

## 4.

### THE PLAGUE

[From Le Déluge, la peste: Paolo Uccello 1976]

*As we saw earlier, in the essay "On the Object of Figuration," the painter Paolo Uccello is a special case for Schefer and is used to exemplify the proposition that the character of Western "classical" painting is primarily constituted in a kind of struggle over the body, or over figuration of the body. The following translation is taken from Le Déluge, la peste, Paolo Uccello (1976), a book dedicated to one of Uccello's frescoes (see Figures 0 and 0) known as The Universal Deluge (DATE, PLACE) and in which Schefer elaborates more fully on Uccello's resistance to the ideologies of his time. In the same gesture, Schefer's own writing is intended to as it were liberate the body from the same constraints: as he says below, "My text wants to...loosen a little bit the belt that binds the body," thus joining and subverting the project of Uccello's painting itself.*

*The translation is of a section of the book called "The Plague" and has been chosen here because it is an especially effective rendering of the linkages between figuration, the body, and memory.<sup>1</sup> It begins with the observation that Uccello's painting is "obscene" because it doesn't play by the rules of figuration that "classical" painting tries to establish and because it is the body that's primarily the site of this resistance. It's also because of the struggle between these two conceptions of the body that the plague becomes an important topic here. The plague is in Schefer's sense the theatre for such a struggle--the body is sick in the plague and its conflicting images are both the cause of that sickness and its historical and social stakes. Schefer plays at length then, not just with the idea of the doxical and paradoxical versions of the body, but also*

*and at the same time with the linkage between plague and the theatrical scene (warranted by Augustine's reminder that during times of plague theatres were closed down, only to re-appear in another place).*

*Trying to undo the strictures and constraints on the body entails giving free play to the memory of the paradoxical body--the pagan body that Christianity combats. The figuration of that particular memory--of what we might call either a social or an ideological memory--serves Schefer here in engendering what will become a crucial component and impulse of his writing: namely, the notion that memory as such is always at stake, or always put into play for the spectator by the visual text. Memory is indeed structurally bound up with visual experience and Schefer attempts here to show how that is so.*

*Later, as we shall see, the place of memory in this sense will warrant increasingly autobiographical explorations. This progression will in part be induced by the idea, introduced here, that the interplay of image, body and memory provokes (or even invokes) a certain fear in the spectator. That fear is of course related to a certain sense of paranoia in that the subject of memory is always necessarily insufficient in relation to the realm of knowledge, science, or anthropology. And it is always linked, too, to a sense of childhood or of the childish (it is a primitive and childish knowledge that stands against the protocols of knowledge). For the moment Schefer seems content with the strategy of allowing this structural place and role of memory to thicken the historical texture of the interpretation--to expand the lexical field in which the visual object must be located. Thence the battery of references that Schefer deploys here: from Michelet's writing on the plague of Marseille, for example, or his remarks on Watteau, alongside Defoe's fictional account of the plague year, and Artaud's linking of theatre with the plague at the beginning of Theatre and Its Double. Even Schefer's gambit of associating the fresco itself with the plague might seem at first a little out of the way in that there is no explicit representation of the plague in the picture. However, what all these lexical manoeuvres produce*

*is an extensively rich and textured understanding of the painting, the history of figuration into which it intervenes, and the social history of its meanings.*

\*

*the gutter*

We have to acknowledge the poverty of Uccello's painting.

A painting of great pallor (an arch stretching from Dante to Vico).

The painting seems to be attached to an enormous gutter.

We're dealing with a painting that's relatively obscene, for the simple reason that it doesn't perform in the theatre of figuration. The body here is obscene (with all that this supposes or necessarily implies about the history of painting) because it's pre-theatrical, or more simply non-theatrical. I recall the passage in Augustine, quoted by Artaud, where Scipio Nasica rather strangely declares that at the time of the plague the theatres had to be destroyed<sup>2</sup>--it's as if the body had been seized by some new urgency, literally by some new fire, that prevented it from making a scene: with such a pressure on the body, there must be no theatrical unity, no scenographic organization. But, stranger still, it nonetheless draws a crowd. This is obviously related to some kind of quality of what we might call the mythological signifier: it's a state of the body--a papillary body, emulsified, and totally indistinguishable from its shell; a body that doesn't yet produce figures, except deeply anonymous ones. There is, in that sense, the work of an evidence that induces the painting while bending its fiction and breaking it: the mythological body is crushed beneath the tempest, the first storm--the storm, in Vico's version, when the

opera of history begins with the clash of cymbals. An homology or a sort of porous passage between the work of fiction and figures and colours. It's indeed the sign of a kind of dramatic quality, of a stupour that's totally powerful. It's Vico's thunder.

