



Border Reconfigurations in Contagious Societies. Epidemics as Biopolitical Crises from the Decameron to Nemesis

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ABSTRACT: This article aims at investigating two narratives about historical moments of sociopolitical, economic, and cultural crisis represented through literary descriptions of epidemics. I will focus on the subtext of the plague in one of the foundational texts of the Western canon, the *Decameron*, paying particular attention to the metaphor of contagion as a phenomenon allowing for the renegotiations of biopolitical borders in the Florentine society of the *Trecento*. Building on images of contamination as vehicles of contagion, I am interested in interrogating the roots and scope of the reconsideration of traditional norms and accustomed practices that Giovanni Boccaccio frames in biopolitical terms in the description of the 1348 plague in Florence. I will also take into consideration Philip Roth's 2010 novel *Nemesis*, which is set against the background of the polio outbreak in Newark in 1944. *Nemesis* depicts a prophylactic measure identical to the country retreat that famously frames the main narrative in the *Decameron*, yet in Roth's novel it represents a failed attempt to escape contagion. Another narrative trait that *Nemesis* shares with the *Decameron* is the context: a society on the verge of essential transformations in the political, cultural, and economic realm. Indeed,



mercantile Florence of the *Trecento* was on the brink of a new era, the Early Modern period, likewise 1944 USA was involved in WWII, fighting for the geopolitical supremacy over a new world order (the Cold War) and shaping a new socio-economic model: neoliberalism.

KEY WORDS: Literary representation of epidemics and contagion; Biopolitics; Border Studies; Philip Roth's *Nemesis*; *Decameron*

The notion of crisis, usually associated with political turmoil, is key to understanding the relation between epidemics and the society infected. The etymology of the word "crisis," from ancient Greek *krisis*, reveals a meaning intrinsically connected to the semantics of illness: "A moment during a serious disease when there is the possibility of suddenly getting either better or worse" ("Crisis"). Politics, hence, seems to have borrowed one of its foundational tenets from the field of medicine, implicitly drawing a parallel between the human body and body politics. Crisis is that which alters the status quo, be it physiological or political, and, in order to be apprehended and thus assimilated by patients and citizens alike, it needs to be otherized, expelled from the body—at least, partially. Indeed, the anatomical and social dynamics underlying the response to moments of crisis factor in a certain level of immunization in the form of the adoption of a harmless portion of the transformative agent or virus within the organism, so that it develops a (immunity) system apt to confront the crisis of the contagion.

This article aims at investigating two narratives about historical moments of sociopolitical, economic, and cultural crisis represented through literary descriptions of epidemics. I will focus on the subtext of the plague in one of the foundational texts of the Western canon, the *Decameron*, paying particular attention to the metaphor of contagion as a phenomenon allowing for the renegotiations of biopolitical borders in the Florentine society of the *Trecento*. Building on images of contamination as vehicles of contagion, I am interested in interrogating the roots and scope of the reconsideration of traditional norms and accustomed practices that Giovanni Boccaccio frames in biopolitical terms in the description of the 1348 plague in Florence, especially in the introduction to Day I and, with the intent to immunize, in the novella IV.5. In particular, I will concentrate on encounters with beings considered "other," such as between humans and animals, as instances of the class tension key to the understanding of the biopolitical crisis at the core of epidemics and their literary accounts.

The second text that I will take into consideration is Philip Roth's 2010 novel *Nemesis*, which is set against the background of the polio outbreak in Newark in 1944. When the polio epidemic breaks out, Bucky Cantor is a playground director in Weequahic, the Jewish neighborhood, a position he will later quit out of fear of getting



infected, only to eventually contract polio in a summer camp in the Pocono mountains. *Nemesis* depicts a prophylactic measure identical to the country retreat that famously frames the main narrative in the *Decameron*, yet in Roth's novel it represents a failed attempt to escape contagion. Another narrative trait that *Nemesis* shares with the *Decameron* is the context: a society on the verge of essential transformations in the political, cultural, and economic realm. Indeed, mercantile Florence of the *Trecento* was on the brink of a new era, the Early Modern period, likewise, 1944 USA was involved in WWII, fighting for the geopolitical supremacy over a new world order (the Cold War) and shaping a new socio-economic model: neoliberalism.

Though distant in historical and geographical terms, the *Decameron* and *Nemesis* prove to be similar in dwelling on a contemporary epidemic crisis as a way to address the collapse of a social order become obsolete and to criticize the biopolitical, economic, and cultural upheavals connected to watershed events. Crucially, the selection of these two radically different case studies allows the reflection on the class implications of contagious societies, an aspect which seems to have remained the same from 1348 to 1944 and which both the *Decameron* and *Nemesis* highlight in their narratives. The crisis they articulate entails inter-species, inter-ethnic, and inter-gender encounters and, hence, contaminations but it is when it comes to inter-class contacts that contagious societies unleash their biopolitical immunity. This means that these two texts have a peculiar comprehension of crisis as that which can transform several connotations of a society except for the class structure, despite the attempts to do so.

