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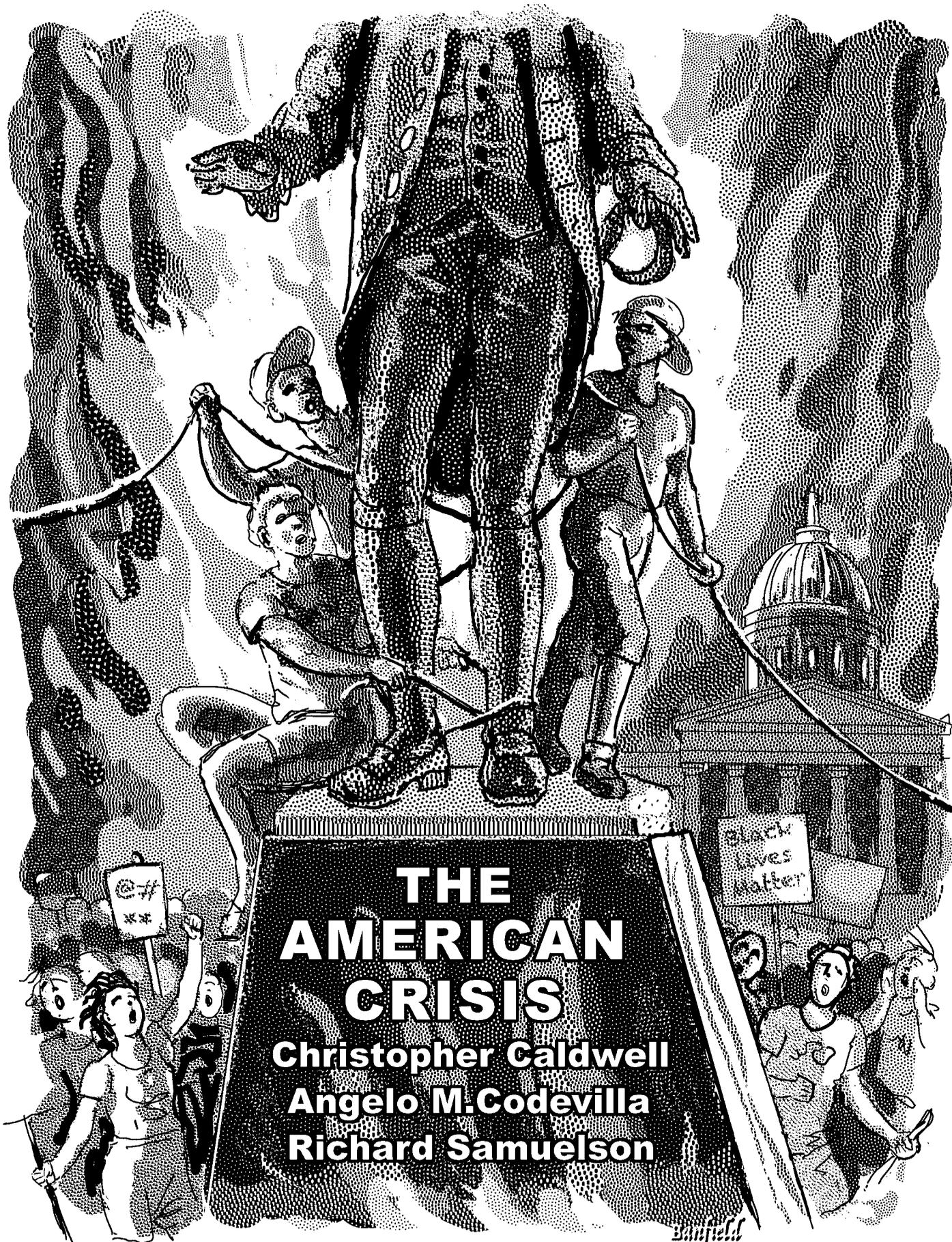
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Essay by Algis Valiunas

IN PLAGUE TIME



AMID THE FEAR, SORROW, ANGER, AND frustration of waiting out the current pandemic, as we sit at home hoping for a return to normalcy and worrying it won't happen any time soon, we have been presented with a rare opportunity to reflect on the brevity and fragility of our lives, and how we are using the time left us. The inveterately bookish have more time than usual to devote to our addiction, and there is a masterly and instructive literature that bears directly on our present situation. This literature treats of epidemics far more frightful than that of COVID-19, and reminds us what human beings are capable of, in the way of nobility and depravity, when the question of whether one will live out the week is a 50-50 proposition. Among the best and most useful of these writers are Thucydides, Boccaccio, Samuel Pepys, Daniel Defoe, and Alessandro Manzoni.

