

Equidistant Points

by Seth Barry Watter

I have often said that the sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room.—Pascal, *Pensées*

The plague came to Athens in 430 BC, in the summer of the second year of the Peloponnesian War. The general Thucydides, who caught the plague and lived, gave an account of its symptoms in Book II of his *History*. "People in perfect health suddenly began to have burning feelings in the head; their eyes became red and inflamed; inside their mouths there was bleeding from the throat and tongue, and the breath became unnatural and unpleasant. The next symptoms were sneezing and hoarseness of voice, and before long the pain settled on the chest and was accompanied by coughing." The disease made its way to the sufferer's stomach, producing spasms and retching; and if the afflicted somehow lived beyond that, they were usually finished off by its progress through the bowels. At the end of ten days one had either lived or died, the whole of it attended by restlessness and burning. Those who did survive yet bore some scar or trace. And the great were not exempt, as Plutarch informs us, for the plague took the sister and the sons of Pericles. He burst into tears when he placed the wreath on Paralus, his last legitimate heir: it was the one time in his life he was completely unmanned. Eventually the plague killed Pericles too. It came, they said, from Persia in the east; and it came more than once, at one- or two-year intervals.

The etiology of plague was only one of Thucydides' aims; equally important was the sociology of Athens. Due to the primitive time-reckoning of the ancient writers, it is difficult to say how fast conditions changed; yet they changed fast enough to be described as an event. "For the catastrophe was so overwhelming that men, not knowing what would happen next to them, became indifferent to every rule of religion or of law." There was no rhyme or reason to who lived and who died, no moral scheme that could justify events, for the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the good and the evil all suffered terribly. Those who fell ill were plunged into despair, while those who had not yet contracted the illness felt it behind them like a stay of execution. People did as they liked and spent as they liked, "since money and life alike seemed equally ephemeral." Funerary rites were casual, even optional; licentious behavior was paraded about openly.

Ethically, the situation was hopeless. One could watch neighbors die, or tend to their needs and later die oneself. Some people, however, "felt ashamed to think of their own safety and went into their friends' houses." To enter another's house, cross over its doorstep, became a heroic if somewhat foolish act. And those who caught plague and emerged with their lives

were nonetheless saddled with a curious split inside them. On the one hand they were naturally the most sympathetic and the best able to succor others, since the disease did not strike the same body more than once. On the other these survivors had the hubris of all survivors—the feeling of power of being the last one standing—so that, says Thucydides, “they fondly imagined that they could never die,” neither of this nor of any future outbreak.

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“Power and Survival” are intimately related, as Elias Canetti argues in an essay of that name. And that is because, while a corpse fills us with dread, this dread soon gives way to a feeling of pleasure. It is not we who are fallen, dead. It is we who are spared and thus we who feel stronger—harder and bigger, more resistant to time and chance. Some of the dead person’s power seems to flow into us, out of the prone and splayed body, especially if we were the cause of its death. The satisfaction and power attendant on survival can become an addiction, and the addicts we call rulers. The logical end of this zero-sum game is to be the one person in the world left alive; to be able to survey from on top of a heap of corpses the now barren landscape and its absence of rivals. As this ideal is hard to balance with the more respectable one of governing, it is most fully realized in delusions of the insane. Canetti gives the instance of Daniel Paul Schreber, whose accounts of his dementia find him eating a world of spirits. Their ranks, he said, had been swollen of late by catastrophes including four different kinds of plague.

But this pursuit of survival, of the feeling of “onlyness,” was just an offshoot for Canetti of a more basic tendency. Few readers of that author’s great book *Crowds and Power* will forget the austerity of its opening lines: “There is nothing that man fears more than the touch of the unknown. He wants to *see* what is reaching towards him, and to be able to recognize or at least classify it.” And: “All the distances which men create round themselves are dictated by this fear. They shut themselves in houses which no-one may enter, and only there feel some measure of security.” So much did this image of distance haunt Canetti that even the taste for symmetry seemed derivative of it, while the layouts of palaces architecturally enforced it. If we take the need for distance as a premise or given, then the individual is primary. Then all of social life is the management of distance. Canetti was unaware of, or more likely ignored, that school of social thought that stressed early bonding; ignored, too, the Marxian writers who thought of distance historically and called it “alienation.” Instead he presents us with a timeless scene of figures, or rather geometric points, who each hold a stick and describe a circle with it. The same stick that functions to draw the circumference can also be used to beat back intruders.

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The truth of social life is something less and something more. Less, because the distance is not impassable, and we invite its transgression on a near daily basis; more, because this distance is real and it alone offers the basis of a world held in common. Distance is a predicate of the individual as such, but it is not merely negative space between figures. It is their common property, that to which they can point: the ground of all activity that is shared or in concert. Few words in literature are more true or more just than those of Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition*: “To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates at the same time.” Yet even worlds are lost through a lack of care and foresight. What Arendt found so dreadful in consumer society was its breakup of all that was public and lasting. In their place it installed a culture of waste, of disposable items, until at last the home seemed the final preserve of dignity. Love of “small things” replaced the love of “greatness” while the public sphere faded into dead public space—as if the parties to a séance who gathered around its table were to see the table vanish “through some magic trick.”

Today it is those at the table who vanish, absorbed by the glow of a backlit display. We tend to reject whatever common world we have and we are practiced in the art of being alone in public. It remains to be seen if the same bits of hardware that enable our life in fracture are adequate to compensate for the loss of world entailed; and if an opportune crisis might precipitate the test-run of an elaborate network infrastructure already in place. It would have to be a crisis of the order of plague, for with plague one expects an extreme increase of distance. Or, rather, an increase and a decrease as the members of a household all but cease to leave the house. At home, at least, they are easier to govern. Perhaps they can even be put to work remotely. The world quakes and shivers into fragments of fragments, each within the compass of roughly four walls.