My comparative reading of Boccaccio's and Roth's works focuses on the conceptualization of epidemics as "border trespassing," a notion that philosopher Roberto Esposito defines as the tension that reveals threats connected to the trespassing nature of contagious diseases. The body, be it anatomical or political, is always "the place where the threat is located, always on the border between the inside and the outside, between the self and other, the individual and the common" (Esposito 8). In this regard, contagion is always a "dynamic of dissolution" (Esposito 8), a dissolving practice that infects and affects the biopolitical body, erasing existing borders and then conceiving of new ones. This dissolution of old boundaries entails dynamics of immunization which, similarly, have to do with borders too. In his seminal studies on the interactions between *communitas* and *immunitas*, Esposito claims that immunity is the negation of a negation, an excluding inclusion that neutralizes the threat of the contagion by including a harmless fraction of the virulent agent. Immunity reproduces the "evil" in a form that can be controlled, assimilated, and eventually expelled (9). In this sense, contagion—understood as the force establishing the connection between the individual and the political body, between community and immunity reactions—is a particularly profitable reading paradigm to look at narratives of epidemics, because it sheds some light on their contextual reference to sociopolitical crises.

According to Esposito's biopolitical take, the body is an immanently liminal space: "the liminal zone where the immunitary intention of politics is carried out: namely, to delay the passage from life to death as long as possible, to drive death to the farthest point from the presentness of life" (127). The body is both the ground and the tool of the battle between life and death, and I think that the liminality of the body, in medical



as well as political terms, can be identified and studied in the *Decameron* and *Nemesis* with reference to social mobility by applying a further methodology, borrowed from the field of Border Studies. In *Border as Method*, Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson reflect on borders not merely as normative and configurative entities, but as agents performing significant epistemic and ontological work. In Mezzadra and Neilson's understanding, borders are far from being "literally marginal" because they inscribe themselves at the center of human experiences (vii). In fact, borders have a "productive power" and play a "strategic role [...] in the fabrication of the world," along these lines, taking the border as "an epistemic angle opens up new and particularly productive perspectives on the transformations" of the world in a given period (viii). Also, adopting the border as method "provides productive insights" on a number of liminal, intermingling phenomena that nourish "conflicts that blur the line between inclusion and exclusion" and that "profoundly chang[e] code[s] of social inclusion in the present" (viii). Contagion and the immunity of communities are radically affected by these dynamics: epidemics are crises that illustrate the liminality, the intermingled nature of social occurrences in a particularly explicit fashion. The mechanisms of social exclusion and inclusion via immunization call for the definition and redefinition of borders and this is one of the reasons why my comparative reading of the *Decameron* and *Nemesis* is based on a Border Studies approach too.

Following a literary trajectory itself trespassing historical, geographical, linguistic, and cultural borders, ultimately this article proposes a comparative study of two profoundly different texts in light of their shared intent to represent epidemics as metaphors for deeper biopolitical crises which put pressure on class conventions, though without transforming them in the end. This rationale is also backed by comprehensive studies on epidemics that highlight the consistencies between different epidemics over the course of history. One study in particular, though not exclusively devoted to epidemics, showcases the significant connection between sanitary crises and sociopolitical turmoil: Walter Scheidel's *The Great Leveler* analyzes the role of crises in levelling social and economic inequalities in a number of disparate societies. Scheidel contends that the ravaging plague of the first half of 1300s Europe had important effects on inequality with a general improvement in the living standards of the laboring population (305). In Florence, specifically, "the real wages of unskilled workers approximately doubled," making it easier for the working class to acquire property and for the bourgeoisie to thrive (307). The contours of class and economic structures of Florentine society were thus reshaped, pointing to the emergence of new political configurations. Similarly, "even human-caused events such as the world wars profoundly affected societies" because the devastation brought about by these crises "served as a uniquely powerful catalyst for equalizing policy change" (9, 6). This equalizing—and hence border-reconfiguring—power entailed the strengthening of the capitalist economy in controversial terms, as it is particularly evident in Roth's depiction of polio-ridden Newark in the 1940s. Importantly though, these changes are shown as only superficial in the *Decameron* and *Nemesis* because class boundaries are eventually respected, and the status quo somehow confirmed.



"LA MORTIFERA PESTILENZA" IN THE *DECAMERON*

The introduction to Day I of the *Decameron* opens on the description of the plague that broke out in Florence in 1348. This sanitary crisis contextualizes the subsequent narrative about the *brigata* who flees the city to reach the countryside as a prophylactic measure. From the onset, the text establishes a paradigm of border renegotiations, signaling a moral and pragmatic entanglement between individual guilt and collective destiny exemplified by the attempt to geographically otherize the disease as coming from the East.