Universal Deluge? because it awakens in me something that's deaf. Or rather it wakes me up in the presence of an adult astonishment: seeing a kind of enormous bric-a-brac of memory, drowned, caught on a string, and tossed around. A rain of bodies. A catafalque of graying flesh.

That the beginning of history should return by way of this buoyant, urethral memory. The entanglement, the skewering of drowned bodies, corked up, looking like hefty horses roughly rubbed down.

That the painting should begin here, with the fable of a second humanity, its ground grasped through this watery fresco. Not to capsize, drift, land high and dry. Where the painting begins (a monstrous opera of the anatomy). The first not to give a damn about the morality of painting: painted in lumps, detaching the drowning of fabled bodies from their earthy background, engulfed.

Uccello doesn't give a damn, gets cheated by some chubby monk, shits on his face, resorts to violence.

There's a peculiar strength in all this (a painting that, alongside its contemporaries, isn't very pretty, not well researched, careless, done in broad strokes). It has the desperate strength of a Ulysses: all in a bundle, arriving in an overheated space, in a baker's oven.

A haughty painting that delivers flows of shit, slithery space (a rebuke to all the cute Botticellis), the bodies in the painting fall back into the shell.

No affectation. Painting's first theatre, the subject of its own delay; it sends out onto the stage the body's very separation, rowing through this bog. A body, having had

once upon a time to begin with its gills, turned onto its tip, a vibrating fibre, a body trembling, stretched out beneath space. And now it paints its own swill.

We have to acknowledge the poverty of Uccello's painting. It's this poverty that moves us because it's just right--the eyes in the water, the head submerged--and it makes other painting seem useless and wrong; it makes any richer signification, any exuberance, seem immoral.

The feeling several times in Uccello (Deluge, Profanation, Battle) that he wants to get rid of painting and retain only its shock, its impact, the boldness of the signification it achieves through a deferred brutality: it's up to us to prepare ourselves especially for this bloated body of memory. The subject here?--Uccello's memory.

Piss, corpse, sponge, specks of milk, a stalk of a head beating its closed eyes upon the night. A memory populated by fabulous bodies.

In broad strokes, the classical theatre, the Christian theatre.

By the handful, outstretched arms, catching at the torso, a pagan memory crosses the body of Christianity, inverting its meaning, abhorrence of the body.

The inside of the boat is an eel-trap, a mass of body--drowned, capsized, mashed, edges splattered with white.

Paestum? A city destroyed in the time of the plague? The City of God, decadent and sunken. An anonymous mythological body, thronging, a body of talcum powder.

### *Scipio*

Scipion Nasica. Black nose, paper nose:

"the gods, in order to put an end to physical pestilence, commanded stage plays to

be exhibited in their honour."<sup>3</sup>

Dii propter sedandam corporem pestilentiam ludos sibi--so that the bodily plague would be calmed by taking a seat--scaenicos exhiberi iubebant--the gods commanded stage plays to be exhibited in their honour, exhibited, thrown before them, on those burning boards.

Pontifex autem (but he who made a bridge for them) propter animorum cauendam pestilentiam to ward off a pestilence affecting the mind ipsam scaenam constitui prohibebat forbade the stage itself to be constructed.

And so from the start the image was split.

So that the costumed bodies in this burning theatre couldn't set up a stage where the soul might take on the gods, the plague.

And so that it wouldn't be in this theatre seized by division that the image would inhabit the body.

Fists to the ears, mouths in charcoal: that the body leaving the stage should be deafened, on the soul that represents it.

If by the light of any reason (si aliqua luce mentis animum corporis praeponitis) you might prefer the mind to the body, if you put this movement in front of the body, then let the body spill its ink!

This plague "so blinded the minds of the poor unfortunates with thick darkness, so polluted them with a foul deformity, that even now--this will quite possibly be incredible to our descendants--when the city of Rome was sacked, those who were so possessed by the disease and were able to reach Carthage, after fleeing thence, were daily in the theatres, indulging the craze of partisan support for favourite actors:" burned with their charcoal, in front of those bodies, exactly, they lost their heads, spinning-tops.