Death and Detachment

WAR MAKES MEN WARLIKE, Thucydides teaches in his great history, *The Peloponnesian War* (circa

404 B.C.), and foremost among the necessary adjustments war makes in a people's character is to stiffen its spine in the face of mass death. It took a Roman poet in full cry, Horace, to assert that it is sweet and becoming to die for one's country, and although no Greek orator went so far as to commend the sweetness of such self-sacrifice, Athenian eloquence did famously extol the everlasting honor of giving one's life for his city in battle. In the winter of the first year of the war with Sparta, Thucydides writes, the Athenians conducted a mass funeral for the fallen soldiers with ritual solemnity, according to the "custom of their ancestors." The funeral oration that Pericles delivered was a masterpiece of grave civic piety, and exalted the unique Athenian way of life for which its noble citizens willingly went to their death.

But then the following summer mass death arrived in a less becoming form. As the Spartans invaded Attica and laid waste to the countryside, the plague broke out in Athens and devastated the city. No medical expertise or any other "human art" could effect a cure. Physicians who ministered to the sick and dying themselves died in droves. Calling

on the gods to show mercy was equally futile, and supplications and divinations ceased altogether when the death toll demonstrated definitively the uselessness of pagan religion.

Although Thucydides suggests that the Spartans may have introduced the plague into Athens—he even mentions rumors they had poisoned the water supply—the origins of the disease he leaves to other writers more inclined to speculation. About the frightful cruelty of the disease, however, the way it ravages the sufferer's body and spirit, he writes as an expert, who survived an attack himself and watched as others fell victim. The lengthy description of the gruesome symptoms is remarkable for its clinical detachment, which does not lessen the sheer physical horror of the affliction: "Externally the body was not very hot to the touch, nor pale in its appearance, but reddish, livid, and breaking out into small pustules and ulcers. But internally it burned so that the patient could not bear to have on him clothing or linen even of the very lightest description; or indeed to be otherwise than stark naked." What Thucydides knew of plague he learned



Diversions

on his own body, and his icy mind recorded the terrible course of the rampaging illness. This is Athenian courage, resolve, and force of intellect at its highest.

He pays tribute to those who displayed the finest humanity and intrepidity—who overcame the fear of death at its most horrific in order to perform the duties of honorable men. To aid and comfort sick friends required a rare selflessness, for the disease was especially contagious. Men died “like sheep, through having caught the infection in nursing each other. This caused the greatest mortality.”

But as the pestilence raged on, it became harder and harder to find estimable men. Thucydides details the widespread moral dissolution of the Athenian citizenry: all restraint forgotten, all honor despised, piety a matter of indifference, law an object of derision. “[F]or as the disaster passed all bounds, men, not knowing what was to become of them, became utterly careless of everything, whether sacred or profane.” One is meant to remember the ceremonious punctilio of the soldiers’ funeral and the noble grace of Pericles’ speech when one reads of interment and cremation of plague victims as solid waste disposal:

All the burial rites before in use were entirely upset, and they buried the bodies as best they could. Many from want of the proper appliances through so many of their friends having died already had recourse to the most shameless modes of burial: sometimes getting in first before those who had raised a pile, they threw their own dead body upon the stranger’s pyre and ignited it; sometimes they tossed the corpse which they were carrying on the top of another that was burning, and so went off.

A chasm separated honorable death in service to the city from meaningless agonizing loss. Men had died in war for Athens and for each other, but in the plague summer it was every man for himself. The once dutiful citizen became a practicing nihilist, and as everything was permitted, “lawless extravagance” reigned: “no one expected to live to be brought to trial for his offenses, but each felt that a far severer sentence had been already passed upon them all and hung ever over their heads, and before this fell it was only reasonable to enjoy life a little.” The very reason that could make men godlike was here slave to the fear of death and the desperate cravings of the body.

ATHENIANS OF THE 5TH CENTURY BEFORE Christ and Christian Florentines of the mid-14th century behaved very like each other in time of fatal epidemic. As Giovanni Boccaccio shows in the *Decameron*, written circa 1350, two years after the bubonic plague or Black Death killed some 100,000 in his native city and perhaps half the population of Europe, *timor mortis* ruled mankind; the physical loathsomeness of disease commandeered men’s minds, and moral blight rotted once unexceptionable Christian souls as it had formerly those of virtuous pagans.