[N]ell'egregia città di Firenze, oltre ad ogni altra italica nobilissima, pervenne la mortifera pestilenza, la quale o per operazion de' corpi superiori o per le nostre inique opere da giusta ira di Dio a nostra correzione mandata sopra i mortali, alquanti anni davanti nelle parti orientali incominciata, quelle d'innumerabile quantità di viventi avendo private, senza ristare d'un luogo in uno altro continuandosi, inverso l'Occidente miserabilmente s'era ampliata. (Boccaccio 15)

This passage showcases the human impossibility to pin down the cause of the plague outbreak; Boccaccio refers to the theological notion of "giusta ira di Dio" that intrinsically connects humankind ("le nostre opera inique") and divine interventions ("operazion de' corpi superiori"). At the core of this metaphysics of the plague, there exists an overlapping of guilt and destiny, of subject and community. According to philosopher Sergio Givone: "La metafisica della peste fa segno a una soluzione in cui colpa e destino stanno (o cadono) insieme. C'è come un destino nel fatto di dover riconoscere la propria colpa. Ma colpa per che cosa, se non per ciò che incombe come un destino?" (xvii). Disentangling the source from the ramifications of contagion is difficult, because contagion proceeds by crossing borders of several sorts and reshaping the borders between guilt and destiny, cause and effect. Against this background, contagion is a spiraling force that constantly defines and redefines its path, producing the sanitary and social crisis that constitutes the epidemics: "Se la peste innesca il processo che conduce dentro quel vortice, a sua volta il vortice fa da incubatore alla peste. È la causa della peste prima ancora di esserne l'effetto" (Givone 39). In this sense, separating the cause from its effects is impossible while the whirlwind of contagion ends up preceding the moral distinction between source and targets, subject and community.

Another key element of Boccaccio's opening remarks on the plague is the geographical reference to the East ("nelle parti orientali") as the original site of the plague, an attempt to exclude the source of the disease from Florence, that is an attempt to reestablish the (spatial and metaphysical) contours that the migration of the bacteria erased. However, this is an epistemic failure, because the plague knows no boundaries, it cannot be contained, and, in fact, it spills over and connects distant places, making them continuous rather than isolated, "senza ristare d'un luogo in uno altro continuandosi." The continuity between foreignness and illness—both unknown and unknowable, both potential threats to the status quo—is a hermeneutic model employed to comprehend the crisis of the disease. Most explicitly this alterity is



associated with a geographical foreignness that can also have a racial, social, gender, and class matrix. This epistemic and metaphysical otherizing of the epidemic is articulated by pathologizing the foreign (Esposito 6), a stance which entails a constant reconsideration of the borders of foreignness itself: who gets to be otherized in times of epidemics? When geographical borders do not hold and a community becomes infected, the sanitary crisis imposes a reconceptualization of foreignness in class, gender, moral, family, and human¹ terms producing always stricter exclusionary dynamics apt to devise the immune response (this ever more exclusionary mechanism will be even more evident and dramatic in *Nemesis*).

Contagion trespasses the border between human and animal realms as well. This cross-species transmission functions as a further iteration of the epidemic crisis as a critical, transformative occurrence. Not only social borders are reconfigured (“il parlare e l’usare con gl’infermi dava a’ sani infermità”), but also traditional ecological and taxonomic borders are questioned:

[D]i tanta efficacia fu la qualità della pestilenza narrata nell’appiccarsi da uno ad altro, che non solamente l’uomo all’uomo, ma questo, che è molto più, assai volte visibilmente fece, cioè che la cosa dell’uomo infermo stato, o morto di tale infermità, tòcca da uno altro animale fuori della spezie dell’uomo, non solamente della ‘nfermità il contaminasse, ma quello infra brevissimo spazio uccidesse. (18)

Eleonora Stoppino notices that the reference to animals getting infected by humans breaks down “the distinction human/non human” in the text—a further epistemic (and ontological) separation that collapses in times of epidemics. Moreover, this “strong binary opposition between human and non human attribute[s] to the human a whole series of values and duties in daily life that the plague gives to the non humans” (100). Ultimately, Boccaccio’s assertion of the hierarchical superiority of humans over animals (in his account, contagion proceeds “from the superior to the inferior”) fails in strengthening this social/biological order because the very idea of cross species contagion positions animality as an example of border renegotiation and, consequently, as a threat “to the political human order” (99).

Because the notion of foreignness is constantly reconfigured in order to otherize more and more subjects, networks such as families and communities are constantly dismantled and built again, created and recreated, along with the ethical duties and the cultural bonds that define them. Almost everyone loathes the ill and joins the rest of the community in sharing the same moral and pragmatic approach towards/against the plague:²

¹ For an in-depth analysis of the Introduction to Day I as a description of the de-humanizing potential of the plague, see Teodolinda Barolini. In this light, the Introduction can be read as Boccaccio’s attempt to reestablish human “ingegno” and “compassion” as a way to re-inscribe the contours of the human, lost in the plague epidemics (Barolini 225).

² The act of leaving the ill behind is in line with the interpretation of illness as a biopolitical device that entails the figure of the *homo sacer*. *Homo sacer* is, literally, “the untouchable” and according to Giorgio Agamben is a person who is still alive while being dead already, somebody who can’t be sacrificed and yet can be killed with impunity (8-10). For Agamben, the most complete realization of *homo sacer* is



[E] tutti quasi ad un fine tiravano assai crudele, ciò era di schifare e di fuggire gl'infermi e le loro cose [...] e fatta lor brigata, da ogni altro separati viveano, ed in quelle case ricogliendosi e racchiudendosi dove niuno infermo fosse e da viver meglio. (Boccaccio 19)

The prophylactic efforts to separate the healthy from the ill, to re-inscribe life over the deadly environment of the epidemics lead to crucial and structural transformations in Florentine culture. The concept of *brigata* becomes fluid: these communities are not given but become subject to constant (re)creation, as it is the case with the *brigata* protagonist of the frame narrative. These new groups form on the basis of exceptional principles: family, class, and gender cease to be the main grounds on which subjects get together and, on the contrary, the borders of these new networks define new foreigners who are so not in geographical or social terms but in medical ones.