And this sickness, this plague that leads to the theatre ("the dainty frenzy for stage plays"--insania delicata ludorum scaenorum--of "a warlike people, hitherto accustomed only to the games of the circus," the blades of swords, pockets of noise, the arena marked out, bloodied rumps, smashed shoes, torn haunches, armour, backs clubbed: the brutes!)

Why look at the painting here? And at what within the painting? What theatre? Already on the corpse, a desire of the sleeping body, the sleep of the signifier.

Defoe: Journal of a Plague Year (a Bataillesque procession, with a way of proposing the "I" that holds that entity, that someone, cheap, and by its hint of writing, asleep near this desire, unsettled)

"I resolved to go in the night and see some of [the bodies] thrown in.

There was a strict order to prevent people coming to those pits, and that was only to prevent infection. But after some time that order was more necessary, for people that were infected and near their end, and delirious also, would run to those pits, wrapt in blankets and rugs,"

(the desire to see the slaughterhouse spectator pass by like the phantom of death; in sum who is driven there, runs to it, already draped in a shroud, the statue walking towards the corpse. What does it amount to? this covering, a tangled up comedian running in a sack-race!)

"and throw themselves in, and, as they said, bury themselves." (I pause over this sort of breach, this wonderful use of tense in Defoe's fiction: these wrapt bodies throwing themselves into the pits, and they said...)<sup>4</sup>

## *Medea*

Plague, theatre. In this decomposition of the body, in its terrible erosion, writes Augustine, resides the chance for the execrated body to be displayed, that body which leaves a sort of pus on the spirit like an open wound: those who escaped, taking refuge in Carthage (thrown together like a crazy bunch of grapes on this bridge, cut off from their Roman memory), piled up like vultures pro histrionibus insanirent, "indulging the craze of partisan support for favourite actors," that is, for the body that acts as their proxy in these theatres of execration.

What is this imminence of the body on its painting, this hanging body?

Something that thus has a frontal impact--here and there we find the same opening up of an angle onto the witness or onto the body that is dislocated but that appears like a hand in the slippage between the scene's panels and takes hold of this abruptly suspended spectacle; it's halted by the monologue of Medea, anchored in the foreground by her sword, and by the cube (the one on which the angel of Mileseva is seated) where two children are posed like chickens on a slab. This Medea (she's already facing us: with a hollow look, turning her back on the picture, she sees the playing out of the contract) "meditates" upon the death of her children. What's the meaning of this poultry-yard drama, this feeble solemnity? Is it for their own dismemberment that the two children are playing dice on the sacrificial slab?

That's an image with the power--as I know all too well--to move me deeply (an

oblique image, frontal, pale ochre, a section of more washed wall, like the mauve dress of Medea belted in yellow, a framing that opens out onto whiteness: the stupid image of Egea, the door of Hera's temple). The signifier here is simply what leads totally beyond itself. There is a signified being referred to here (it's that which gazes violently: there's no proper reversion to meaning, but a chopper, something that modesty forbids. The rare feeling of the frozen brutality of this place, of this word to which the body suddenly finds itself addressed, in Latin, palpantibus: to other bodies that are groping around; for me all of a sudden the fright of signification, its underside, and its invented memory: paganism [the Medea in the Naples museum].

Medea? One of the most "unstable" of all mythological bodies, here along with the dagger of Euripides like a menhir from Filitosa).

My text wants to relieve the painting of its fiction, to deduct it, to hand the painting a suspension that it cannot tolerate. To loosen a little bit the belt that binds the body.

Memory coming alive upon the withdrawal of one facet of the real; it's also in the wooden boat that Uccello's Deluge holds back, one moment before the rain or the indefinitely suspended breeze. We'll come to see how there's something here that's desperately halted, caught in a net, ready to sink, like a swarm of wasps, a sort of jelly that melts, two wooden jaws that bite into the cranium, split the head, then globulate.

Painting (on this fresco) is isolated or ceases to transmit a knowledge that would be both vague and more free.

(To speak of painting, or more exactly of the strangeness of signification, at an angle that can no longer be varied.)

The painting here catches an indefinite memory in its net. There is, then, a minimal

differentiation of the signifier overseen by the possibility of being awoken to a sort of biographical stress. It leads a drowned body far beyond itself: the body of another jouissance, a jouissance always lost to this body, and which throbs.

Why Uccello's Deluge? (it's still a matter of grasping the signifier, the grain that drags signification, its wheel, and that which precisely worries us towards knowledge, but leads to its refusal, burns it), because this brutal theatre (sends, throws, capsizes, and propels right in front of you), sumptuously infected with leprosy, awakens another commotion, disturbs the consciousness of another body that comes adrift and yet remains the prisoner of a minimal bond; no air, but a sort of clamminess.

