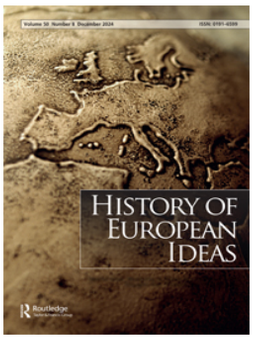

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REVIEW ARTICLE

Plagues and pantheism

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ABSTRACT
This response to Eileen Hunt's The First Last Man: Mary Shelley and the Postapocalyptic Imagination (2024) addresses the question of whether there is such a thing as a general apocalypse, or whether when we speak of apocalypses we are always presupposing a certain community of humans or beings.

KEYWORDS
Shelley; apocalypse; community; pantheism; divine; Spinoza

In this final instalment in her Mary Shelley trilogy, Eileen M. Hunt has solidified herself as the world's foremost scholar on the relation of Shelley's work to philosophy and especially political philosophy. The book is far too rich to be covered comprehensively, and so I focus my analysis here on one small part: Shelley's engagement with Baruch Spinoza and pantheism. In doing so, I want to question whether it is possible to have a post-apocalyptic plague literature with elements of pantheism, or whether there is something about pantheism that makes apocalyptic plagues impossible. I begin by outlining Hunt's account of Shelley and Spinoza, before turning to why I have my doubts about a post-apocalypticism with pantheistic attributes.

Shelley's engagement with Spinoza and pantheism does not take up a tremendous amount of space in *The First Last Man,* but its presence is important – and Hunt has written at greater length about this in a previous article.[1] In the book, the treatment appears in the first substantive chapter, on Shelley's 'Journal of Sorrow'. This is the name that Shelley gave to her fourth journal in which she details all the misfortunes that have befallen her, from the death of her children to Percy's often callous treatment of her and his own death by drowning.[2] These sufferings, unsurprisingly, brought an ancient problem to the front of Shelley's mind: 'why suffering and evil plagued the world if God and creation were good'.[3] Hunt argues that a major part of Shelley's resolution to this problem derives from her reading of Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise,* which she and Percy translated in a since-lost English version.

Spinoza's work, like that of any great thinker, is complex enough to have spawned countless interpretations. But it is generally agreed that his 'monistic' account of the world suggests that everything we encounter is a variation of a single divine substance, alternatively termed 'God' or 'Nature'. These manifestations could not be in any other way, as they are 'attributes which come about in a 'certain and determinate manner,'' according to Spinoza in the *Ethics*.[4] Elsewhere in that same text, Spinoza writes that 'things could not have been produced by God in any other manner or in any other order than that in which they have been produced'.[5] For Spinoza, God/Nature deals in actualities, not potentialities. We imagine God to be free because we project the appearance of our own freedom onto God, but it is only a 'prejudice'' that lets us imagine ourselves to be free and a projection of this prejudice to God.[6] Spinoza is typically considered to be a pantheist because of the way he denies the distinction between a Creator and Creation. This notion of an immanent god suggests that 'the whole of nature, perhaps we ourselves, emanate from the divine'.[7]

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In *The First Last Man*, Hunt argues that this Spinozan revelation was liberating for Shelley. In her words,

> Shelley discovered that a deterministic outlook on one's place in the cosmos could resolve the problem of evil … she reasoned that if an ineluctable chain of causal events made the world as it is, then all that has happened and will happen – good *and* evil – is part of that same necessary concatenation of creation and destruction.[8]

In *The Last Man*, Shelley has the protagonist Verney reflect such a principle while alone in Rome after the plague has killed all others, responding 'affirmatively to the voice of "Necessity"'.[9]

