The Failure of Progress and the Example of Fraternity in Mary Shelley's "The Last Man"

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The Covid-19 pandemic naturally turns readers' interest toward books that feature epidemics; the usual suspects are Bocaccio's *Decameron*, Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, and Camus' *The Plague*. This paper focuses on a similarly important book, Mary Shelley's 1826 pandemic narrative, *The Last Man*.[1] Its plot takes place in the end of the fictive 21st century, when England has become a republic but any social progress is annulled by a global plague epidemic that wipes out humanity. *The Last Man* culminates in a tragic exodus of an ever-decreasing number of the remaining members of humankind through a devastated Europe, until the narrator can find no more living persons on the continent. As Madeleine Joelson argues, the widowed Mary Shelley was also very lonely at the time of writing the book, and thus the narrative's "infectious disease is not only a physical or biological phenomenon, but a sociological one as well" (Joelson, np). In building on this assertion, my short essay draws conclusions that concern modern societies, and offers a twenty-first century reading of *The Last Man* with the current pandemic in mind. I believe that Shelley's book might help us understand how and why we should live our lives differently after the pandemic, rather than returning to the same practices of the individualism of a consumer society that has been one of the main causes of global warming and which has also had a significant impact in the development of the current pandemic.

Éva Antal argues that *The Last Man* is three novels in one—the first part being "a romantic narrative of six characters' life and their relations, the middle one is an apocalyptic narrative of the plague, while the last, post-apocalyptic volume describes the melancholy of the end of the world" (4). Muriel Spark also points out these three parts, identifying them as the decomposition of the family, of society, and of mankind, respectively (181). Yet these three parts are not interwoven seamlessly, and nothing beyond the suspicious title suggests, until roughly halfway through the book, that *The Last Man* is going to be about a devastating pandemic. I suspect that, in 1824, when Mary Shelley began her work, she did not know yet that it would be mainly about a plague. It is likely that her thoughts were turned towards this topic in the following year, in 1825, by the publication of *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, with its detailed descriptions of the 1665 London plague. Yet this is speculation, as her journals unfortunately reveal no such evidence: in this period, neither Shelley's letters nor her journals reflect on either her readings or her work, so the fact that she does not mention Pepys does not mean that she did not read it.[2] What we can state for certain is that the uneven structure of the book reflects the uncertainties and significant personal and literary events during its composition.

Turning from the circumstances of the composition to the contents, we may note that the political and military conflicts of the early nineteenth century that seriously concerned the Shelley family are present in the fictive future of *The Last Man*. In Shelley's novel, the Ottoman Empire has

held out much longer than in historical reality. The liberation of Greece from Turkish rule is still not completed in the fictive twenty-first century. Yet the book depicts a successful campaign to liberate Greece and, in fact, even Constantinople (the present-day Istanbul) is under siege by the allied Christian armies. They manage to take the city and end the Ottoman rule in Europe, yet this victory has unexpected consequences.

It is during the siege of Constantinople that the second, apocalyptic part of the novel begins: the pandemic kills the defenders of the city, infects the liberators, and, within years, spreads all over the world. The narrative later reflects on the events in England. The spread of the plague is slow at first, but after a few years, the whole country is infected and human life comes to a halt: towns become devastated, and commerce and agriculture stops. Yet it is still a better situation than in other parts of the world, and a migration toward England begins. The situation is becoming anarchic but, finally, order is temporarily restored. As the lethal pandemic cannot be stopped, soon only a few thousand inhabitants remain alive in England, who decide to begin a huge pilgrimage to the continent.

They first cross to the continent and, from devastated France they decide to move to Switzerland, but only fifty survivors reach the vacant Alpine country. From here they take a route to Italy, but a mere three survivors reach Venice, and finally, only one of the main characters, Lionel Verney, the narrator and titular last man, reaches an empty Rome, where he plans to sail around the globe in search of more survivors. This makes the narrative situation of *The Last Man* somewhat embarrassing: Verney, the only survivor, tells the story to no one after every human being has died. Instead, the introduction gives a mystic explanation of the origin of the text: the notes were found by Shelley near Naples in Sybil's cave more than two hundred years before the events described in them (Shelley 2-4). As Antal argues, the "frame narrative projects the last man's testimony into the past and, if we think of the great cycles of man, in its vortex, the text still foreshadows a catastrophic future" (5). The issue is problematized by the narrator as well: "I also will write a book, I cried—for whom to read?—to whom dedicated? And then with silly flourish (what so capricious and childish as despair?) I wrote, DEDICATION TO THE ILLUSTRIOUS DEAD. SHADOWS, ARISE, AND READ YOUR FALL! BEHOLD THE HISTORY OF THE LAST MAN" (Shelley 364). This dedication is in an interesting parallel with Winston Smith's dedication of his illegal diary from George Orwell's 1984: "To the future or to the past, to a time when thought is free, when men are different from one another and do not live alone—to a time when truth exists and what is done cannot be undone" (26). Under completely different circumstances, the last man living and the last man thinking (Orwell's working title was *The Last Man in Europe*)[3] face very similar challenges: they write to a supposedly non-existent audience.

