular scene on the contemplator, and not from the scene itself. However, the *Rückenfigur* is not a mere Romantic *Doppelgänger*, inserting the viewer in the painting. Its very nature entails another ironic twist: we can only see the contemplator contemplating, not their actual reaction. The *Rückenfigur* not only obscures a part of the landscape they are contemplating, but also their own response to it. Thus, Koerner writes of *Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer*:

If repetition is at work (we seeing the *Rückenfigur* seeing, or, alternatively, we seeing the artist’s vision of himself seeing), then something has been elided, for what repeats our looking, the turned traveller, hides with his body the very thing repeated: the gaze of the subject. The hidden eye within the picture [...] testifies to a powerful dimension of loss, of absence, of incompleteness within the subject of Friedrich’s landscapes.<sup>26</sup>

**21** Viktor B. Sklovskij: *Theory of Prose*. Elmwood Park, Ill. 1991, p. 66 (emphasis in the original).

**22** Ibid. See also the discussion in Elisabeth Schulze-Witzenrath: *Der gereitete Erzähler: Decameronrahmen und städtische Sprachkultur im italienischen Trecento*. Tübingen 2012, pp. 103–194.

**23** See the contribution by Pia Doering and Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf in this volume.

**24** Daniel Schäbler: *Framing Strategies in English Fiction from Romanticism to the Present*. Heidelberg 2014, p. 14. See Hans U. Gumbrecht: Historisierung der Beobachtung zweiter Ordnung: Eine epistemologische Rahmenerzählung. In: *Beobachtung zweiter Ordnung im historischen Kontext: Niklas Luhmann in Amerika*. Ed. by id./Perla C. Pawling/Aldo Mazzuchelli. Paderborn 2013, pp. 7–21, on the epistemological implications of the concept around 1800.

**25** Joseph L. Koerner: *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*. 2nd ed., London 2009, p. 36.

**26** Ibid., p. 213. The view opposing this immanent focus in Friedrich’s work, and emphasising instead its spiritual symbolism and transcendent nature, is articulated in Helmut Börsch-Supan: *Caspar David Friedrich*. München

Such incompleteness is suspended between a double function: it challenges the viewer to consider what the *Rückenfigur* might feel,<sup>27</sup> while at the same time sparing them the direct experience or even its representation. Through this suspension, the mimetic and the pragmatic functions of art are 'safely' held up for contemplation: to what extent, the viewer is challenged to ask, do I dare explore representation, to what extent do I dare risk affect? The intermediary figure is a threshold – link and separator at the same time. This poetics of the sublime, problematizing mimesis, is also encountered in the narrative framings of Romantic narratives of lastness I want to turn to now.

Leonhard Meister (1741–1811) was a Swiss theologian, historian, and writer. A student of Johann Jacob Bodmer, he was noted, among other things, for his history of German literature published in London in 1777 and for a treatise on enthusiasm (2 vols., 1775 and 1777), in which he sided with Shaftesbury, Locke, and Swift in opposition to excessive sentimentalism.<sup>28</sup> His libretto for his compatriot composer, Johann Jakob Walder's cantata, *Der letzte Mensch* (?1777), provides a typical example for framing lastness in religious terms.<sup>29</sup> The piece for piano and four voices presents a view of the extinction of all humankind from the perspective of its last survivor. In the beginning, there is silence, except for the last man's voice (in recitativo): all other noise is placed under erasure as the speaker states that the silence is more terrible than any lion's roar, the stomping of coursers' hooves, or the thunder of cannons. The silence, then, is contrasted with the din of war and violence, but even so, the speaker yearns for his own death unless he were granted the resurrection of his wife. As the sun's fire engulfs the earth, mountains tumble, and seas rise, the last man (now in song) laments that he alone is doomed to witness the spectacle, obsessively questioning the purpose and concluding that it is for eternal torment only that he has survived. However, the cantata then turns, as 'time and eternity merge' and earth and heaven are renewed: the dead are resurrected, including the speaker's beloved. This, of course, makes sense of the world's ending, and the redeemed join the angelic choirs in praise of God. Meister's vision of the extinction of humanity is characterized by an otherwise empty, silent world: there is initially no voice but the last man's, and 'the pulse of all the cosmos stops' (LMC 2). Earth flees 'like a hunted deer' from destruction (LMC 8),

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1987. However, Börsch-Supan, too, attests to a similar function of the *Rückenfigur*. On Friedrich's *Mönch am Meer* (1809–10), in which the *Rückenfigur* is much smaller, he writes: "Entscheidend für die Wirkung des Hintergrundes ist nicht seine Größe als Quantität, sondern seine Unermesslichkeit als Qualität. Ohne die Möglichkeit, sich zu orientieren, steht der Mensch diesem Raum gegenüber, dessen Weite ihn seine Kleinheit und Ohnmacht empfinden lässt" (p. 83). The applicability of this assessment to representations of epidemic experience is immediately evident.

- 27** See also Hilmar Frank: *Aussichten ins Unermessliche: Perspektivität und Sinnoffenheit bei Caspar David Friedrich*. Berlin 2004.
- 28** Barbara Schnezler/Thorsten Fitton: Meister, Leonhard. In: *Killy-Literaturlexikon*, vol. 8. Ed. by Walther Killy/Wilhelm Kühlmann. 2nd, rev. ed., Berlin 2010, pp. 141–142. See Leonhard Meister: *Ueber die Schwermerei*. 2 vols. Bern 1775–1777 and *Beyträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und National-Litteratur*. London [i.e., Berne] 1777.
- 29** Johann Jakob Walder/Leonhard Meister: *Der letzte Mensch: Eine Cantate*. Zürich ?1777; further references in the text, marked as LMC, by page (all translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated). The obvious pre-text is the *Dies irae* from the Catholic missal. It links classical and Christian ideas of the world's end in the first of its 19 Latin stanzas, "teste David cum Sibylla". The lofty description of the Day of Judgment has all creation quaking in fear of God's doom, and it is not until stanza 7 that a human, individual perspective is introduced: "Quid sum miser tunc dicturus?" (*The Office of the Dead*. London 1790, p. 115). For context, see Johannes Fried: *Dies irae: Eine Geschichte des Weltuntergangs*. München 2016.



and the nightingale's song is said to have ceased (LMC 2), but otherwise, no mention is made of any non-human life: it is an anthropic world that is coming to its end. This ending, however, is only held up for consideration very briefly, to be salvaged by the triumphant vision of apocalyptic glory. The cantata opens, before the first note has been sounded, with its hyperbolic title – but the stupendous idea of the extinction of all mankind is quickly couched in a promise of spiritual salvation and renewal. Even before the turning point, the speaker pleads to have his mate restored to him, recalling how Adam found the earth barren without Eve and thus likening the last and the first man and suggesting a parallel between creation and glorification. The cantata does render the depths of despair at the extinction of humankind and the solitude of the survivor, but it immediately retracts and overwrites it with the joy of salvation.