In Hunt's telling, Verney – and Shelley – affirm this deterministic necessity to achieve an existential philosophy of love: 'By accepting her part in the human artifice that has shaped suffering on the planet, Shelley learned to love the cosmic order of things, for its beauties as much as its miseries'. By seeing the cosmos determined as a whole, Hunt suggests, Shelley and Verney achieve a kind of pantheistic philosophy of love. Indeed, in 1822, before the death of Percy, Shelley wrote in her journal what Hunt calls a 'private prayer'. It reads: 'Let me love the trees – the skies & the ocean & that all encompassing spirit of which I may soon become a part'.[10] It seems that Shelley's adoption of a determinism from Spinoza led her to love the entirety of the world, since in Spinoza's pantheistic vision all things are manifestations of the same divine substance. Later in the book, Hunt indicates that this outlook also influences Verney's approach to international law. She terms it an obligation to 'care for and protect the life and independence of oneself and others, especially the weak and vulnerable, across artificial borders of nation, culture, and species,' and see Verney act upon it when he 'sets out with his dog and his books in search of a new community with whom to remake a planetary dystopia into a cosmopolitan utopia'.[11]

In short, Hunt argues that accepting the determined disaster of the plague leaves Verney not with a sense of existential dread at his inability to control the world or prevent his suffering, but an existential love for the rest of creation given the entanglements of humans and non-humans. As Hunt writes, 'People could learn to see that their personal suffering could finally be transcended by identifying with the suffering of others, not perpetuating it'.[12]

I certainly do not wish to question the evidence Hunt has found of Spinoza's influence on Shelley, nor whether this is the correct interpretation of Shelley's intentions. And Hunt correctly describes Mary Shelley as being influenced by pantheism rather than strictly speaking adopting it. But I do want to ask whether such a pantheistic approach is truly an effective model for us as we face our own plagues and attempt to act in a way that does not 'perpetuate' suffering. I want to argue that this pantheistic perspective misses that a plague is always a plague for a specific form of life, an apocalypse always an apocalypse for a specific bounded community. In the end, a pantheistic perspective that sees borders between species as 'artificial,' or that our love can genuinely be applied indiscriminately to 'the trees – the skies & the ocean & that all encompassing spirit,' cannot really recognize the existence of a plague.

I will begin by discussing some literal facts of pandemics, a literality which is certainly one of the ways that the plague in *The Last Man* must be read, and which while it may seem pedantic, is ultimately necessary. A pandemic is an infectious disease that has spread across a large region and adversely affects the health of a substantial number of individuals. An infectious disease is usually caused by either a bacterium or a virus. Bacteria are single-celled organisms that exist all around us, whereas viruses can only grow and reproduce within living cells of host organisms. Viruses are dormant outside of living bodies. When plague or pandemic strikes, certain bacteria or viruses have overwhelmed their hosts.

But crucially, viruses and bacteria are not indiscriminately pathogenic. Some of them can harm or kill only humans, mammals, birds, or plants. Even ones that can jump between species or harm multiple species are not harmful to all. In fact, in many cases, 'pandemics' for one form of life are nothing of the sort for another. For example, Lakes Erie and Ontario periodically experience epidemics of botulism and microcystis, both bacteria harmful to fish and mammal life. Yet these bacteria aren't fatal or toxic to the quagga and zebra mussels that are invasive to those lakes. When such

epidemics of botulism or microcystis occur, from the perspective of the mussels these are not epidemics at all – by killing their predators (round gobys) and eliminating competition for nutrients, these epidemics are in fact boon for the proliferation of their form of life. Similarly, in 1995 in North Carolina, waste from industrial hog farms washed into the ocean and provided immense nutrients for the dinoflagellate *pfiesteria piscicida.* Normally, the organism is a benign plant, but in the right conditions it releases a toxin, which killed thousands of fish and made many swimmers sick. A pandemic for the fish, harmful to the humans, terrific for the dinoflagellate.[13]

Alternatively, we can think back to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. For humans, it *was* a pandemic: a communicable viral disease that killed or adversely affected the health of many. But for other forms of life the effects were far less clear. With the rapid diminishment in human activity brought about by containment measures, many species experienced the pandemic like the mussels and botulism: as the precise opposite. According to one report, in Florida 'beach closures led to a 39 percent increase in nesting success for loggerhead turtles. Ocean fishing fell by 12 percent, and fewer animals were killed by vehicle strikes on roads and in the water'.[14] Other invasive species benefited because people weren't actively trying to prevent their proliferation. For decades in Lake Superior's tributaries, the Great Lakes Fishery Commission has been poisoning the lampreys with a 'lampricide' that kills only that species. But because these actions were limited during COVID, the lampreys were able to procreate and return to the Lake in significant numbers, attacking perch, whitefish, trout, and sturgeon.[15] In a way, the time of COVID-19 could have appeared like a pandemic for those fish even though they never developed a cough – and it appeared as the opposite of a pandemic for the lampreys.