Another traditional category key in the creation of communities which seems to collapse in the *Decameron* is private property. Interestingly, the social failure of private property is associated with the realm of animality, as if subjects who deny it are not even human any longer because they are not *homines oeconomici*:

[P]er ciò che ciascun, quasi non più viver dovesse, aveva, sí come sè, le sue cose messe in abbandono, di che le più delle case erano divenute comuni, e così l'usava lo straniero, pure che ad esse s'avvenisse, come l'avrebbe il proprio signore usate; e con tutto questo proponimento bestiale sempre gl'infermi fuggivano a lor potere. (19)

This new arrangement reconfigures the borders between owners and users thus rejecting private property, but it does not stand against the ruling attitude of shunning the ill, because the new house owners still distance themselves from those infected. Prophylactic measures become the new social rule. With private property power relations are redesigned as well and, in this sense, the plague functions as a potential social equalizing force. Even family bonds collapse. Boccaccio acknowledges this fact with particular astonishment, stating that "maggior cosa è e quasi non credibile" (21), a parallel with the human-animal contagion which he called "maravigliosa cosa" (17):

E lasciamo stare che l'un cittadino l'altro schifasse e quasi niun vicino avesse dell'altro cura ed i parenti insieme rade volte o non mai si visitassero e di lontano, era con sí fatto spavento questa tribolazione entrata ne' petti degli uomini e delle donne, che l'un fratello l'altro abbandonava ed il zio il nepote e la sorella il fratello e spesse volte la donna il suo marito, e che maggior cosa è e quasi non credibile, li padri e le madri i figliuoli, quasi loro non fossero, di visitare e di servire schifavano. (21)

the concentration-camp inmate as the emblem of the sovereign's power over life and death. But this model can be easily applied to the plague victims who are untouchable, and whose illness ratifies their exclusion from their community and who are thus outside or beyond the laws of democratic society. In a time of crisis, such as the epidemic of an infectious disease, social norms and constitutional laws are renegotiated and the *homo sacer* is what remains after the prophylactic exclusion of those infected by history.



The term “citizen” seems to be crucial in the depiction of the crisis of the family. While the disenfranchisement between citizens is portrayed as somehow understandable, the betrayal of the bonds of parenthood is particularly hard to believe. This recognition may undermine my biopolitical analysis of the epidemics in 1348 Florence but, in fact, it expands its scope. This is so because the category of citizenship on the one hand conveys the arbitrariness of the borders defining a subject’s identity but, on the other, it can also stretch its comprehension to define the exceptional stakes of an epidemic crisis. If illness is a biopolitical marker that separates individuals within the same national, social, family, or class community along the lines of a biological/physiological status (being healthy or being ill), this condition can be expressed through the explicitly political metaphor of citizenship.

In the incipit to her classic *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag resorts to this very biopolitical image: “Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship,” because those who are healthy and those who are ill inhabit two distinct yet contiguous dimensions that she defines as two “kingdoms” (10). Boccaccio’s remarks about citizenship raise questions about the meaning of being a good citizen in times of epidemics, is this equal to being good to one’s family as a form of smaller community? In the *Decameron*, as well as in *Nemesis*, the theme of the abandonment of family members is associated with the abandonment of citizenship values. When they decide to flee Florence, the *brigata* clarifies that they are leaving nobody of their families behind:

Per ciò che, quantunque quivi così muoiano i lavoratori come qui fanno i cittadini, v’è tanto minore il dispiacere quanto vi sono più che nella città rade le case e gli abitanti. E qui d’altra parte, se io ben veggio, noi non abbandoniam persona, anzi ne possiamo con verità dire molto più tosto abbandonate: per ciò che i nostri, o morendo o da morte fuggendo, quasi non fossimo loro, sole in tanta afflizione n’hanno lasciate. (Boccaccio 36)

On the contrary, Bucky Cantor is not alone and his decision to leave his grandmother behind in polio-ridden Newark to reach the mountains will prove fallacious in *Nemesis*.

Boccaccio too describes the kingdom of the sick citizens as bordering and almost trespassing into the kingdom of the well, yet the importance of keeping the two citizenships clearly separated is emphasized, and many social and institutional dynamics operate to keep them distinct. Sontag insists on the notion of “trespass” as key to the phenomena of illness and contagion, especially in its negative form of looming menace: “Contact with someone afflicted with a disease regarded as a mysterious malevolency inevitably feels like a trespass; worse, like the violation of a taboo” (10). The violation of taboos is very much present in Boccaccio’s depiction of the plague; another unconventional custom is for ill women to be attended by male servants, thus suspending “la donnesca pietà” (Boccaccio 24):

E da questo essere abbandonati gl’infermi da’ vicini, da’ parenti e dagli amici, ed avere scarsità di serventi, discorse uno uso quasi davanti mai non udito, che niuna quantunque leggiadra o bella o gentil donna fosse, infermando, non curava d’avere a’ suoi servigi uomo, qual che egli



si fosse, o giovane o altro, ed a lui senza alcuna vergogna ogni parte del corpo aprire non altramenti che ad una femina avrebbe fatto, solo che la necessità della sua infermità il richiedesse; il che in quelle che ne guerirono fu forse di minore onestà, nel tempo che succedette, cagione. (22)

Gender borders are, thus, trespassed and reconfigured to accommodate the exceptional needs of the sanitary crisis. In this gendered transmutation, the ways in which a community is forced to redraw its inner borders and split become evident.