Books discussed in this essay:

The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War, edited by Robert B. Strassler, translated by Richard Crawley. Free Press, 752 pages, \$45 (cloth), \$30 (paper)

Decameron, by Boccaccio, translated by J.G. Nichols. Vintage Classics, 688 pages, \$27 (cloth), \$14 (paper)

The Diary of Samuel Pepys, edited by Richard Le Gallienne. Modern Library, 352 pages, \$18 (paper)

A Journal of the Plague Year, by Daniel Defoe. Oxford World’s Classics, 304 pages, \$9.95 (paper)

The Betrothed (I promessi sposi), by Alessandro Manzoni, translated by Bruce Penman. Penguin Classics, 720 pages, \$20 (paper)

[I]n both men and women, [the disease] began with certain swellings in the groin or armpit, some of which grew to the size of an ordinary apple, while others were egg-shaped and of different sizes. Ordinary people called them buboes. These fatal buboes soon spread from those two parts of the body and began to appear all over. Then the nature of the symptoms changed, and on the arms, thighs, or other parts of people’s bodies black or bluish blemishes appeared, some large and far apart and others small and close together. These,

like the original buboes, were a sure sign that anyone who had them would die.

No medical advice or medicine seemed to be effective against this disease.

Once again the plague was fiendishly contagious, and men and women were so bent upon saving their own skins that they effectively renounced the most cherished human connections. Friendships and family ties counted for nothing, as even fathers and mothers abandoned their sick children to die alone, “almost as if they did not belong to them.” Self-love conquered all. Experience of the plague changed decent men into reprobates and reprobates into monsters. The solemn fellowship of grief that had formerly marked funeral rites gave way to mad “laughter and ridicule and conviviality” in the face of loss. Death with dignity was a fading memory.

[T]hings had come to such a pass that dead human beings were treated no better than goats.... There was not enough consecrated ground to bury the great multitude of corpses arriving at every church every day and almost every hour, particularly if each was to be given its rightful place according to the ancient custom. So, when all the graves were occupied, very deep pits were dug in the churchyards, into which the new arrivals were put in their hundreds. As they were stowed there, one atop of another, like merchandise in the hold of a ship, each layer was covered with a little earth, until the pit was full.

Boccaccio presents seven young women and three young men who, to escape for a spell from the charnel house, withdraw for ten days to the countryside and entertain themselves and each other by telling stories: the *Decameron* collects the 100 tales they told, on a different set theme every day. The tales are mostly *divertimenti*, amusing morsels that grant teller and listeners temporary respite from the omnipresence of death. This is really diversion in the sense of turning the mind aside from the first and the last things that are the proper objects of Christian contemplation. Bold, pungent, frivolous, ribald, occasionally obscene, Boccaccio’s art broke with reverent medieval convention and inaugurated the humanistic—which is to say, the modern—temperament and habits of mind, whose wisdom is of this world, and defiantly so. He composed an extended eulogy to human powers, which must make the best of a world whose Creator seems indifferent or



even brutal. Strength of intellect, and above all the gifts of imagination, see his men and women through the innumerable ordeals of this inhospitable earthly life.

The physical devastation and moral dishevelment of the plague city have made possible an unprecedented liberty, argues one of the young men, Dioneo (aptly named after Dionysius, the god of intoxication and revelry), when he defends the appropriateness of the theme he has chosen for the seventh day: the tricks ladies have played on their husbands, for love or self-preservation.

[I]n my opinion these times are such that, provided men and women do not act dishonourably, they are allowed complete freedom of speech. Are you really unaware that, in the disorder of these times, the judges have deserted the law courts, all laws (divine as well as human) are ignored, and everyone is granted every liberty to preserve his life?

The 100 stories include numerous variations on the theme of “bedswerving,” to borrow a Shakespearean coinage that Boccaccio would have loved, in which randy merchants and nobles and monks and nuns with proto-Machiavellian wiles violate every commandment of God and man and savor every moment of pleasure they manage to steal. For Boccaccio the mortal sin against nature was credulity, the negation of common sense, and he delighted in seeing fools get what’s coming to them, while shrewd men and women who dared pursue what they really wanted were the heroes of the new dispensation.

The imitation of Christ was out of place in a universe in which Fortuna seemed the supreme deity and human beings were hard-pressed to understand or evade her severe decrees. The time did not call for the propagation of men of sorrows; all were only too well acquainted with grief, Boccaccio believed, and they were ardently seeking some reasonable alternative to obsession with morbidity and mortality. Fortuna’s harsh imposition of the plague was teaching men and women the art of thinking for themselves, enjoying their lives despite the wreckage around them, and investing existence with a new and purely human purpose.