A similar religious framing is encountered in the novel often suggested as a precursor to the English Romantic craze for 'last men', Jean-Baptiste François Xavier Cousin de Grainville's *Le Dernier Homme*, published posthumously in French in 1805 and translated into English in 1806. Grainville (1746–1805), a member of the lesser nobility who abandoned his priesthood under the Terror, lived precariously as a teacher until his death by suicide, shortly before the publication of his *Last Man*.<sup>30</sup> This ambitious "sequel to Genesis", modelled after Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Malthus' theories on population,<sup>31</sup> also focuses on a pair of lovers mirroring Adam and Eve, Omégare and Sydérie. Omégare is born to "la famille des rois de la terre" at a time when sterility besets humankind, and he remains "le fils unique de la vieillesse des Européens et de leur fécondité".<sup>32</sup> The Spirit of Earth appears to him and charges him to seek Sydérie, the last woman, to ensure the survival of the species. Omégare travels to Brazil (in a balloon), finds Sydérie, and they return to Europe together. Here, they encounter Adam, who – at God's command – convinces Omégare to leave the pregnant Sydérie and thus bring about the end of humankind and the Last Judgement. As in Meister's libretto, extinction is couched in religious teleology, decreed by God and part of Providence. Sydérie's death – signifying the end of humanity – is greeted by approval in Heaven:

Tout le ciel attendoit avec impatience ce grand événement; ses voûtes retentissent aussi-tôt de cris d'alégresse. Le règne du temps est fini, les siècles éternels vont commencer; mais au même moment, les enfers jettent des cris de rage, le soleil et les étoiles s'éteignent. La sombre nuit du chaos couvra la terre, il sort des montagnes, des rochers et des cavernes des sons plaintifs, la nature gémit. On entend dans l'air une voix lugubre qui s'écrie: Le genre humain est mort. (DH 2:167)<sup>33</sup>

Soon after, the Spirit of Earth tries to fend off Death and sets off an explosion: "la terre ébranlée, recule sur son orbite. Ses entrailles se déchirent, elle soulève les Alpes, les Pyrénées, et lance ces énormes masses jusques dans les hautes régions

**30** See I. F. Clarke: Introduction. In: Jean-Baptiste F. de Grainville: *The Last Man*. Ed. by id. Middletown, Connecticut 2002, p. xxvi.

**31** Ibid., p. xxx.

**32** Jean-Baptiste-François-Xavier Cousin de Grainville: *Le Dernier homme, ouvrage posthume*. 2 vols. Paris 1805, vol. 1, pp. 33, 35. Further references in the text, abbreviated as DH, by volume and page.

**33** "All Heaven waited on this great event with impatience; and there came an instant, universal cry of joy. The reign of time had ended, and a vista of eternity opened up. At the same moment, however, howls of rage arose from Hell, and the sun and the stars were extinguished. The dark night of chaos covered the world; plangent sounds came from the mountains, rocks and caverns, as all nature moaned and wailed. A doleful voice echoed through the air, crying out: 'The human race is no more!'" (de Grainville, *The Last Man*, p. 132).

de l'atmosphère" (DH 2:173).<sup>34</sup> Again, as in the cantata, humanity is coterminous with earth and even the universe: no mention is made of other creatures on earth, and without humankind, it appears creation is pointless and can be extinguished. However, Grainville's prose poem develops on a grander scope, and it offers a narrative framing that supplements the religious. An unidentified homodiegetic narrator gives an account of entering, against the emphatic warnings of his Syrian guides, a cave near the ruins of Palmyra, where he falls into a trance and hears a (first) metadiegetic narrative by a ghostly voice from a tripod. The voice declares that it wants to disclose the story of the Last Man, because he himself will not have a posterity to admire him: he should be remembered before he is even born. A first vision of Omégare and Sydérie dissolves, and the narrator sees instead old Adam, who has been cursed to observe generations of humans pass into Hell. He is visited by an angel who sends him back to earth with God's command to end human history by convincing Omégare not to procreate with Sydérie. It is Adam who then goes on to hear Omégare's account of his own life, which constitutes the main body of the novel on a second metadiegetic level. The story of this Last Man, then, is not only 'cordoned' from external reality by its eschatological subject and setting, but also relayed through two intermediaries: Adam, the First Man and the listener to the Last, and the unnamed first narrator, observing Adam in a vision granted by "le père des pressentiments et des songes" (DH 1:6).<sup>35</sup>

The dream is also the frame established around a third and final narrative of extinction I want to discuss briefly. It differs from the previous in that it undertakes to imagine, not a religious vision of the end of humankind, but its very opposite: Jean Paul (1763–1825), in his famous *Erstes Blumenstück*, 'Rede des toten Christus vom Weltgebäude herab, dass kein Gott sei' (1796), offers an avowedly atheist contemplation of the end of the world.<sup>36</sup> In this vision, the end of humankind is almost marginal against the absence of God from, and the collapse of, the heavens (*Weltgebäude*). Christ himself declares, to the risen dead in a church, that he has travelled the universe in search of God, and that he has not found him. He berates the cosmos for its contingent nature, and he pities humankind for hoping in vain for salvation and eternal life:

Wenn der Jammervolle sich mit wundem Rücken in die Erde legt, um einem schönern Morgen voll Wahrheit, voll Tugend und Freude entgegenzuschlummern: so erwacht er im stürmischen Chaos, in der ewigen Mitternacht – und es kommt kein Morgen und keine heilende Hand und kein unendlicher Vater!<sup>37</sup>

**34** "The earth shook, was blown out of orbit, and was torn asunder. The Alps and the Pyrenees rose up, flinging huge masses through the upper reaches of the atmosphere" (ibid., p. 134).