Ultimately, plague entails the trespassing of human as well as divine laws defining the very notion of community: "Ed in tanta afflizione e miseria della nostra città era la reverenda autorità delle leggi, così divine come umane, quasi caduta e dissoluta, [...] per la qual cosa era a ciascun licito quanto a grado gli era, d'adoperare" (20). This crisis is radical, the contagion is epidemic and the transformations it generates become endemic. The plague is an entanglement, a borderless juncture of the old order and the new system, it is "una soglia estrema dove tutto è possibile, il male come il bene, ed ecco che tutto viene rimesso in gioco. Come se il mondo si offrisse a una nuova creazione o ri-creazione" (Givone 174).

According to Givone, the *lieta brigata* not only deploys a protective measure by fleeing Florence but, in recounting the novellas during "their exile," it also performs generative acts of re-creation, "trasformando la ricordanza (dolorosa) e il cominciamento (orrido) in ricominciamento e dunque in 'festa', 'allegrezza', 'piacere'. Raccontare non è forse ricominciare?" (175). In particular, the tales told on Day IV can be read as an immunity reaction on the part of the *brigata*. Myra Best points out that the novellas of Day IV, the day in which the Black Death is implicitly referred to through "figurative language" by "the brigata of narrators who similarly fail to repress the object of their horror" (158), allude to the class implications that unhappy loves and "the problem of unexplained and unspeakable death" have (161). The immunity scope becomes even more powerful considering that it will safeguard the class status quo in the end.

I believe that the tale of Lisabetta da Messina (IV.5), in particular, outlines a phenomenology of the corruption of human (and social) bodies that cannot but remind of the original source of the frame narrative. Best insists on the physical description of Lisabetta's decaying body as an implicit mention of the black death, especially when compared with the images of decomposition of the pestilential corpses in the Introduction (162). Filomena, the novella's narrator, begins clarifying that her story does not deal with "genti di sì alta condizione" but with the bourgeoisie, thus spotlighting class as a decisive factor in the plot. Lisabetta's brothers are rich merchants, prototypes of the blooming mercantile society, a context of social mobility and potential accumulation of wealth.³ From the very beginning, the unhappy love between Lisabetta

³ Vittore Branca famously defined the *Decameron* as the first and most significant text on the mercantile class: the "epopea dei mercatanti". "La ricchissima vita mercantile fra il Duecento e il Trecento [...] per la prima volta riceve alta consacrazione [come] movimento decisivo per la nostra storia" (9). The emergence of the bourgeoisie is itself an example of "sconfinamento" not only in social and class terms, but also in historical, geographical, and cultural ones. Indeed, it entails "un nuovo, sconfinato



and Lorenzo is marked by social difference because Lorenzo works for Lisabetta's brothers who do not approve of this relationship, applying an exclusionary logic against somebody from an inferior class. Vittore Branca observes that Lisabetta's story is so powerfully dramatic in part because of the boisterous and affirmative context in which it is set:

Lisabetta chiusa nel suo pianto silente fino alla morte [è una delle] inobliliabili figure di amanti [che] si illuminano di un fascino più trepido nello stagliarsi così fragili ed esili sullo sfondo oscuro di quel mondo dominato dal danaro, dalla cupidigia, dalla inesorabile spietatezza della convenienza economica. (23)

With economic advantage as their motive and class rejection as their intent, Lisabetta's brothers kill Lorenzo and her attempts to keep him alive will fail, signaling that the biopolitical crisis of 1348 did reconfigure social borders but only up to a certain point, only as long as these borders do not enclose economic profits.

On the one hand, tale IV.5 establishes a subterranean connection with the repressed subject of the plague by introducing an imaginary linked to death and body corruption. This narrative framework serves as a sort of immunization endeavor undertaken by the *brigata* via their storytelling and it reflects the necessity to exclude the plague from their world by inoculating implicit and hence harmless mentions to it. In this sense, the tales of Day IV can be interpreted as means to keep the *brigata*'s exceptional community alive through its own immunization. On the other hand, these immunity procedures can be associated with the bourgeoisie as another liminal, in-between condition (a social rather than organic one) and attest to the bourgeois objective to preserve current wealth and class divisions. Indeed, Florentine society reconceives of its values in light of the "convenienza economica" at the core of its proto-capitalist system as it reconfigures its biopolitical borders in light of the sanitary crisis. These diverse border trespasses provide "a grid within which to fathom the deep transformations of the social, economic, juridical, and political relations" of Florentine mercantile and epidemic context without naïve and clear-cut understandings (Mezzadra and Nielson 7).