One would be remiss if one failed to mention that Boccaccio later recanted his flagrant passion for this world at the expense of the next. As the art historian Millard Meiss writes in his classic study *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death* (1951), “When during the [1360s] and seventies Boccaccio was driven by a religious conscience, he both disowned the *Decameron*, the finest flower of

early Florentine secular art, and tried to dispose of his library, rich in ancient writing.” In the absence of the plague, perhaps he outlived his need for diversion and concentrated his mind on the eternal things he and his storytelling youths had so pointedly avoided. Or perhaps he simply lost his nerve.

Body and Soul

THE DIARY OF SAMUEL PEPYS IS THE most celebrated document of its kind, and rightly so. Robert Louis Stevenson wrote of Pepys, who was a civilian high official of immense accomplishment in the British Admiralty, “There never was a man nearer being an artist who yet was not one.” From May to December 1665, Pepys recorded the lethal progress of the plague through London, and the emotional amplitude of his observations fascinates today, encompassing the gravity of profound dread and the levity of congenial diversion.

Pepys was molded after Boccaccio’s image of the man who knows how to live: a slightly

The plague changed decent men into reprobates and reprobates into monsters.

better-than-average sensual man out chiefly for his own pleasure, a rascal rather than a rogue, very much at home in the modern secular world, though inclined to pay obeisance to the Almighty when the pressure got unbearable and sometimes when things were going too well. The scuttlebutt of the day formed the foundation of his mental life. On May 24 he noted that the imminence of war and of plague had become the pressing public concern: “All the newes is of the Dutch [fleet] being gone out, and of the plague growing upon us in this towne; and of remedies against it; some saying one thing, some another.” Four days later, his mind was occupied with the latest salacious gossip, as he relished the sensation he made with a great lady when he regaled her with a gamy escapade of the most notorious rakehell of the age, Lord Rochester. Some two weeks after that, the bubonic plague was striking home, but his rejoicing at the naval victory over the Dutch drove the creeping fear out for the moment. The fear pursued him most days, however, and thoughts of death pushed aside his usual worry over his career, his appetites,

and the public business—though he was less anxious for his immortal soul than he was about getting his affairs in order for his family’s sake, “in case it should please God to call me away, which God dispose of to his glory!”

As London grew “very sickly,” he started to reckon up with an accountant’s nicety the appalling losses, running into the tens of thousands. But the natural disaster also turned Pepys’s preoccupations toward the supernatural. He gave Providence some serious attention. When the coachman driving him home from the plague-ridden end of town suddenly stopped and told his passenger he was too sick to go on, Pepys’s fear of the Lord burst out in terror and pity: “but God have mercy upon us all!” By the beginning of July daily life had become fraught with peril, “the season growing so sickly, that it is much to be feared how a man can escape having a share with others in it, for which the good Lord God bless me, or to be fitted to receive it.” And yet he could brag to himself about his peerless wine cellar, and see in it a mark of God’s favor: “only taking notice to what a condition it hath pleased God to bring me that at this time I have two tierces of Claret, two quarter casks of Canary, and a smaller vessel of Sack; a vessel of Tent, another of Malaga, and another of white wine.” By August the plague was slaying its multitudes, but Pepys was happy to see how prosperous he was when he went over his books, and he honored his Maker accordingly: “upon my monthly accounts late...I did find myself really worth £1,900 [or about \$425,000 today], for which the great God of Heaven and Earth be praised!”

As September rolled around, the plague was all that anybody talked or thought about. And the novel experience of mass death in plain view animated Pepys’s curiosity; he wanted to see as much of the catastrophic spectacle as he could, despite the danger to body and soul.

Thence...walked toward Moorefields to see (God forbid my presumption!) whether I could see any dead corps going to the grave; but, as God would have it, did not. But, Lord! how every body’s looks, and discourse in the street is of death, and nothing else, and few people going up and down, that the towne is like a place distressed and forsaken.

London was reverting to wilderness: “and grass grows all up and down White Hall court, and nobody but poor wretches in the streets!” The pestilence even affected Pepys’s personal grooming, by which he set great store: he “durst not wear” his new periwig, because he was afraid the hair might have come from the head of a plague victim. Still,



the news was not all unfavorable: since the plague had carried off his physician and his surgeon, Pepys could indulge his fondness for “a cup of good drink” without reproach from medical killjoys. Roistering, copping a feel from a gracious lady, listening to another beauty sing a song he had written, diverting himself every way he could think of, Pepys survived the plague year in fine fettle, his appreciation for life’s fundamental agreeableness and for his own good fortune keeping the general evil at arm’s length. Healthy egotism and a certain insensibility to the suffering of others helped.