No hand, no finger can touch this body: it's not a matter of the abortive return, precipitous and confused, of some real body that's not figured here. Where has it gone? Its sudden rise ensues from the upturning of the head. But again: the painting sets afloat the arch of a forgotten body, immense, bloated, and latent.

A blind body, invaded; it stretches out, transparent over the stress of a fractured image that doesn't resemble it. This: a stupour that transmits a body of memory (but allows it to endure) that is articulated by the strangest denial of resemblance.

Heaps of whole bodies, turned pale, fungosities rewashed in an intensely shaken memory, a memory traversed by a kind of startlement of its own bestiality.

To the right of this fresco, an incredible tangle of contamination, of dish-rags, peelings, dirty shavings, grease. Such a weight inhibits the body's flight, its onirization (the mystical step of Dante's chalky statue, advancing towards the edge, fist clenched, one hand lifting the toga's train, crosses untouched; denies the shit): a body lifted from memory, bloated too by the leprosy of recollection, and it cannot get up; it cracks,

fissures, reheated, greasy spot: capsizes again.

Pressure of the memory upon a fainting body, its stomach shaded yet perfectly white.

This fresco: a new putrid odour (Venetian) is here gently disturbed and what's dislodged from it is this irrepressible and yet unexpected memory. That this minimal but invasive suggestion should link up (by means of an extremely fragile bridge) with the greatest commotion of the signifier (that's used to replace all other commotion, and the signifier has nothing to tell us but that). Or else the commotion of something savagely awoken by dreams or by memory (the place of memory in the classical science of ars memorativa tried to stake out the real in a certain relief, in its fiction of a fully conscious body scanning the very footstep that was recording it).

This space is over-woven for the imminent destruction of its referent: so the painting inspires the writing of just that (a sort of Latin text), the reserve of the body that is invested here, or its admission (its madness that makes a bridge [pontifex], without for all that being able to help us cross anything at all); it's bent on a course of destruction. The painting also induces a movement of knowledge as a motif of resistance but whose analyzable element is always nearby--nearby, in the sense that the painting in some way makes the signifier dissemble, attaching the signifier to the painting in the register of what I call a duction of the signifier which is then only ever given over to the ability to deal with a certain residue.

To discover the history of figuration through this fresco of Uccello's--this edge: the

fold of the toga, nude bodies, cramped walls, liquid background, a flame about to go out, granulations of a sort of hypersensitive skin, a watery and emulsified hornstone memory: an immense memory, in puddles, weeded over and that catches alight on its fissure; returning inflamed. A tiny, faraway fire that doesn't spread to the mythological body floating in its folds, on its water, encrusted milk, pus that crosses the whole arc of colour on a raft. Crosses with dead eyes the eye of its colour. Putrid, regurgitates.

Subject of the painting, subject at least of this loosening of the mouldiness of milk in the mythological eye: the painting surveys this bridge.

What is this body of colour? Boarding the boat in Dante (Hell. The signifier, having passed this way, is a voyage on the paradoxical waters of memory; there it's the only lifeline, on its entire arc, for the material that rises up as nothing except a sort of coagulation of water, mud, milk, and wood. Swollen body and swollen memory, emerging from the pus of matter, of water, scenically set in the belly of the boat, refrozen).

(Rembrandt's Jewish Couple: "while the fiancée was waiting, carnally, she sat down on a pile of dung.")<sup>5</sup>

It's a matter (no less) of putting to shore, wherever possible, and swimming quite brutally through layers of space.

To unblock its pipes. Blow down its tubes. The drops of its milk, cracks, scales, fingered eyelashes.