"WHY THE JEWS SHOULD BE ISOLATED;" *NEMESIS*

Like the *Decameron*, *Nemesis* opens on the description of an epidemic: the polio outbreak in Newark in 1944. Roth's account relies on the same border transgressions recorded by Boccaccio: the failure of traditional medicine ("no medicine existed to treat the disease and no vaccine to produce immunity"), the inter-class contagion (Franklin Delano Roosevelt "had contracted the disease as a vigorous man of thirty-nine"), and the epistemic impossibility to identify the source of the infection (Roth 304).

ampliamento degli orizzonti geografici [a cui] corrisponde un allargamento delle prospettive umane altrettanto ricco e prodigioso" (21).



In 1944 Newark as in 1348 Florence, the ill are scrupulously distanced: "What people did know was that the disease was highly contagious and might be passed to the healthy by mere physical proximity to those already infected" (72), "ché non solamente il parlare e l'usare con gl'infermi dava a' sani infermità o cagione di comune morte ma ancora il toccare i panni e qualunque altra cosa da quegli infermi stata tòcca" (Boccaccio 17). Most importantly, *Nemesis* presents the same cross-species contamination as that described in the *Decameron*, and these inter-species encounters point to the ultimate contact with alterity during times of epidemic and biopolitical crises.

When a fly or a mosquito managed to penetrate the screens of a family's flat or fly in through an open door, the insect would be doggedly hunted down with fly swatter and Flit out of fear that by alighting with its germ-laden legs on one of the household's sleeping children it would infect the youngster with polio. Since nobody then knew the source of the contagion, it was possible to grow suspicious of almost anything, including the bony alley cats that invaded our backyard garbage cans and the haggard stray dogs. (305)

Along similar lines, the Newark community tends to deal with the epidemics of polio as the Florentines did with the plague, that is by otherizing its source and pathologizing the foreign. In the passage above quoted, polio is associated with animality (flies, mosquitoes, alley cats, and stray dogs) but when these explanations fail, the epidemics' foreignness is linked to human subjects belonging to marginalized communities. The Italians are blamed because the first polio cases are registered in a poor Italian neighborhood; in one of the first scenes involving the protagonist Bucky Cantor, a group of Italian boys reach the playground in Weequahic, apparently "to spread polio" (308). Bucky, the playground director, confronts them in an exchange in which, from the narrator's perspective (that of a former playground kid), he is presented as the defender of his community, standing his ground against the Italians who, instead, are degraded to uncivil, almost inhuman subjects—a dichotomy that will be reversed by the end of the novel, when the biopolitical, ever more exclusionary dynamic will eventually otherize (and hence blame) the Jewish community.

"Since when is there a law against spreadin' polio, Mr. Playground Director?" "Look, polio is not a joke. And there's a law against being a public nuisance. I don't want to have to call the police. How about leaving on your own, before I get the cops to escort you out of here?" With this, the leader of the pack, who was easily half a foot taller than Mr. Cantor, took a step forward and spat on the pavement. He left a gob of viscous sputum splattered there, only inches from the tip of Mr. Cantor's sneakers. (309-310)

The insistence on the disturbing and disgusting detail of the spit exacerbates the tones of the confrontation, depicting the potential spreaders as particularly *foreign* agents. Resorting to images related to the semantics of animals, the Italians are described as beastly, degraded to an inferior species because of their potentially contagious condition. The very use of the verb "to spread" suggests an understanding of the encounter between the Italians and the Jews in terms of border trespassing: the



potential carriers move from one neighborhood to the other, they spill over from their realm to another one.

Bucky redraws the borders of the playground to exclude the infectious subjects and, with them, the polio virus. In other words, Bucky's *brigata* performs prophylactic measures to distance itself from the threat of the disease and will continue to establish ever stricter borders around itself as Boccaccio's *brigata* did. This is so because, as Esposito notices: "To sterilize itself from its own contaminating power, the community is forced to 'operate on itself': to divide itself from itself; to separate off a point inside itself on which all collective evil will converge in order to distance it from the rest of the body" (47). In subsequent iterations, the epidemic is blamed upon Horace, "the neighborhood's moron" (Roth 312), another marginalized subject easy to pathologize and to blame the polio on. Once again, the exclusion of the supposed spreader from the community assumes degrading tones when a boy at the playground shouts:

"I'm not calming down!" Kenny cried. "He's got shit all over his underwear! He's got shit all over his hands! He doesn't wash and he isn't clean, and then he wants us to take his hand, and shake his hand, and that's how he's spreading polio! He's the one who's crippling people! He's the one who's killing people! Get out of here, you! Get! Go!" (Roth 363)

Horace used to be an everyday presence at the playground but when the polio breaks out, he is seen as the source of the epidemic and, hence, sent away like the Italians before him. Following Esposito's argument about the immunity of communities, those perceived as or actually ill can be considered "bare lives" in the Agambenian sense, as those forms of human life that are included in the order of a given society "solely in the form of [their] exclusion" (Agamben 8). In this sense, the playground community can be seen as a sovereign power which produces bare lives, a biopolitical act of border redefinition and trespass, because "the realm of bare life—which is originally situated at the margins of the political order—gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside [...] enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction" (9).⁴ Borders are constantly redrawn so that they create a constant liminal zone in which the epidemic community lives, and different subjects get included in or excluded from it, depending on the kind of citizenship—resorting to yet another notion from the *Decameron*—they have.