Very, Very, Very Dreadful

IN A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR (1722), Daniel Defoe renders “the last Great Visitation in 1665,” as he calls it, with such brio and vital detail that his novel has sometimes been mistaken for an eyewitness documentary. He describes suffering so intense it made the dying vent “their Pain by incessant Roarings, and such loud and lamentable Cries.” The screams pierced the listeners’ hearts all the more sharply because “the same dreadful Scourge might be expected every moment to seize upon our selves.” The horror of the mass burial pit was literally indescribable: “it was

indeed *very, very, very* dreadful, and such as no Tongue can express.”

Only poverty, with its fear of destitution, shouldered out the fear of death. The poor were eager to do whatever work they could find, however dangerous, including the virtually suicidal task of manning the death carts: “It must be confest, that tho’ the Plague was chiefly among the Poor; yet, were the Poor the most Venturous and Fearless of it, and went about their Employment, with a Sort of Brutal Courage.” The economic hardship caused by the suspension or permanent shuttering of business made the prosperous fear “that Desperation should push the People upon Tumults, and cause them to rifle the Houses of rich Men.” It was left to charity on a “prodigiously great” scale to preserve “the Publick Peace.” And Defoe’s narrator discerns nature’s compassion in the plague’s deadliest stage, when 30 to 40 thousand of the poor were annihilated over two months. Had so many survived, they would have imposed “an unsufferable Burden, by their Poverty,” on the city’s resources, and in their importunate rampage would have “put the whole Nation, as well as the City, into the utmost Terror and Confusion.” Thank Heaven for small mercies.

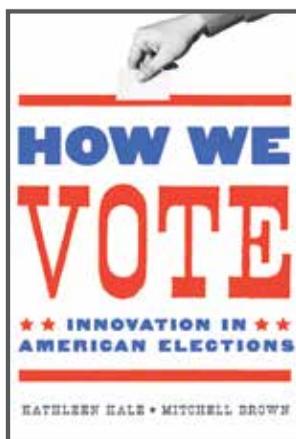
Defoe inclined more to thanking Heaven than to hurling defiance its way. The narra-

tor’s decision to ride out the plague in London rather than flee to the countryside rested on his utter trust in “the Goodness and Protection of the Almighty...[who] was able to keep me in a Time of the Infection as in a Time of Health; and if he did not think fit to deliver me, still I was in his hands, and it was meet he should do with me as should seem good to him.” The brimstone preachers who heaped supernatural terror on natural terror with prophecies of unexampled divine wrath in this world and the next earned Defoe’s scorn. The quaking flock needed to be reminded instead of “the Gospel of Peace, and the Gospel of Grace.” One happy consequence of the plague was that the violent sectarian divisions and antipathies which had recently convulsed the nation became negligible, though only for the time being. When the plague had passed, good Christians of all denominations resumed hating each other with godly fervor.

True Love

ALESSANDRO MANZONI’S *I PROMESSI sposi*, or *The Betrothed* (1827), is widely considered the greatest Italian novel, and is certainly among the classics of orthodox Roman Catholicism. It is

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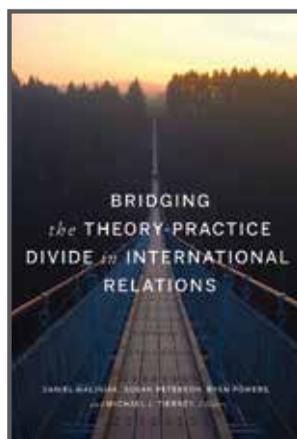


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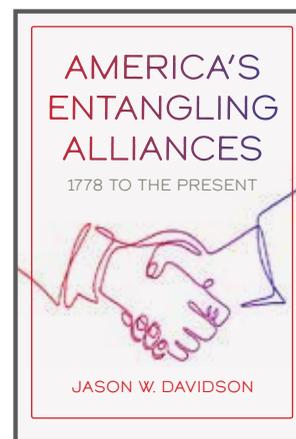