## *Boccaccio's Plague*

This pestilence was so powerful that it was transmitted to the healthy by contact with the sick, the way a fire close to dry or oily things will set them aflame. And the evil of the plague went even further: not only did talking to or being around the sick bring infection and a common death, but also touching the clothes of the sick or anything touched or used by them seemed to communicate this very disease to the person involved. What I am about to say is incredible to hear, and if I and others had not witnessed it with our own eyes, I should not dare believe it (let alone write about it), no matter how trustworthy a person I might have heard it from. Let me say, then, the plague described here was of such virulence in spreading from one person to another that not only did it pass from one man to the next, but, what's more, it was often transmitted from the garments of a sick or dead man to animals that not only became contaminated by the disease but also died within a brief period of time. My own eyes, as I said earlier, were witness to such a thing one day: when the rags of

a poor man who died of this disease were thrown into the public street, two pigs came upon them, and, as they are wont to do, first with their snouts and then with their teeth they took the rags and shook them around; and within a short time, after a number of convulsions, both pigs fell dead upon the ill-fated rags, as if they had been poisoned. From these and many similar or worse occurrences there came about such fear and such fantastic notions among those who remained alive that almost all of them took a very cruel attitude in the matter; that is, they completely avoided the sick and their things, and in so doing, each one believed that he was protecting his own good health. There were some people who thought that living moderately and avoiding excess might help a great deal in resisting this disease, and so they gathered in small groups and lived entirely apart from everyone else. They shut themselves up in those houses where there were no sick people and where one could live well by eating the most delicate foods and drinking the finest of wines (doing so always in moderation)....these people lived, entertaining themselves with music and other pleasures that they could arrange. Others thought the opposite: they believed that drinking excessively, enjoying life, going about singing and celebrating, satisfying in every way the appetites as best one could, laughing, and making light of everything that happened was the best medicine for such a disease.<sup>6</sup>

(What about the "things" of a man who had been ill or had died; nothing here to demonstrate the monstrous: the demonstrative is in the text's vague, flowing, cloudy body--limit of the sex, ill as sex--the passage of this thing, syntactically out of control: appendage, attribute, vehicle.)

What's peculiar about this plague, Boccaccio says, is that it crosses the boundaries between species (it will affect the other animals in man's circle); an anti-classificatory plague, terrifying and naive synecdoche of pig-men; the rags thrown into the stream are seized and shaken by the pigs about their jowls. Humanity is surrendered to the stream and will fall in after just a few twists of these infected linens.

And the pressure, like a necessity, that this plague should be such that those who remained alive would then begin to live differently than they had in the past (the plague is what separates history into two parts: the contagion crosses species, it is passed on a rag, on this sort of bridge: that which sketches out the arc of a symptom for every living creature. It is, ultimately, a new paradigm: the historical body cannot get through this sickness unless it changes its habits, changes its social costume (indeed, the only history of the body as social body has been written as a history of costume).

Michelet's History of France, in Book VI (the Black Plague followed by a current of mysticism in Northern Europe--Michelet cites Ruysbroek).

And Quicherat's History of French Costume. Ways of dressing changed after the plague: "gowns short, so short as to show their buttocks."<sup>7</sup> The crossroads of sickness; everywhere it means a change of scene and a change of costume. The plague in everyone's head is a theatrical sickness; a sickness in which the body returns to its social disinheritance, returns to the crowd. Defoe tells of the processions of migrants, of the parades wending their way across the map.

An elevated aspect of bodies (the thoracic cage during inspiration): a scene on the

painting--asking what the theatrically painted body is; so I've been asking what sickness it was that painting painted in order to capture the body in it, what skin, what limbs, how many lepers?--a skin that doesn't hesitate but that soon buckles under or rises up.

Painting's body on an immersed skin.

Lucretius: the plague is internal to the body. Boccaccio: the plague is passed through the skin, from skin to skin (the cloths and sheets spread this plague into the stream). The image arises with a body (the body, henceforth, of memory. That body has, then, finally found its feet).

The Deluge: an enormously knotty body. Large lateral movements, sliding with a cry over knots in the planks. Ovid: this boarded body is the one that thus attempts to escape being captured by the monster in mythology. Ovid's affection for painting: what is Metamorphoses?--metamorphosis is a moment of censorship in the text; it intervenes (as a figurative, hysterical supplement) in order to defer or annul the interpenetration of two bodies, like a censorship of the real (the case with all Pan's nymphs, the Centaurs, Polyphemus, the Silenes). Metamorphosis is the production of this dislocated body, of this excessive thing, by means of a story to which painting is then attached (Poussin): the ideal solution of Alberti's istoria.

But between Ovid and the Renaissance there's still room for the development of allegory as an historical moment in representation and--probably--in a fantasmatics of the body. The problem of the division of the body according to its objects of desire, according to the enticement to classify this "body" as matter that is reflected (lit) by the object-libido: there are two men in a man. This divisional protocol can be attained only through an

unclassifiable question whose allegory is exactly its deferral--which of these two bodies will be the first to come? It's difficult to understand in any other way how we get from the Greek and Roman body to a Christian body that is ligatured throughout the Middle Ages (one factor is the way the body is disinherited both in law and in scholastic theology). Allegory and the law--the problem of an obsession with the symbolic body's anatomy.