Is not the same true of the plague in Shelley's novel? Shelley is clear that the disease only kills humans. As Verney travels through a depopulated Europe, he finds towns habituated by wild and formerly domesticated animals alike. As Ilana Mosad recently wrote in *The Atlantic*, Verney 'watches as nature presents "her most unrivalled beauties" in lakes and mountains and enormous vistas; and, "carried away by wonder," forgets about "the death of man"'. In a similar way to Hunt, Mosad describes how Verney ends the novel watching 'the thriving flora and fauna around him.' But instead of cursing nature's survival even as his species is going extinct, he recognizes the similarity between himself and the nonhuman animals who keep living: '"I am not much unlike to you," Verney says to the rest of the world. "Nerves, pulse, brain, joint, and flesh, of such am I composed, and ye are organized by the same laws."'[16]

From the perspective of flora and fauna who flourish even more in the absence of humans, there is no pandemic in *The Last Man*. And, if Verney really does identify with them, is he suggesting that there's been no pandemic for him either? Every disease or human act that makes that disease worse for those it infects opens an opportunity for other forms of life. Even non-pandemic apocalypses have winners and losers. Nuclear war would kill almost all life. But the bacteria *Deinococcus radiodurans* in fact thrives in radioactive environments. The death of all other life might not be a disaster for it but an opportunity to reproduce.[17]

If we accept a pantheistic outlook, why should we judge these pandemics to be bad, or try to avoid them?[18] Why should we try and preserve human life when we know that doing so it as the direct or indirect expense of other forms of life? Why should we kill the Covid virus with disinfectants? Why would we kill the botulism bacteria? Pantheism seems only to tell us that when we lament our own suffering or death or of our loved ones we fail to realize that something else will flourish in our absence.

My point is that describing something as a plague, pandemic, or apocalypse always implies a 'plague-for, pandemic-for, apocalypse-for' a certain form or forms of life that adversely affected by the events. In so doing, we are always implicitly constructing a hierarchy: Shelley's plague is a plague *for humans*, COVID-19 is a pandemic *for us*. For the pantheist, this hierarchy of being is probably indefensible, a suggestion that one form or certain forms of life are superior to others, and that we may judge something desirable or undesirable based on how it affects that form or forms. For the pantheist, we must love all of existence equally since it is all the divine emanation of God or Nature,

and true wisdom means subordinating any apparent suffering we perceive as unjustly narcissistic. But this pantheistic love of God or Nature in general means that we cannot love anything close to us in particular, that we must reject our phenomenological experience as deceptive. There is no such thing as a pantheistic plague – except for the plague of centring our own experience. I think Shelley's work actually points us away from such conclusions.

Unlike Percy and Lord Byron, figures in Mary's life who never saw how their self-love was an inferior to loving others, Mary Shelley did. As Hunt writes, like Diotima Mary transcended the lower forms, seeing that they were self-defeating, contradictory, and left only plagues of lovelessness in their wake. Yet if Mary had really transcended Percy and Byron's lower form of love only to adopt the pantheist's vision of a universally divine creation, it is not clear that she could have described anything as a plague, aside from our ignorance of universal divinity. Percy and the Pantheists offer their own Scylla and Charybdis. Percy was so enthralled with himself that he didn't realize there was anything above. Pantheists like Spinoza see themselves so high above that there is no longer an ascent at all. But Mary's legacy is that these hubris are the kinds that, on the one hand, leaves those around us in states of profound suffering, or on the other makes it impossible for us to recognize suffering in the first place. *The Last Man* is an education in navigating between those two extremes. Thanks to Hunt, that education is now ours.

Notes

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11. Ibid., 124.
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14. Brian Owens and Hakai Magazine, 'Nature Isn't Really Healing', *The Atlantic*, May 31, 2021, https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2021/05/pandemic-lockdowns-nature-wildilfe/619054/.
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18. See: Luc Ferry, *The New Ecological Order*, trans. Carol Volk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 133, 140.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).