The pandemics in both Shelley's book and in 2019 begin in Asia. Similarly to Daniel Defoe's description in *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), the pandemic comes from the East. The apocalyptic narrative about the spread of the epidemic ends in complete destruction and offers no hope. The plague proves to be unstoppable. An ambivalent depiction of technological and social progress is also a significant element of the book, as any form of progress, be it social or

technological, proves to be futile with the plague sweeping across the world and destroying all human life. Distress and perseverance prove to be equally pointless, yet examples of human greatness, altruism, and hope (despite the hopeless situation) are depicted as positive examples.

In the last exodus of the remainder of humankind, there is no purpose that gives meaning to this pilgrimage of a smaller and smaller number of survivors. It is a meaningless quest for nothing. One would believe that such final meaninglessness renders all action up till that point meaningless, but this is not the case in the narrative. Two scenes will illuminate how, in Shelley's book, there is a difference between fear and bravery, between egoism and altruism. The negative example is the sect in Paris formed by a false prophet, who promises health to his followers. Many people give up both freedom and common sense for a false hope. As the promise cannot be kept, the episode ends tragically, with the followers killing the prophet and all of them ultimately dying in the epidemic.

Another episode in England looks completely different:

> In the village of Little Marlow an old woman ruled the community. She had lived for some years in an alms-house, and on fine Sundays her threshold was constantly beset by a crowd, seeking her advice and listening to her admonitions. She had been a soldier's wife, and had seen the world; infirmity, induced by fevers caught in unwholesome quarters, had come on her before its time, and she seldom moved from her little cot. The plague entered the village; and, while fright and grief deprived the inhabitants of the little wisdom they possessed, old Martha stepped forward... She entered the cottages of the sick; she relieved their wants with her own hand; she betrayed no fear, and inspired all who saw her with some portion of her own native courage. She attended the markets—she insisted upon being supplied with food for those who were too poor to purchase it. She shewed them how the well-being of each included the prosperity of all. She would not permit the gardens to be neglected, nor the very flowers in the cottage lattices to droop from want of care. Hope, she said, was better than a doctor's prescription. (212-13)

Even though the town is struck by a lethal epidemic, Little Marlow becomes a utopia of people caring for each other, an example of hope and of mental hygiene also symbolized by the flowers. Death cannot be prevented, but the rest of their lives are not spent in misery and fear. Martha in Little Marlow achieves something that Pope Francis, the head of the Catholic Church, reflects on in his latest book, *Let Us Dream – The Path to a Better Future*, published as a reflection upon the current pandemic. Pope Francis claims that, out of the three chief targets of enlightenment—that is, liberty, equality, and fraternity—humankind has made great efforts to reach the first two, and now it is time to turn toward fraternity as well (7). This kind of fraternity is what appears through the example of old Martha in Shelley's book. I consider this idea relevant in our analysis of *The Last Man* as in this narrative, liberty becomes extremely reduced in the context of the destruction of mankind, whereas equality becomes simply the equality of all people being mortal. Yet, in the scenes where fraternity becomes apparent, an existence worthy for humans becomes available,

even if death cannot be avoided. As it is suggested by Pope Francis, "[i]f we are to come out of this crisis less selfish than we went in, we have to let ourselves be touched by others' pain" (5). Martha in Shelley's book is an apt example of this attitude, and so are all the other characters who act out of altruism, overstepping their individual fears and interests. A more secular source, Gregory Claeys, argues that "most utopias are linked by their commitment to a form of enhanced sociability, or more communal form of living, sometimes associated with ideals of friendship" (145). The Last Man is about the destruction of the large community that is humanity; however, throughout the book, we find instances of the power of small communities and the importance of solidarity, fraternity, or enhanced sociability. Such instances, as we see in the above example, may even lead to a more or less utopian model of communal existence, even when it can only appear in the context of death, the unavoidable fate of all humanity.

If we look at Shelley's book as an allegory, death is unavoidable: the death of the individual surely comes. Under normal conditions, humanity survives because the many individual deaths do not occur simultaneously or in close proximity. These deaths in *The Last Man* would normally occur across decades; what makes the narrative horrible is that Shelley brings them together within a few years, and so many deaths occurring within such a short time destroys the structure of human society. The devastation, however, does not reduce the importance of solidarity; rather, it highlights the necessity of a fraternal relationship between the members of humankind.