So: what is the plague? the plague is also the fiction of an infection in the social body that allegory cannot conceive (and primarily because allegory cannot conceive the division of the interior body through the division of the social body. Allegory is one form of the theatrical body's unification). Thus the function of the plague is to produce some other division of the body. (So it's here still that it relates to the Deluge: therefore it's carried less by a fiction than by the need to produce the pertinent division on some new representation of the historical body--it's tied to mythology, that is, to Greece; even Vico's Greece.)

### *Fear*

Artaud: the effect of the signifier dispersed across the body of humanity is to inflict fear, plague, pain: the body of writing, the symbolizing body.

In Vico, the history of civilization, of writing, that continual scansion, is represented by the thunder that transfixes humanity in fear. This fear, manifested dramatically as a fear of storms, stresses the historical impossibility of humanity's body

collapsing whole into language, or of its becoming a signifying body (language, he says, is the non-synthesizing intermediary between spirit and body: it's almost what makes the animal body float within humanity).

To organize this body for a painting that can't actually discern it. Painting and the prefigurative division: division of what material?

Project for a science, that of modes of dividing (skiagraphy): how to divide pictorial material?

What is the body that's divided and divides itself as image?--a symptom. The body is produced on a bedrock that's not figure, image, copy, etc., but rather the preconstitution of the figurative field as the field of the symptom.

The Deluge (the painting too) is a sequence taken up into a history that remains to be written (it still has no terrain, if not historically at least ideologically): the history of the body, of its symbolization, the body and the signifier etc.; its symptomatic stages might then be: Origen, Augustine, St John of the Cross, Vico, Freud's Schreber.

How to make the body speak in such a history about its excessiveness, or perhaps just about its historical symptom--the plague; this would constitute the very return of its social and moral disinheritance. Or else the body that can't speak makes a scene instead; it explains also what, on the fiction of its sickness, of a sickness that sheathes it in a crowd, what a division as image might be.

## *The Reign of the Slaves*<sup>8</sup>

The cart of the dead, a body stirs the slime with a pole.

"All mixed up at random, in one big soft mass, putrefying together;" "the people themselves, besides, deplored their misfortune in not being buried separately."<sup>9</sup>

Tintoretto's plague: "Whole groups of women, friends and sisters, clutching and clinging to each other, in the indistinct darkness, in the chaos of the grey shadows, are already anticipating the community of the grave. Everything is fleeting, becomes dull, and dissolves. And yet certain of these poor little figures display a strange grace, already other-worldly with langours and indolence, wonderful morbidity. Even as they decompose some of them are horrifyingly pretty."<sup>10</sup>

There's nothing of any of that in this painting, in close detail, but on the other hand, this is all there too, the possibility of this immiserated gaze, of this emphatic literature that designates a colour, an imprisonment, a smell. In Michelet the plague is also a kind of coagulation of the body in the System of Law that's ruining the North; this system, ruins credit, immiserates, divides, produces beggars. Among the people of Marseille, who are disproportionately actors, the system is the expiatory procession, the clamour to be punished: bodies throw themselves out of windows and off roofs, jumping out of their rags: here and there (we rediscover in Artaud this vision of the imbecile doctors, wax dolls with canvas noses who cross the city on sandals that help them avoid contact with bandages).

Michelet: "Over the poisonous, thick, bloody streams...which gush out of the corpses, strange personages pass, dressed in wax, with noses long as sausages and eyes of glass, mounted on a kind of Japanese sandal made of double wooden tablets, one

horizontal, in the form of a sole, the other vertical, to keep them from the contaminated fluids, chanting absurd litanies that cannot prevent them from sinking into the furnace in their turn. These ignorant doctors betray only their own fear and childishness."<sup>11</sup>

The body taking refuge from the plague manages only to become a puppet, a mummy, a fur-clad corpse, mounted on a spring. The very picture of fear.

In Lucretius it's the body marked by death like a blotter that the statue stains. That fears the faux-pas (the portrait, statue of Uccello/Dante: whom fear paints and understands in the picture).

The plague engendered by the fear of shadows: "a little black boy," says Savaresi, "who one evening, on a stairway in Cairo, had been frightened by a shadow and was upset by this shock, got the plague the very next day."<sup>12</sup>

In Marseille they moved the dead with iron hooks. In Toulon, they threw them head first into graves from the upper storey windows.