**35** On the further complexities of the ultimately 'undecidable' narrative situation, lacking any final authority in its account, see Gerhard Poppenberg: *Figuren des Endes. Der letzte Mensch – ein Mythos der Moderne*. In: Jean-Baptiste Cousin de Grainville: *Der letzte Mensch*. Transl. Sylvia Schiewe. Berlin 2015, pp. 209–253, here pp. 237–238.

**36** There is an earlier version of this text, also framed as a dream, in which it is Shakespeare who speaks. See Eva Horn: *Die romantische Verdunklung: Weltuntergänge und die Geburt des letzten Menschen um 1800*. In: *Abendländische Apokalypik: Kompendium zur Genealogie der Endzeit*. Ed. by Veronika Wieser [et al.]. Berlin 2013, pp. 101–124, here p. 104.

**37** Jean Paul: "Erstes Blumenstück: Rede des toten Christus vom Weltgebäude herab, dass kein Gott sei." In: Id., *Siebenkäs. Flegeljahre*. Ed. by Norbert Miller. Frankfurt a.M. 1996, pp. 270–275, here p. 275.

This crushing insight, expressed in the short text with the utmost hyperbole, is once again carefully cordoned from external reality. As Reto Rössler has shown,<sup>38</sup> it is nested in no less than three frames: first, it is presented as a paratext for the novel *Siebenkäs*, on the apparently unrelated theme of an unhappy marriage. The speaker of the ‘flower piece’ may be identified with the novel’s heterodiegetic narrator, but here, he suddenly speaks homodiegetically, recalling the dreams of his childhood. He then recounts a specific dream, in which Christ’s own narrative is contained. As the text ends, it returns from Christ’s speech (level 4), through the dreamer’s observation of the collapse of the heavens in the dream (level 3), to his waking in an idyllic world (level 2). This ‘flower piece’ is followed immediately by another, so that the first level (of the novel’s fiction proper) is deferred further.

Primarily, these three narratives of human extinction – even Jean Paul’s – are all framed by the hope for salvation after death. In diegetic terms, however, their representation of that hope differs widely: Meister’s cantata proceeds chronologically to overturn and ameliorate the idea of lastness: thanks to the Rapture, the Last Man quickly finds himself in plentiful company again, and his deep despair is transformed to pure joy. Structurally, the cantata frames the experience of lastness by presenting the Last Man and his mate as typological correlates to Adam and Eve, suggesting that there is a clear purpose and meaning to their experience. A similar strategy is employed in *Le Dernier Homme*, but the addition of two diegetic frames or embeddings (the vision granted by the voice in the tripod, and the narrative of Omégare to Adam) further serves to distance the reader from the events, and to reflect on the mediated nature of what they are reading. To what extent, the reader is made to wonder, is the idea of extinction representable? Extinction is thus conceived as something that requires prophetic revelation, and even so, it is only expressible (perhaps even: thinkable<sup>39</sup>) once the experience has been gone through. This is also true of Jean Paul’s ‘flower piece’, where the elements of prophetic revelation and narrator-as-witness are further contained within a larger and unrelated fiction (of *Siebenkäs*). The ontological difference between diegetic levels is disturbed when the dreamer-narrator sees the collapse of the heavens which Christ had only talked about in his speech. Since the dreamer is presented as identical with the intrusive narrator of *Siebenkäs*, the frames of fiction, dream, and speech seep into each other, suggesting just the ontological vertigo and disorientation that is entailed by an atheist worldview. Without faith, Jean Paul suggests, the entire edifice of the cosmos collapses into meaninglessness – but he, too, retracts this vision and celebrates the gift of faith: “Meine Seele weinte vor Freude, daß sie wieder Gott anbeten konnte – und die Freude und das Weinen und der Glaube an ihn waren das Gebet.”<sup>40</sup> The experience itself of confronting and overcoming doubt – of finding a way back from the depths of meta-diegesis – has a religious purpose.

38 Reto Rössler: *The End of ‘Heavenly Writing’, or: Speech of the Dead Christ down from the Universe That There Is No God* (1796). Jean Paul’s Cosmopoetics as Paratextual Prose. In: *Writing the Heavens: Celestial Observation in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*. Ed. by Aura Heydenreich [et al.]. Berlin 2024, forthcoming.

39 On ‘thinkability’, cp. Martin Amis: “Thinkability”. In: id., *Einstein’s Monsters*. London 1999, pp. 1–23, and Daniel Cordle: *Long After Midnight. On Our New Nuclear Fears*. In: Nottingham Trent University, <https://www.ntu.ac.uk/about-us/news/news-articles/2022/03/expert-blog-long-after-midnight,-on-our-new-nuclear-fears> (20 November 2023).

40 Jean Paul: “Erstes Blumenstück”, p. 275.

Further, all three narratives discussed here share a vision of human extinction that is essentially coextensive with cosmic destruction, and a relative disregard for other forms of life. Since the world and everything in it, according to Scripture, is created for humankind (Gen 1:28), the end of human life deprives the world of purpose.

The craze for Last Men in the early decades of the nineteenth century produced other literary treatments, of which Byron's "Darkness" (1816) and Thomas Campbell's "The Last Man" (1823) are perhaps the best known. Both are framed as dream visions, but there is a key difference between them: Campbell's last man is convinced of salvation, while Byron's poem concludes with the universal rule of the eponymous darkness. This may have been inspired by the external event of the eruption of Mount Tambora in 1815, which famously caused the 'year without a summer' in Europe in 1816. The bleakness of Byron's secular vision – also 'cordoned' in the frame of a dream – may be related to this specific natural phenomenon as the occasion for writing his poem.