The envisioned political changes that take place in Britain over the 250 years that pass between the time of writing and the fictive future the book narrates are significant, as the country has turned into a republic. However, it is still an aristocratic and highly hierarchical republic, where even members of the former royal family have a significant role and birth still defines social rank and marriage prospects. Shelley's social and political imagination is, in fact, very much linked to her own time. Rather than depicting new social structures, the betterment of the world in *The Last Man* is attempted by virtuous people who primarily triumph over their adversaries using their rhetorical skills. A large number of social and political conflicts are depicted, yet they are not defined by social trends or structures, but in an intentional vein.

Neither is the narrative concerned with technological progress. The 1820s, when the book was written, was significant from a technological-industrial point of view, being as it was the heyday of the industrial revolution. It was in 1809 that Robert Fulton began commercially running regular passenger steamboats and, in 1819, the first hybrid steamship crossed the Atlantic, and in 1825, only a year before the book was published, the first regular railway began its operation in England. Such important inventions are not reflected in Shelley's futuristic book—with the exception of a faint reflection of the Montgolfier brothers' 1783 experiment with balloon flight (Shelley 92), and also one mention of a steamship (Shelley 166). But these are the exceptions to the rule that the technological details in the novel reflect the beginning of the nineteenth century. In *The Last Man*, people travel on horseback or horse-drawn vehicles and on sailboats. Certain elements even prompt a historical rather than a futuristic fiction, like soldiers using muskets (Shelley 235), and

no mention is made of industry. What is even more salient is the lack of medical progress. In Shelley's book, no significant attempts are made to fight the illness, leaving everybody completely helpless against the plague.

The technical aspects of utopianism are not within the interest of Shelley in this novel (unlike in Frankenstein). As Antal argues, *The Last Man* "is not really an SF [novel] … it is more a warning about a possible future, it is an ecofeminist novel" (12). Antal also points out that nature is always female in the novel: "mother nature and her sister the epidemic ultimately eliminates mankind" (5). We should not believe, however, that progress is completely irrelevant for Shelley. Let me quote from a longer speech of one of the protagonists, Adrian. This speech is made before it becomes obvious that the plague cannot be stopped: "The choice is with us; let us will it, and our habitation becomes a paradise. For the will of man is omnipotent, blunting the arrows of death, soothing the bed of disease, and wiping away the tears of agony" (60). Adrian can be seen as the alter ego of Percy Shelley,[4] and as Anne McWhir reminds us, these lines may be a reflection of *Julian and Maddalo*: "it is our will / That thus enchains us to permitted ill" (McWhir 60). Shelley wrote in a reflection on Prometheus Unbound that Percy "Shelley believed that mankind had only to will that there should be no evil, and there would be none" (McWhir 60). In the context of the tragic ending of the novel, the reflection on "blunting the arrows of death and wiping away the tears of agony" (Shelley 60) can only be interpreted in an ironic manner. As Madeleine Joelson argues, the main characters of *The Last Man* are "thinly veiled portraits of Byron, Percy Shelley, and Claire Clairmont: depictions that not only allow Shelley to mourn her friends, but also to think critically about their ideals and the ideals of their cultural moment. Shelley's idealism, Wordsworth's naturalism, Byron's ego and heroism—even the progressive politics of her parents, Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin—are each examined and rejected in turn" (Joelson, np). Or, as Antal reflects on this phenomenon, a "parody of millennial wishful thinking" (4) is characteristic of the novel. This is how the book becomes a tragic satire of the notion of progress and the belief in the unlimited capabilities of humanity. Yet struggle itself is not satirized, and solidarity, fraternity, and altruism are shown in a positive light, despite the complete destruction of mankind.

In conclusion we may state that, in Shelley's *The Last Man*, the human will cannot resist the blind powers of nature. Suffering and the destruction of humankind are inevitable, yet there are significant differences between the attitudes of humans toward the demise of our species. The attitude of fraternity that is manifested as solidarity of small communities may not stop dying, but it creates a social atmosphere where the well-being of the individual may not be the cause of the destruction of others. If Shelley's book, written two hundred years ago, has any continued relevance, in my opinion it is the question of whether we can call something progress that destroys our environment and culminates in endless consumption. I hope the present pandemic gives us a chance to re-discover the structures of fraternity.

Notes

1. An earlier version of my paper was published in Hungarian as "Az utolsó ember: a halálfélelem utópiája."

2. See Feldman, Pamela, and Diana Scott-Kilvert, editors. *The Journals of Mary Shelley 1814–1844*. Clarendon Press, 1987.

3. In George Orwell's letter to F. J. Warburg on 22 October, 1948, he writes, "I haven't definitely fixed on the title but I am hesitating between 'Nineteen Eighty-Four' and 'The Last Man in Europe'" (Orwell and Angus 448).

4. Antal asserts that "all of the characters recall reminiscences in Mary Shelley's life: Adrian alludes to Percy Bysshe Shelley himself." See Antal, pg. 6.

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