The plague, says Michelet, inflames the imagination, and in his text it is immediately linked to painting.

In this particular painting, the one I'm looking at (which pushes me in the back towards this half-drawn cadaver, imprisoned by perspective), it's a sickness. The effect of an acute and contagious leprosy that is transmitted through clothes (dei panni), writes Boccaccio (the two pigs fighting over the scraps of a corpse in the stream), and transported in bails of cotton. This painting in terra verde retains this: the source of the enigmatic body and of the uninhabitable body (taking the place of the execrated body). This painting arrives at a stricken body. The skirting of a double floating (what floats is caught, hauled in, and thrown back).

The plague--Lucretius, Augustine, Boccaccio, Michelet, and Artaud all agree--contradictorily leads to the theatre. It leads to a picture of the blind body--it's retrieved from the film, the body of a rivalry (driven crazy, paraded, beating the air), from a change in its substance; the doctor then is disguised, puts his nose in waxed canvas, crosses the pustulence on clogs that make his gait look ridiculous--in all the narratives of this sickness.

So there's this thread running through the history of the plague: the statue that crosses the arch of the fresco; it's the step of the doctors on those wooden sandals, wrapped in wax.

In the background of the fresco, like a map, a whole continent goes sailing by.

"It is the very soul of the plague. In Florence, in Venice, Marseille, such it was, bitterly amorous....No pity at all for the dying. Death itself scarcely secure."<sup>13</sup>

"The gravediggers are overwhelmed, going crazy. It's necessary to take violent measures, make reductions. Churches are forced open, their catacombs breached and loaded up with bodies and lime. Then hermetically sealed. All the rest go to common graves. But these were soon full and gorged. They began to putrefy and, a horrible thing, they were throwing up! The ditchdiggers fled."<sup>14</sup>

Something scintillates, brushes past?--broad stroke, of arrow feathers, on the raised floor, striated planks, body, on its backside, unlathed.

Detail, under the magnifying glass, of the body: this body (the figures with clubs) is treated like a wall. Skin?--these scratches are made on the material of a wall; the painting holds little, when it gets old, and doesn't retain this skin but only its quite fissured memory. I remember from this fresco its lacunae, the panels that have dropped

out of the story. As Stendhal might say: the missing painting is what subsists in these "little memories," these little islands, still quite close together, that float upon blackness.<sup>15</sup> Or in reverse, these black scales, mounted, tossed, are like "eyes" floating upon a kind of soup.

### *Watteau's Death*

(Watteau is sad: "why sad? Sad about art above all. He thought he couldn't understand it, not knowing anatomy and being ignorant of the principles that allow movement, allow the surface to be transformed in all directions").<sup>16</sup>

The man with the club: the wall, the back, skin peeling off, like one wall of the painting. Scratched painting: the body is a subcontraction of these little wounds, the anatomy--that's to say, whatever remains of the figurable body at bottom would almost be a slow and bulky subtraction, rolling across this character, in a scribble.

(What might we hope to find at the heart of this most improbable horror, not very pertinent here and yet so carefully displayed?--simply the pleasure of seeing. The peeling off that causes writing; an absurd and gratuitous excess, brings back with a pole, or a hook, the underlying fear in the painting).

Shadow that contaminates, excess of petrified fear (Michelet's text is all about theatrical fear: a shadow falling on a stairway in Cairo).

I know few paintings of the period that go so thoroughly to the heart of things:

perspective, wall of colour (that is, a walled and graffitied colour). These striations (there is then a kind of madness, insania delicata), they can't cart the picture off, but they begin writing--that is, begin then on this cracked surface, take over from there, and with a scratch of the nail make its date of birth appear.

Behind that man with the club?--a black pig (a hyena) (a female hyena).

What's beautiful in the fresco is to some extent its puzzle: we can't isolate one detail, one figure etc., except in order to carry away at the same time the enigmatic and disproportionate fragment of another body; think of this as a chain of bodies, troubled, blind, harried--an extraction, consequently, of who knows what body. But this is no less striking: the epiphenomenal detail, the little annexed body (such a character, surprised on the field of another body, relinquishing a still more violent body that poses, shows its muscles, bandages its made-up face), and so, this little bit of body is there just the same (the dogs, the rower with the hook, a foot, the head of a beast, etc.), desperate to signify, to insist upon what it can no longer understand: the lenticular magnification, the network that overweaves the skin (if you get close, it's a painting with a canine naughtiness).