I now want to look at two narratives of epidemic experience produced during the 'first' and 'second' cholera epidemics to see how they frame material that is likewise related to an external, immanent threat. By contrast to the religiously framed narratives of human extinction, I argue, these narratives of extinction use a secular, aesthetic framing.<sup>41</sup>

### III. Heine: Painting death in life

In his influential letters from Paris written for the *Augsburger Allgemeine Zeitung*, Heinrich Heine (1797–1856) offers an 'epidemic' and aesthetically framed description of the cholera outbreak of 1832. The sixth letter, dated 19 April 1832, comments on Heine's role as correspondent by likening his report to a bulletin written

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<sup>41</sup> The aesthetic is by no means the only option for a secular framing. The best-known modern English narrative of epidemic experience, Daniel Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), for all its references to divine providence, employs the emerging discourse of science and in particular, statistics as a representational device. Interspersed throughout the text, the reader encounters mortality figures for individual London parishes, offsetting the disturbing 'epidemic' individual accounts of the narrative proper. In fact, these statistics appear as an objective register of facts even before the homodiegetic narrator himself is properly introduced (on p. 8). The beginning is innocuous enough, in a single line: "it was printed in the weekly Bill of Mortality in the usual manner, thus, *Plague 2. Parishes infected 1*" (Daniel Defoe: *A Journal of the Plague Year* [...]. London 1722, p. 2, emphasis in the original). Only one page later, however, the Bill (for two parishes) runs to fourteen lines, another of sixteen lines immediately follows, and then another, which is captioned: "This last Bill was really frightful, being a higher Number than had been known to have been buried in one Week, since the preceding Visitation [of the plague] of 1665" (ibid., p. 5). Clearly, the language of numbers is deemed objective, but also in need of interpretation to the reader. Further bills are cited on pp. 57, 115, 131, 135, 177, 206, 215, 217–218, and 236–237, and there are additional lengthy stretches of narrated statistics throughout (for the first instance, see pp. 6–8). The attempt to render experience mathematically is one side of a representational strategy that also explicitly puts in doubt its own ability "to represent those Times exactly to those that did not see them, and give the Reader due Ideas of the Horror that every where presented itself" (p. 20). Narrative and numbers, vignettes of individual fates and general statistics, complement each other in representation. The narrator's ubiquitous habit of prolapses (first on p. 15, concerning people staying in after sunset, "the Reasons I shall have Occasion to say more of by-and-by") is another appeal to the authority of 'science', presenting him as a natural historian in full command of his complex material. The framing of epidemic experience through scientific discourse stands next to the strong providential thread of the narrative, but the two are not at all in conflict: early modern natural philosophy was deeply committed to religion in that it was presented as reading God's other book, the Book of Nature.

from the battlefield, during battle (“ein Bülletin [...], welches auf dem Schlachtfelde selbst, und zwar während der Schlacht, geschrieben worden”).<sup>42</sup> From this immediacy, Heine derives a claim for the utmost authenticity, and he compares his own epidemic narrative favourably to those of Thucydides and Boccaccio. However, the truthfulness of Heine’s account is debated, and critics such as Rutger Booß, Michael Perraudin, and Thomas Stähli have perceptively discussed his representational strategies. They have focused in particular on one passage in which Heine recounts a lynching scene in the rue Vaugirard. During the epidemic, the (unfounded) rumour had arisen that there was no cholera at all, but that the numerous dead had been poisoned, and the scene Heine sketches concerns the lynching of two suspected poisoners:

Auf der Straße Vaugirard, wo man zwey Menschen, die ein weißes Pulver bey sich gehabt, ermordete, sah ich einen dieser Unglücklichen, als er noch etwas röchelte, und eben die alten Weiber ihre Holzschuhe von den Füßen zogen und ihn damit so lange auf den Kopf schlugen, bis er todt war. Er war ganz nackt, und blutrünstig zerschlagen und zerquetscht; nicht bloß die Kleider, sondern auch die Haare, die Scham, die Lippen und die Nase waren ihm abgerissen, und ein wüster Mensch band dem Leichname einen Strick um die Füße, und schleifte ihn damit durch die Straße, während er beständig schrie: *voilà le Cholera-morbus!* Ein wunderschönes, wuthblasses Weibsbild mit entblößten Brüsten und blutbedeckten Händen stand dabey, und gab dem Leichname, als er ihr nahe kam, noch einen Tritt mit dem Fuße. (emphasis in the original, FZ, p. 136)

For all the dynamics of the scene – tying the rope, dragging and kicking the corpse, screaming – it is easily visualised as a single tableau. As Rutger Booß and Michael Perraudin have shown, several key details here – the male corpse tied up at the ankle, the bare-breasted woman among the rioters – seem to spring directly from Eugene Delacroix’ famous painting, *La Liberté guidant le peuple* (1830), which Heine had seen in 1831 and discussed in his *Französische Maler*.<sup>43</sup> Booß contends, on this basis, that Heine did not witness such a scene at all, but constructed it on the basis of the painting.<sup>44</sup> Perraudin, however, stresses the amount of detail *not* taken from the painting, and argues for the possibility of an eye-witness account.<sup>45</sup> Noting in addition the passive, observing role of the narrator in this passage, Thomas Stähli compellingly synthesizes their views, arguing that it is precisely the interplay between fiction and fact, and their narrative, mythicizing montage, that characterizes Heine’s mimetic method:

Wenn das Autor-Ich [...] in der Rolle des Zuschauers verharrt, dann geschieht das im Sinne einer ästhetischen Distanzierung des unsagbar Grausamen, das nur durch die Eingliederung in bereits gegebene Bildmuster und dadurch erwirkte Veräußerlichung zum Ausdruck kommen kann.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Heinrich Heine: *Französische Zustände*: Artikel VI: Paris, 19. April 1832. In: Id.: *Historisch-kritische Gesamtausgabe der Werke* (Düsseldorfer Ausgabe). Vol. 12.1. Ed. by Manfred Windfuhr/Jean-René Derré. Hamburg 1980, pp. 129–142, here pp. 132–133. Further references in the text, abbreviated as FZ, by page.

<sup>43</sup> Heinrich Heine: *Französische Maler*. In: Id.: *Historisch-kritische Gesamtausgabe der Werke*. Vol. 12.1., pp. 9–62, here pp. 20–22.

<sup>44</sup> Rutger Booß: *Empirie und Fiktion: Die Juli-Revolution und die Anfänge von Heines Pariser Berichterstattung*. In: *Heinrich Heine: Artistik und Engagement*. Ed. by Wolfgang Kutenkeuler/Joachim Bark. Stuttgart 1977, pp. 66–85, here pp. 80–81.