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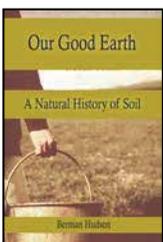
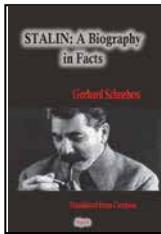
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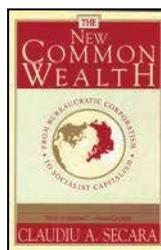
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a page-turner about the impediments that a villainous nobleman's lust presented to the marriage of true minds between poor but virtuous Renzo and Lucia, whose plight and triumph inspired the author's sage Christian reflections on sacred and profane love as well as divine and human justice. The 700-page novel reaches its climax in the 1630 plague that killed, according to one contemporary account, some 140,000 of Milan's 200,000 inhabitants. Manzoni provides a panoramic view of the devastation and the heroism. He plainly echoes Boccaccio in lamenting the way "the very links of human affection...became words of terror"; and he does pile on the abominations. Yet the tragedy of widespread suffering provided the occasion for remarkable men to demonstrate their excellence in serving the public good, and not least in saving souls. The truly religious rose to the occasion, however punishing the cost, and the greatest honor accrued to the Capuchin priests who staffed the *lazaretto*—the vast public hospital, or more precisely repository, for plague victims, which for most was the last stop before the mass grave.

The suffering included mass hysteria, which "propagated itself as fast as the plague." Crazed, desperate multitudes were willing to believe any and all rumors of evil intent behind the pestilence—preferring "to blame disasters on human wickedness, against which revenge is possible, rather than to attribute them to a factor which can only be met with resignation." Renzo, who has survived infection with the plague, is searching for his vanished Lucia when someone accuses him of smearing the wall of the house where she had lived with a pestiferous unguent—a common popular delusion being that such "anointing" was a form of witchcraft. He runs for his life from an angry mob, which multiplied each individual's stupidity and folly by an astronomical coefficient. Renzo finds safety among the death cart commandos and *lazaretto* ferry-men who are the lowest of the low, and who help him because they too believe he was deliberately spreading the plague, much to their professional advantage.

On his way to the *lazaretto*, where he heard Lucia might be found, Renzo encounters the beloved Capuchin Father Cristoforo. He confides to the good friar that if Lucia isn't found Renzo will hunt down the lovers' nemesis, Don Rodrigo, and kill him. The wise priest, who had killed a man himself in his earlier, sinful secular life, turns the hot-head young lover away from murderous vendetta and toward the saving grace of Christian forgiveness. Then he takes Renzo to see the prostrated Don Rodrigo, hovering between life and death, whose face might have

been that of a corpse. And Father Cristoforo tells Renzo, "Perhaps this man's salvation—and your own—depend on you at this moment—on an impulse of forgiveness and pity from you...yes—an impulse of love!"

The love Renzo shows his moribund enemy certifies the worthiness of his love for Lucia, whom he subsequently finds among the 16,000 patients yet alive in the *lazaretto*. He still has to overcome her own resistance, for she has vowed to dedicate her life to the Madonna, who she believes has saved her from the clutches of another evildoer. Father Cristoforo convinces her—though it takes some doing—that her previous vow to love Renzo takes precedence over her promise to the Virgin, who, after all, understands such matters of the heart. All is made well for the couple blessed by true love. Through their terrible troubles they learn that "trust in God goes far to take away their sting, and makes them a useful preparation for a better life." How the salvation and happiness of one such couple weigh in the balance against the lives lost and souls fouled in the Black Death remains a question beyond human calculation.

Dire Mystery

EPIDEMICS THAT SEEM TO COME OUT of nowhere, and that disappear as suddenly as they broke out, induce a peculiar distress of mind and soul in the affected population, and even in some who merely read about them centuries after the fact. These pestilences possess the dire mystery of what are still called acts of God, and thus suggest an obscure justice or even an active malevolence at work, even if they are simply accidents of nature. As men tend more and more to accept that these calamities are purely accidental, the ground buckles under their feet, for the suffering and death that once seemed moral ordeals—trials of the soul—are exposed as meaningless mischance. Which is why, when one turns to old books about the plague for their reports of human behavior *in extremis* and for their efforts to explain the darkest fatalities, one seeks a wisdom that is not readily come by in our own bleakly modern experience. We find men and women very like ourselves, tormented as we are by fears of an awful death, but the best of whom proved heroes of unflinching intelligence, or irrepressible vitality, or godly devotion. For they knew they had souls and lived by that knowledge. As in our accident-prone modernity we still can, too.

Algis Valiunas is a fellow of the Ethics and Public Policy Center and a contributing editor of the New Atlantis.

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