In the end, it is the Jewish community that is turned into a bare life, excluded from the realm of the healthy and pointed at as the source of the polio. The biopolitical spiral closes on the very community that, at least in the novel, initiated it and in this occurrence, the epidemics is linked to the spread of anti-Semitism:

The anti-Semites are saying that it's because they're Jews that polio spreads there. Because of all the Jews—that's why Weequahic is the center of the paralysis and why the Jews should be isolated. Some of them sound as if they think the best way to get rid of the polio epidemic

⁴ Agamben's explanation of bare life is intrinsically linked to the notion of border trespassing: "When [the political system's] borders begin to be blurred, the bare life that dwelt there frees itself in the city and becomes both subject and object of the conflicts of the political order" (9).



would be to burn down Weequahic with all the Jews in it. There is a lot of bad feeling because of the crazy things people are saying out of their fear. Out of their fear and out of their hatred. (Roth 401)

However, from the beginning of the novel a sense of impending doom frames the acts of the Weequahic community, as Victoria Aarons notices: "The mounting sense of isolation and defenselessness in the face of contagion creates a kind of stasis in which Newark's Jewish community is poised, waiting to disaster to strike" (55). The stasis produced by the terror of contagion is broken when the contagion does happen, and polio becomes the reason "why the Jews should be isolated." The once exclusionary community becomes excluded—an outcome hinting at the cypher of biopolitical reconfigurations. Interestingly, Bucky is the agent of both dynamics: he is the one establishing new borders excluding the foreigners and the one turning into the ultimate bare life. Even more so, Bucky was supposed to be an immunity agent in the organism of his own community, serving as harmless form of alterity within his own community as he is the living connection between the playground children on one hand, and the Italians and Horace on the other. Indeed,

if the community has managed to rescue itself from the current to which it is continually exposed by its own violence, it is because an immunitary device capable of diminishing its devastating effects has been put in place from the very beginning. This is not to suppress the violence—the community itself, which is inseparable from it, would be extinguished along with it—but to take it in nonlethal forms and doses. (Esposito 46)

However, Bucky's immunization efforts will fail as his decision to leave Newark for the Pocono mountains as a prophylactic measure will. In this sense, a parallel reading of the *brigata's* escape to the Florentine countryside and Bucky's retreat to the summer camp of "Indian Hill" can shed some light on another instance of border transgression: the mobility between the city and the countryside. Both in *Nemesis* and the *Decameron* the countryside is portrayed as a healthier, safer place but, unlike the *brigata*, Bucky does leave his family, in the person of his grandmother, behind and in his case, this decision does not spare him from catching the disease.

Crucially, the epidemic is initially presented as a collective threat affecting and infecting the whole community, a readerly impression conveyed by the narratorial use of the pronoun "we." Yet as the novel unfolds different polio spreaders are identified and blamed until the end, when Bucky becomes the individual culprit of a collective destiny, the epitome of the sanitary and existential crisis caused by the disease. Upon surviving the illness, he realizes that he cannot survive the guilt of being the suspected polio spreader, the vector of the contagion first at the playground and, subsequently, at "Indian Hill." For him, polio is a truly "dissolving dynamic" (Esposito 8) that ruins every sphere of his existence: family and social mobility (he won't marry the girl he loves, who belongs to a higher social class), work and morality (he fails to protect the kids he was responsible for). Borrowing Givone's words, I contend that Bucky experiences illness as a total existential crisis, "una distruzione di ogni ordine possibile, un inquinamento della



vita alle fonti, un vero e proprio pervertimento dell'essere. Con un repentino passaggio e scambio di piani per cui il male fisico è al tempo stesso male spirituale" (Givone 40).

The epidemic crisis embodied by Bucky is "a summerlong social tragedy" turned into "a lifelong personal tragedy too" (Roth 440). This existential condition reconfigures the borders between sanitary and eschatological explanations, expanding the significance of Bucky's character from the medical to the theological field: "'I'm a medical enigma,' Bucky said confusingly. Did he mean perhaps that it was a theological enigma?" (438). Bucky's metaphysics of the polio is similar to Boccaccio's, in that the human and the divine intermingle: "this martyr, this maniac of the why, [...] finds the why either in God or in himself or, mystically, mysteriously, in their dreadful joining together as the sole destroyer" (439). Within an epidemic context not only the borders between included and excluded subjects, sovereign powers and bare lives are reconsidered, but also those between human, non-human, and divine agency.