<sup>45</sup> Michael Perraudin: *Heinrich Heines Welt der Literatur: Realistisches und Antirealistisches in seinem Werk*. In: *Vormärzliteratur in europäischer Perspektive III: Zwischen Daguerrotyp und Idee*. Ed. by Martina Lauster. Bielefeld 2000, pp. 15–29, here pp. 23–25.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas Stähli: *Probleme authentischer Vermittlung in Heinrich Heines Schriften über Deutschland und Frankreich*. In: *Heine-Jahrbuch*. 46/2007. Ed. by Joseph A. Kruse. Stuttgart 2007, pp. 172–184, here pp. 180–181.

This recalls just the effect we encountered in Grainville's and Jean Paul's narratives, but with an aesthetic, rather than a religious framing: depicting this haunting episode in terms of a historical painting suggests that the experience comes as pre-processed not by the journalist, but by a painter, who has already captured and 'fixed' it. The conventions of painting replace the comfort offered by providence.

A similar strategy is apparent at the beginning and end of Heine's letter. His account of the first public cholera outbreak also creates a panorama suggestive of a historical painting:

Ihre [sc., cholera's] Ankunft war den 29. März offiziell bekannt gemacht worden, und da dieses der Tag des *Mi-Carême* und das Wetter sonnig und lieblich war, so tummelten sich die Pariser um so lustiger auf den Boulevards, wo man sogar Masken erblickte, die, in karikirter Mißfarbigkeit und Ungestalt, die Furcht vor der Cholera und die Krankheit selbst verspotteten. Desselben Abends waren die Redouten besuchter als jemals; übermüthiges Gelächter überjauchzte fast die lauteste Musik [...]: als plötzlich der lustigste der Arlequine eine allzu große Kühle in den Beinen verspürte, und die Maske abnahm, und zu aller Welt Verwunderung ein veilchenblaues Gesicht zum Vorscheine kam. Man merkte bald, daß solches kein Spaß sey, und das Gelächter verstummte [...]. (FZ, pp. 133–134)

The reveller's unmasking interrupts the merrymaking and suspends it in the silence of that moment of terrible insight. Iconic in its depiction of death in life, life in death,<sup>47</sup> and mock-ekphrastic in manner, it is unsurprising that this poignant scene was later turned into a woodcut, *Der Tod als Würger* (1850), by Alfred Rethel.<sup>48</sup> Again, at the end of his narrative, Heine recounts how he accompanied the remains of a friend killed by cholera to the cemetery. There is a 'traffic jam' of hearses delivering the dead, and Heine witnesses as they spill their cargo:

und wie nun gar an dem Kirchhofsthore ein Kutscher dem andern vorausseilen wollte, und der Zug in Unordnung gerieth, die Gendarmen mit blanken Säbeln dazwischen fuhren, hie und da ein Schreyen und Fluchen entstand, einige Wagen umstürzten, die Särge aus einander fielen, die Leichen hervorkamen: da glaubte ich die entsetzlichste aller Emeuten zu sehen, eine Todtenemeute. (FZ 141–142)

For all his horror, the observer is once again passive among the fray, and the nightmarish tableau he describes is clearly reminiscent of groups of the dead or dying in paintings such as Antoine-Jean Gros's *Bonaparte visitant les pestiférés de Jaffa* (1804), J.M.W. Turner's *The Deluge* and *The Destruction of Sodom* (both 1805), Théodore Géricault's *La Radeau de la Méduse* (1817–18), John Martin's *The Destruction of Pompei and Herculaneum* (c. 1821) as well as *The Great Day of His Wrath* and *The Last Judgement* (both 1851–3), Eugène Delacroix' *Scène des massacres de Scio* (1824), or Alexandre-Gabriel Decamps's *La défaite des Cimbres* (1833). The final tableau, of Heine's escape by climbing the cemetery's highest point and gazing upon the city below, is paralleled by his reflections on Delacroix in *Französische Maler*<sup>49</sup> and anticipates John Martin's 1849 painting, *The Last Man*, almost to a point:

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47 The intermingling of life and death throughout Heine's account may be motivated by the symptoms of cholera, which could sometimes render the body of the afflicted "into an ice-cold and inert living cadaver" (Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer: *Blemished Physiologies*: Delacroix, Paganini, and the Cholera Epidemic of 1832. In: *The Art Bulletin*. 83/2001, no. 4, pp. 686–710, here p. 690).

48 Alfred Rethel: *Der Tod als Würger*. In: *16 Zeichnungen und Entwürfe*. Ed. by Freie Lehrervereinigung für Kunstpflege. Mainz 1907, plate 9 (p. 23); see the introduction by Walther Friedrich, on the inspiration: "Den äußeren Anlaß dazu gab eine Zeitungsnachricht, nach der die Cholera in Paris zuerst bei einem Maskenballe ausbrach" (pp. iv–v).

49 Heine: *Französische Maler*, p. 22.

Eben war die Sonne untergegangen, ihre letzten Stralen schienen wehmüthig Abschied zu nehmen, die Nebel der Dämmerung umhüllten wie weiße Laken das kranke Paris, und ich weinte bitterlich über die unglückliche Stadt, die Stadt der Freyheit, der Begeisterung und des Martyrthums, die Heilandstadt, die für die weltliche Erlösung der Menschheit schon so viel gelitten! (FZ 142)

The point is not that Heine necessarily saw the earlier paintings mentioned here, or that his account inspired the later ones. Stähli's argument, presented with respect to a single ekphrastic passage,<sup>50</sup> applies to all scenes discussed here: in the face of inexpressible suffering and horror, Heine employs pictorial conventions – primarily, the choice of a single, poignant tableau – as a device for accommodation. Both verbal and visual art aim to represent experience, as Heine writes in *Französische Maler*, discussing the 'god-given means' available to the artist "bey der Veranschaulichung seiner Idee":

In den rezeitrenden Künsten bestehen diese Mittel in Tönen und Worten. In den darstellenden Künsten bestehen sie in Farben und Formen. Töne und Worte, Farben und Formen, das Erscheinende überhaupt, sind jedoch nur Symbole der Idee, Symbole, die in dem Gemüthe des Künstlers aufsteigen, wenn es der heilige Weltgeist bewegt, seine Kunstwerke sind nur Symbole, wodurch er andern Gemüthern seine eigenen Ideen mittheilt. Wer mit den wenigsten und einfachsten Symbolen das Meiste und Bedeutendste ausspricht, der ist der größte Künstler.<sup>51</sup>