I get too close, to the point of myopia where I can understand only the complete dullness of the signifier; a body looked at from this close, giant (under the magnifying glass, the skin is no longer anything but the wall, the opus reticulatum of Adrian's villa, with craters like animal markings).

Explain this, something that stands out like the ring in the nose of a bull: bodies transfuse...Into what thickness do these stinking bodies, washed, inundated, idiotic, pass and dissolve?--the painting at least films such warped memories: Diderot, the skin looks at colours, and most surely touches them.<sup>17</sup> And this is why. An extremely stretched painting (not a speck of blue).

The cap of Dante/Uccello (it would suit a housekeeper).

Photographic details (some of them are much enlarged, and the fresco is entirely cut up) at work on the detritus of the painting. Enough to fill another book, to show exactly how this fresco is in tatters and that it attracts, like iron filings, peeled skin and sorts of moultings that will fit nowhere else but here.

I understand very well in fact that in this fresco what is figured is not the plague. Or rather this sickness. A memory, incessantly struck in jolts, of another history on the body of humanity. The history, too, of the doctor-actors who act out their own alienation, completely making up the scene from which they disappear, rigged out in their bird's noses full of scent, musk, spices. The history of the distancing of the medical body: these dolls at the edge; a history of culture--they're there with their crow's beaks so as not to breathe in the pus, so that it doesn't go to their heads, and theirs are the only bodies removed from the agglutination.

Thenceforth the painting would be the effect of this fear, led very precisely to the point of its own collapse. Like the child who leads me by the hand into the dark corridor in order to show me, in a sort of maternal deprivation, what he's scared of--there it is.

The painting thus impels me to write something that writing sees: the gaze of writing is in that sense the knowledge of a fear. I've said it's a childhood fear, because it's so much easier to remember succumbing to it since these days a child's fear is the only thing that's comparable. And which collapses. It's as if Vico were saying: children are afraid of the dark, not of ghosts; it's the only way they can say that they're mortal, absolutely, without a bit of this edge, plunged into this terrible test-tube with a pair of forceps.

So if a child leads me by the hand into a dark passage to tell me, there it is, that's

what he's afraid of, immediately a sort of rhombus trembles, round-chested, its head somehow making its wings flap.

A deprivation torn from this admission, from this secret. How to make this darkness recede? by what bridge?

So the painting leads to the heart of its own darkness, leading by the same hand.

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NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A complete translation, by Tom Conley, of Le Déluge, la peste is forthcoming (1994) from the University of Michigan Press.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Antonin Artaud, Theatre and Its Double (tr. M.C.Richards). New York: Grove Press (1958), 26.

<sup>3</sup> This and the subsequent quotations: Saint Augustine, City of God (I: 32). Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press (1966), 133

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Defoe, A Journal of the Plague Year. New York: Jensen Society (1904 [1722]), 68. Apparently, the French translation of Defoe quoted by Schefer here uses the imperfect tense, as if Defoe's text ran: "and they were saying...."

<sup>5</sup> A private comment made to Schefer by Jean Genet.

<sup>6</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, The Decameron (tr. M. Musa & P. Bondanella). New York: Norton (1982), 7-8. Translation slightly changed.

<sup>7</sup> Jules Michelet, Histoire de France (tome 6). Paris: Marpon & Flammarion (1875),184

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<sup>8</sup> Jules Michelet, Histoire de France (tome 17). Paris: Marpon & Flammarion (1875), 289.  
"Le règne des forçats" is a phrase Michelet uses to describe the activity and behaviour (the "devilish hilarity") of the lower-class men pressed into service as body-removers by the city fathers.

<sup>9</sup> Michelet, 290

<sup>10</sup> Michelet is describing one of Tintoretto's paintings of the crucifixion and he relates it to the plague of 1576 (291-2).

<sup>11</sup> Translation is from Artaud, Theatre and Its Double p.23-4; Schefer deliberately attributes the words to Michelet from whom Artaud had in fact roughly quoted (Michelet, 282-3).

<sup>12</sup> Michelet, 283-4

<sup>13</sup> Michelet, 283-4

<sup>14</sup> Michelet, 292-3

<sup>15</sup> Stendhal?

<sup>16</sup> Michelet, 319

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Diderot, "Letter on the Blind," in Early Philosophical Works (tr. M. Jourdain). New York: Burt Franklin (1972), 143.