Speaking of Bucky's existential crisis, it is important to consider the historical context of the polio outbreak of 1944 as one occurring in a nation at war. World wars were among "the greatest levelers in history," a context that encouraged social mobility and "transformative revolution[s]" on the political level (Scheidel 7). The novel insists on Bucky's upbringing as a poor child and his early employment as a teacher, and presents his engagement to Marcia as a possibility for him to better his social condition, to pursue his personal "American Dream, encapsulated in Marcia's urging him to fulfil a different type of obligation," that to be happy (Jardine 33-34). Nevertheless, the potentially equalizing forces at work in the narrative do not actualize for Bucky, because he won't become part of the social class he so viscerally admires in his girlfriend's family. Interestingly, Marcia "temporarily seduces Bucky into thinking he can walk out of one history and into a self-determined future," while Bucky's ultimate demise "reveals the tragic impossibility of self-reinvention, exposing the ways in which his ill-fated [character] is an heir to history in the making" (Aarons 53-54), rather than being author of his own future.

An important moment is when Bucky asks Marcia's father permission to marry her, and hence to seal his admission into a higher social status, an episode curiously associated with the image of Bucky enjoying a juicy peach, which is given to him by Dr. Steinberg, Marcia's father:

He bit into a delicious peach, a big and beautiful peach like the one Dr. Steinberg had taken from the bowl, and in the company of this thoroughly reasonable man and the soothing sense of security he exuded, he took his time eating it, savoring every sweet mouthful right down to the pit. Then, wholly unprepared for the moment but unable to contain himself, he placed the pit into an ashtray, leaned forward, and compressing his sticky hands tightly together between his knees, he said, "I would like your permission, sir, to ask Marcia to become engaged." (Roth 357)

Like a forbidden fruit, the peach represents the fully enjoyable and sweet life that Bucky savors "down to the pit," the "security" he wants to be able to enjoy from this moment onwards. He savors the present as the occasion propelling a juicy future, but this taste will not turn into a lifelong meal. As in the Biblical episode of the forbidden



fruit, Bucky will be expelled from Eden, will be excluded from the class he anticipated to join and even from the community he is already part of. As in the case of Lisabetta da Messina, the biopolitical transformations defining contagious societies are immune to true social mobility and the class factor is a powerful obstacle in the reconfiguration of sociopolitical borders. The narratives of Lisabetta's and Bucky's unhappy loves make the *Decameron* and *Nemesis* respectively highly aware of the delusion of truly radical changes with reference to class issues.

Bucky is the existential crisis exemplifying the sociopolitical and historical crises of the polio outbreak and WWII, the former being the metaphor of the latter: "Only a fiend could invent polio [...] Only a fiend could invent World War II" (438). In line with the WWII metaphor, the polio outbreak in the Jewish community can also be read as a metaphor for the Holocaust, in a hermeneutic move that blurs the lines between American and European Jewry, especially in light of Dr. Steinberg's words: "I'm against the frightening of Jewish kids. I'm against the frightening of Jews, period. That was Europe, that's why Jews fled. This is America" (356; see also Kaminsky, Jardine). In this sense, in thinking back to the failure of his immune and prophylactic endeavors, Bucky always connects his individual responsibility to the collective destiny of his Jewish community with reference both to the epidemic and to the war. He perceives himself as a double deserter because due to his bad sight he was not enlisted, and he subsequently left his job at the playground: "Yet he had been given a war to fight, the war being waged on the battlefield of his playground, the war whose troops he had deserted for Marcia and the safety of Indian Hill," and given his eventual defeat he concludes: "he could at least have remained in Newark, fighting their fear of polio alongside his endangered boys" (391). Once he flees the battleground of Newark, Bucky's sense of responsibility towards his students turns into guilt, a sentiment that enables him to find a reason for the epidemic in an almost Oedipal way because he believes to be the polio himself.⁵

Ultimately, as in the case of the *Decameron*, the only successful immune reaction remains that of storytelling, as the positive life experience of *Nemesis*' narrator, Arnold Meskinoff, proves. Arnold becomes infected and recovers from the polio in 1944 but, unlike Bucky, his is not a "lifelong personal tragedy" because he goes on having a happy life afterwards. The fact that Arnold is reintegrated into the community while Bucky is unable to feel accepted by anyone after the infection (he is the one who refuses to marry Marcia, he is his own punisher) explains Arnold's epistemic enterprise of recounting the polio outbreak to let other members of a community (in this case, readers) know. Storytelling is a communal act and, in this sense, also an immunity act. At the same time, it is impossible to completely subsume the biopolitical transformations operated in times of epidemics and this may be the reason why Bucky will forever be excluded, a lifelong bare life.

In conclusion, the *Decameron* and *Nemesis* represent the multifaceted reconfiguration of biopolitical borders in two different societies affected by epidemics in a way that seem to highlight the economic and class tensions underlying the social

⁵ On the parallel between Bucky and Oedipus, see Stangherlin, Giannopoulou.



changes necessarily brought about by the sanitary crises. In both novels class, in particular, proves to be the one factor impossible to be radically transformed and the narration of the two unhappy (because inter-class) loves encourages such an interpretation of Lisabetta's and Bucky's stories. Border reconfiguration in contagious society is, hence, possible only within the boundaries of class structure and this seems to be the ultimate point Boccaccio and Roth want to raise as particularly problematic. However, there are also examples of "positive" border reconfigurations as in the case of the successful immunity endeavors performed by the narrators—the *lieta brigata* and the third person narrator in the *Decameron*, Arnold Meskinoff in *Nemesis*—whose accounts of the epidemics successfully immunize the community they continue to belong to.

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