The tableaux Heine creates in his account of the Paris cholera are symbols of this sort. They suggest the exceptionality of epidemic experience by supplementing verbal description with a strong visual element – words fail to capture the experience adequately. Readers are tasked with imagining a visual scene that is couched in the conventions of landscape and historical painting. These aesthetic conventions replace the sacral framing of earlier extinction narratives, and their ekphrastic inclusion renders them into a double frame: epidemic experience is first captured as a visual scene, which is then ekphrastically described by the poet. The ekphrastic poet, in Heine, is also a passive observer within the visual scene, and the reader is invited to identify with him, as with a *Rückenfigur*. However, he is not just a visual, but also a verbal mediator and intercessor: his ekphrastic device of imposing pictorial conventions on a real-life scene is the verbal equivalent of the *Rückenfigur* obscuring the scene it observes.

#### IV. Shelley: Secular prophecy

While Heine's account of the Paris cholera epidemic is written expressly 'to the moment', the philosophical novel *The Last Man* (1826) by Mary Shelley (1797–1851) precedes the coming of cholera to Western Europe by several years. It is informed, however, not only by an awareness of cholera's spread in South Asia,<sup>52</sup> but also by

<sup>50</sup> I am using the term ekphrasis in a somewhat broader sense than usual to mean "the verbal representation of a visual object" (Christopher Rovee: Ekphrasis. In: *The Encyclopedia of Romantic Literature*. Ed. by Frederick Burwick. Chichester 2012, pp. 400–407, here p. 400). As Frederick Burwick points out, ekphrasis need not be "externally directed [...]": Homer never saw the shield of Achilles; Keats's Grecian Urn existed only in his own imagination" (*Mimesis and Its Romantic Reflections*. University Park, PA 2001, p. 107).

<sup>51</sup> Heine: *Französische Maler*, pp. 24–25.

<sup>52</sup> As Alan Bewell points out, the novel's plague outbreak is caused by the Western conquest of Constantinople, "[j]ust as the British influence in India unleashed cholera" (*Romanticism and Colonial Disease*. Baltimore 1999,



early nineteenth-century fears of other diseases such as plague, yellow fever, smallpox, malaria, and fevers.<sup>53</sup> Its representation of a disease simply called ‘the plague’, coming into Europe from Asia on the wings of war and eliminating all of humanity except for the narrator Verney, carries clear moral and political overtones. It has been read as a critique of imperialism, global commerce, political philosophy, environmental destruction, and conventions of gender.<sup>54</sup> For the present purpose, the framing of Shelley’s plague narrative is of central interest. Like Heine’s account of the Paris cholera, and like *The Last Man* at large, as a *roman à clef*, this frame sits on the fence between a factual account and its aesthetic processing, yoking external reality and fiction in a way that disturbs ontological boundaries. The novel’s central characters Adrian, Earl of Windsor, and Lord Raymond have been read, by contemporaries and later critics alike, as fictionalised posthumous versions of Mary’s husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822), and Lord Byron (1788–1824), respectively. Adrian is the philosophically inclined and republican son of the king of England, Raymond the passionate and heroic general. The recent deaths of Percy and Byron, alongside those of four of Mary’s children, deeply influenced the novel, as Shelley noted in her journal: “The last man! Yes I may well describe that solitary being’s feelings, feeling myself as the last relic of a beloved race, my companions, extinct before me–.”<sup>55</sup> The concerns of the novel’s first half, set in the late twenty-first century and centring on questions of governance and the military threat of the Turks to Greece, are soon replaced in the second half by the all-consuming plague, as Adrian and Raymond, like their non-fictional counterparts, die, leaving the eponymous last man, Lionel Verney (sometimes identified with Mary Shelley), to mourn them. Verney finds himself the only survivor of the pandemic, thanks perhaps to inadvertent inoculation.<sup>56</sup>

The novel, published anonymously but identified as ‘by the author of *Frankenstein*’, opens with an ‘Introduction’ that clearly refers not only to Mary Shelley but to her famous late husband. It is paginated in Roman numerals, suggesting a paratextual character reminiscent of Jean Paul’s *Blumenstück* and partaking of the same ambiguous ontological character. The couple’s sojourns on the continent were well-known enough for the anonymous speaker’s opening words to invite identification with Mary: “I visited Naples in the year 1818. On the 8th of December of that year, my companion and I crossed the Bay, to visit the antiquities which are scattered on the shores of Baiae.”<sup>57</sup> The narrator describes a visit to the “gloomy cavern of the Cumaeen Sibyl” (ibid.), during which their local guides – like Grainville’s Syrians – warn them

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p. 298). Martin Garrett affirms that there is “no doubt” Shelley was “aware of reports of the cholera which had been spreading steadily from the east since 1817” (*The Last Man*. In: *The Palgrave Literary Dictionary of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*. London 2019, pp. 138–145, here p. 141).

- 53** Anne McWhir: Mary Shelley’s Anti-Contagionism: *The Last Man* as ‘Fatal Narrative’. In: *Mosaic*. 35/2002, no. 2, pp. 23–38, here p. 23. A specific argument for *The Last Man* “rewrit[ing] the history of smallpox” is presented in Fuson Wang: Romantic Disease Discourse: Disability, Immunity, and Literature. In: *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*. 33/2011, no. 5, pp. 467–482, here p. 470.
- 54** See the recent survey of critical positions in Rebekka Rohleder: “A Different Earth”: *Literary Space in Mary Shelley’s Novels*. Heidelberg 2019, pp. 95–96.
- 55** Letter dated May 14, 1824, in Mary Shelley: *The Journals of Mary Shelley 1814–1844: II: 1822–1844*. Ed. by Paula R. Feldman/Diana Scott-Kilvert. Oxford 1987, pp. 476–477.
- 56** See Rohleder: “A Different Earth”, pp. 105–106, for a survey of criticism.
- 57** Mary Shelley: *The Last Man*. 3 vols. London 1826, vol. 1, p. iii. Further references in the text, abbreviated as LM, by volume and page.



against climbing deeper into the cave. The couple insists on going further, but they are unsatisfied with what the guides present them as the Sibyl's Cave. They proceed alone, groping through several dark, narrow passages to arrive at larger cavern. It is occupied by the remains of a long dead goat, fallen in through an opening in the roof, and "piles of leaves, fragments of bark, and a white filmy substance" (LM 1 vii). Upon examination, the narrator's companion finds the leaves to be covered in writing in various languages, some ancient, some modern, and identifies them as "Sibylline": "they seemed to contain prophecies, detailed relations of events but lately passed" (ibid. viii). The couple makes "a hasty selection" of the leaves they can understand and escapes the cavern, but on later return visits takes further writings (ibid. ix). The narrator claims to have deciphered, translated and arranged them:

Scattered and unconnected as they were, I have been obliged to add links, and model the work into a consistent form. But the main substance rests on the truths contained in these poetic rhapsodies, and the divine intuition which the Cumaean damsel obtained from heaven. (ibid. x).

Apologizing for the "distortion and diminution of interest and excellence" the leaves "suffered" in the process, the narrator pleads "that they were unintelligible in their pristine condition" (ibid.). Lending them their present shape, the narrator concludes, had an (albeit counterintuitive) therapeutic effect:

I have been depressed, nay, agonized, at some parts of the recital, which I have faithfully transcribed from my materials. Yet such is human nature, that the excitement of mind was dear to me, and that the imagination, painter of tempest and earthquake, or, worse, the stormy and ruin-fraught passions of man, softened my real sorrows and endless regrets, by clothing these fictitious ones in that ideality, which takes the mortal sting from pain. (ibid. xi)

Although the introduction poignantly avoids specifying the sex of the two companions, this frame narrative from the pen of 'the author of *Frankenstein*' clearly explores questions of gendered agency: who has the epistemological, discursive, and aesthetic authority to publicly speak, and write?<sup>58</sup> In structural terms, its function has been read as raising the issues we have encountered above, of representing, and making sense of, extreme experience through art. Thus, Samantha Webb has observed a parallel between *The Last Man's* fiction of fragmentary origins and its representation of epidemic experience: "Both the plague and the fragmented text that writes of it are alien, their authorship unaccountable. They beg to be assimilated into an epistemology, to be made intelligible, to be 'framed'; and it is that process of interpretation that [*The Last Man*] explores."<sup>59</sup>

Shelley's reflexive treatment of this issue is nowhere clearer than in the passage in which the spreading of the plague into Europe is first mentioned. It pivots on the contrast between two kinds of scientific prediction: at a gathering of Verney's closest friends, an old astronomer forecasts a "universal spring" that will make earth a paradise

**58** See, for instance, Sandra M. Gilbert/Susan Gubar: *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. 2nd. ed. New Haven 2000, pp. 96–98.

**59** Samantha Webb: Reading the End of the World: *The Last Man*, History, and the Agency of Romantic Authorship. In: *Mary Shelley in Her Times*. Ed. by Betty T. Bennett/Stuart Curran. Baltimore, MD 2000, pp. 119–133, here p. 121. See also Sophie Thomas: The Ends of the Fragment, the Problem of the Preface: Proliferation and Finality in *The Last Man*. In: *Mary Shelley's Fictions: From Frankenstein to Falkner*. Ed. by Michael Eberle-Sinatra. Basingstoke 2000, pp. 22–38; and Ingrid Hotz-Davies: 'Plunged into Chaos, Obscure, Contrary, Unintelligible': Mary Shelleys *The Last Man* und die Grenzen der symbolischen Ordnung. In: *Krisen des Verstehens um 1800*. Ed. by Sandra Heinen/Harald Nehr. Würzburg 2004, pp. 277–296.

to come in one hundred thousand years, thanks to a felicitous position of the planet in space (LM 2 121). This prediction is mocked by Ryland, an odious political adversary to Raymond. At just this moment, Verney reads the news that the plague is spreading from Constantinople into Greece. Conversation now focuses on this matter, but Ryland concludes that “it is as wise to discuss the probability of a visitation of the plague to our well-governed metropolis, as to calculate the centuries which must escape before we can grow pine-apples here in the open air” (ibid. 123). Verney cannot quite share this attitude because while he, too, believes London to be safe, he has seen the places now ravaged by the plague, and he sympathizes with the population’s suffering. The linking of astronomical and epidemiological speculation can suggest two things: either the sublimity and ineffability of the former is transferred to the latter,<sup>60</sup> or (as intended by Ryland), both are dismissed as absurdly irrelevant. What is at issue is ‘anthropic’ sense-making, as natural phenomena and processes are interpreted with a view to what they ‘mean’ for, or have to say about, humankind.<sup>61</sup>

As the plague ravages the world, it becomes increasingly clear that it cannot be made sense of as part of some greater purpose, be it political, imperial, Malthusian, theological or otherwise. Nature resists human interpretation and is simply indifferent to human extinction. Fleeing with his friends from England to the continent, Verney observes with some indignation:

Nature was the same, as when she was the kind mother of the human race; now, childless and forlorn, her fertility was a mockery; her loveliness a mask for deformity. Why should the breeze gently stir the trees, man felt not its refreshment? Why did dark night adorn herself with stars – man saw them not? Why are there fruits, or flowers, or streams, man is not here to enjoy them? (LM 3 33)

Verney’s attitude that the world is pointless without humans is a clearly ironic version of the views encountered in the religious extinction narratives discussed above. Imagining the end of the human species alongside the largely unaffected persistence of the rest of the world appears as a consequence of the secular, immanent occasion for human extinction that is the plague.<sup>62</sup>

Near the end of the novel, Shelley reflects on the connection between such pivotal change and cultural artefacts from the past. Verney and a small group of survivors travel through Italy, and as they do, they take more comfort in each other’s company than in reading:

There were few books that we dared read; few, that did not cruelly deface the painting we bestowed on our solitude, by recalling combinations and emotions never more to be experienced by us. Metaphysical disquisition; fiction, which wandering from all reality, lost itself in self-created errors; poets of times so far

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**60** On the place of astronomy in Romantic culture, see Dometa Wiegand Brothers: *The Romantic Imagination and Astronomy: On All Sides Infinity*. Basingstoke 2015.

**61** On ‘anthropic sense-making’, cp. Florian Klaefer: *Reading into the Stars: Cosmopoetics in the Contemporary Novel*. Heidelberg 2018, p. 210. Melissa Bailes has shown that the process of editing by the introduction’s narrator, *forecasting* a horrible future for humanity, can be seen as analogous to the activity of the paleo-ontologist trying to piece together fossils which lend insight into the horrible creatures of the past. Thus, the mode of scientific inquiry is shown to provide insight only into the insignificance of humankind (The Psychologization of Geological Catastrophe in Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man*. In: *ELH*. 82/2015, no. 2, pp. 671–699).

**62** Thus, Verney observes: “when any whole nation becomes the victim of the destructive powers of exterior agents, then indeed man shrinks into insignificance, he feels his tenure of life insecure, his inheritance on earth cut off” (LM 2 145).

gone by, that to read of them was as to read of Atlantis and Utopia; or such as referred to nature only, and the workings of one particular mind; but most of all, talk, varied and ever new, beguiled our hours. (Ibid. 264)

Literature has lost, then, its intersubjective function: it only reminds the survivors of a community they have lost. They practice the 'literary distancing' described by Marcus to avoid a sense of loss. *The Last Man's* representation of epidemic experience must thus be seen, as numerous critics have observed, as a contribution to Romantic debates about the individual: where Percy Shelley and Byron, for instance, had celebrated individualism and solitude, Mary foregrounds the communal nature of human existence – although she does so in a bleak and hopeless manner.<sup>63</sup> Thus, in the novel's final pages, Verney – now truly the last man, wandering through empty Rome – decides to set out on a boat for the West, sailing towards the pillars of Hercules. This image recalls, again with heavy irony, the frontispiece of Francis Bacon's *Instauratio Magna* (1605) in the version of 1620 and the revised, much more complex version of the 1640 English translation, both depicting ships traversing the pillars of Hercules.<sup>64</sup> The frontispiece bears a motto paraphrasing the book of Daniel, "multi pertransibunt & augebitur scientia,"<sup>65</sup> suggesting that the increase of knowledge heralds the millennium. For Bacon, the global movement of people and ideas was to advance science, improve life for all, and bring about the kingdom of Christ. For Shelley's Verney, there is no hope of 'many' making this journey anymore, and the promise of science has failed. Taking instead "a few books; the principal are Homer and Shakespeare", Verney sails, not for hope or delight, but for "restless despair and fierce desire of change" (LM 3 351). The final image he leaves the reader with reduces him to a speck on a massive canvas: "Thus around the shores of deserted earth, while the sun is high, and the moon waxes or wanes, angels, the spirits of the dead, and the ever-open eye of the Supreme, will behold the tiny bark, freighted with Verney – the LAST MAN" (ibid. 352). No human spectator remains, and Verney can have no hope his account will ever be read: he is both author and sole addressee. His narrative practice reveals that "composition can perform a function independent of readers; it has value independent of the 'transaction' that takes place between an author and a reader."<sup>66</sup> Verney's nostalgic sense of loss is assuaged through his narrative, and this 'writing cure' is independent from a communicative act – exactly replicating the situation of the introduction's narrator, whose declared aim is also 'softening sorrow'.

This mirroring between diegetic levels reinforces what the frame narrator had already suggested: in the face of immeasurable loss, the attempt at expression can offer its own consolation. By 'quarantining' the traumatic experience through the prophecy

**63** Ina Schabert: Weltuntergang mit Zuschauer: Über Mary Shelleys Endzeitroman *Der letzte Mensch*. In: *Soziopolis: Gesellschaft beobachten* 2021, <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-80759-4> (11 August 2022), and cp. Steven Goldsmith: Of Gender, Plague, and Apocalypse: Mary Shelley's *Last Man*. In: *Yale Journal of Criticism*. 4/1990, no.1, pp. 129–173.

**64** In the later version, the pillars are labelled to represent the universities of Oxford and Cambridge – the suggestion is that these institutions are mainstays of knowledge, but also that it is necessary to push beyond what they teach. Mary Shelley was reading Bacon in 1822, and Percy Shelley had done so in 1819 (see reading lists in Mary Shelley: *The Journals*, vol 1., pp. 411 [for Mary], p. 92 and p. 288 [for Percy]).

**65** The Vulgate version of Dan 12:4 actually reads, "pertransibunt plurimi et multiplex erit scientia." See Dieter Groh: *Göttliche Weltökonomie: Perspektiven der Wissenschaftlichen Revolution vom 15. bis zum 17. Jahrhundert*. Berlin 2010, pp. 419–439.

**66** Webb: *Reading the End of the World*, p. 127.

edited by the introduction's narrator,<sup>67</sup> and through Verney's purportedly self-directed narrative, their responses to the experience of loss are foregrounded over the loss itself. Coping with loss by means of shaping, form-giving, becomes the theme. As the sacred, transcendental mould of Providence is rejected in the face of a mundane threat, the secular, immanent conventions of art come to replace it. Like Heine, Shelley suggests that art can be a means of pre-processing traumatic experience, accommodating the horror of the otherwise inexpressible. Whereas Heine uses the verbal description of an imagined painted scene as a distancing device, Shelley acknowledges the pain in turning a normally communicative, intersubjective medium like writing into an "opiate" (thus Verney on his narrative, LM 2 223) for self-consolation. Unlike earlier writers imagining the extinction of the human species by divine decree, Heine and Shelley self-consciously 'quarantine' epidemic experience by framing it in aesthetic terms, suggesting that the practice and conventions of art can contain what would otherwise exceed our capacity for suffering. In doing so, they shift the focus from the epidemic to epidemic experience, to the observing and recording subject.

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**67** Morton D. Paley speaks of a "buffering" afforded by the Introduction, which "alleviate[s] the reader's anxiety at having to imagine Lastness and the void that must follow Lastness" – an assessment that can be specified to refer to epidemic experience (*The Last Man: Apocalypse Without Millennium*. In: *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein*. Ed. by Audrey A. Fisch. New York 1993, pp. 107–123, here p. 110 and p. 121).