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The Big One:

Literature Discovers AIDS

Shaun O'Connell

Among the works discussed in this essay:

- An Intimate Desire to Survive*, by Bill Becker. 31 pages. Dorrance & Company, 1985. \$5.95.
Epitaphs for the Plague Dead, by Robert Boucheron. 47 pages. Ursus Press, 1985. \$5.95.
A Cry in the Desert, by Jed A. Bryan. 235 pages. Banned Books, 1987. \$9.95.
The World Can Break Your Heart, by Daniel Curzon. 241 pages. Knights Press, 1984. \$6.95.
Safe Sex, by Harvey Fierstein. 112 pages. Atheneum, 1987. \$15.95.
"The Castro," in *Cities on a Hill: A Journey Through Contemporary American Culture*,
by Frances FitzGerald. Simon and Schuster, 1986. \$19.95.
As Is, by William M. Hoffman. 97 pages. Vintage Books, Random House, 1985. \$3.95.
Plague: A Novel About Healing, by Toby Johnson. 250 pages. Alyson Publications, 1987. \$7.95.
The Normal Heart, by Larry Kramer. 123 pages. A Plume Book,
New American Library, 1985. \$6.95.
To All the Girls I've Loved Before: An AIDS Diary, by J. W. Money. 188 pages.
Alyson Publications, 1987. \$6.95.
Facing It: A Novel of AIDS, by Paul Reed. 217 pages. Gay Sunshine Press, 1984. \$7.95.
And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic, by Randy Shilts.
630 pages. St. Martin's Press, 1987. \$24.95.
Men on Men: Best New Gay Fiction, edited by George Stambolian.
A Plume Book, New American Library, 1986. \$9.95.
-

Not stability but a sequence of sharp alterations and abrupt oscillations in existing balances between microparasitism and macroparasitism can therefore be expected in the near future as in the recent past.

—William H. McNeill
Plagues and People

In *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag insists that illness is *not* a metaphor. "The most truthful way of regarding illness — and the healthiest way of being ill — is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking."¹ By such logic, illness exists in its own autonomous realm; illness insists upon an original response. When Henry James suffered a stroke in 1915, he heard a voice exclaiming, "So here at last is the distinguished

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thing!”² So, too, should we understand illness — particularly the collective illness that is called plague — as a distinguished, incomparable thing.

However, Sontag grants, “it is hardly possible to take up one’s residence in the kingdom of the ill unprejudiced by the lurid metaphors with which it has been landscaped.”³ Suffering from cancer, in the 1970s, Sontag attempted to clarify, if not control, her condition through an analysis of the disease and its implication, just as many writers would, in the next decade, turn their attention to AIDS and its ominously intensifying reverberations. In times of crisis, the attraction of metaphor, the root of all artistic expression, is too powerful to resist, though the dangers associated with the imposition of ready-made verbal constructs upon new crises are well expressed by Sontag. Her book, principally on the literature of cancer and tuberculosis, is, then, a proper first, oblique step in confronting the unimaginable threat posed by AIDS. *Illness as Metaphor* serves both as a warning against the reckless use of metaphor and, paradoxically, as a tribute to the powers of many writers’ imaginations, including her own, to name and contain, at least in words, the disease that ravishes them and their loved ones and that threatens everyone. There is a natural inclination to confront mystery with metaphor, as though words could tame. Even when words fail, metaphor can articulate the imagination of disaster, as does Lear, near the end, his mind and his language reeling:

There is the sulphurous pit, burning, scalding,
Stench, consumption. Fie, fie, fie! pah, pah!
Give me an ounce of civet; good apothecary,
Sweeten my imagination. There’s money for thee.⁴

The myths of TB and cancer have served many purposes, Sontag discovered. Both have been seen as diseases of passion, though lately cancer has also been understood as a result of repression.⁵ The diseased have been separated for special metaphoric attention; they have been invested with sinfulness, their disease interpreted as punishment, or they have been granted special poetic powers, their disease seen as evidence of the medieval humor, melancholy, or the “romantic agony” of the nineteenth century.⁶ Alternatively, the diseased have been seen as innocent victims of foreign invasion by the Other: alien occupiers from outer space are blamed or alien members of the society are imagined. “Massacre of Jews in unprecedented numbers took place everywhere in plague-stricken Europe of 1347–48, then stopped as soon as the plague receded,” writes Sontag.⁷ Finally, illness has long been used as a measure of the health (spiritual, moral, political) of the society in which disease occurs, the infected “body politic.”⁸ All of these tropes, long established in the literature of TB and cancer, have been appropriate and have been applied to the AIDS crisis. The sudden impact of AIDS has sent writers reeling, grasping for long-standing verbal formulations, groping for original rhetorical powers to meet the challenge. It is no surprise, then, that many literary responses have been inadequate: formally repetitive or rhetorically hyperbolic. Still, some writers have succeeded in finding new structures of understanding and apt verbal equivalents to describe the crisis.

In 1969, after long-repressed tensions broke to the surface in Belfast, Seamus Heaney realized that “the problems of poetry moved from being simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament.”⁹ So, too, have writers begun to search for images and symbols, metaphors of understanding, to do justice to AIDS, the “distinguished thing” that has become a plague of our time.

In the age of AIDS, a sense of *before* pervades the collective consciousness. In *Safe Sex*, a play by Harvey Fierstein, a character says, "'Now' will always define us. Different times. Too late. At last we have Safe Sex."¹⁰ For those who came of age before the 1960s, the period of sexual liberation had been a long time coming. As Philip Larkin wittily put it in "Annus Mirabilis,"

Sexual intercourse began
In nineteen sixty-three
(Which was rather late for me) —
Between the end of the *Chatterly* ban
And the Beatles' first LP.¹¹

By the 1980s, that go-with-the-feeling period seemed distant, even innocent, like fading pictures of those confident, stoned young men and women making love in the mud of Woodstock or those other eager young men, out of the closet, fresh from provinces of the republic and finding sex in the bathhouses of San Francisco or Manhattan. A *triste* of nostalgia for lost splendor in the grass characterizes much of the literature of love and sex in our day. This tone of poignant recollection is similar to Larkin's regretful look back at the young men who marched off to certain death in 1914: "Never such innocence again."¹² Remembrance sweetens the imagination. Randy Shilts, writing on the AIDS crisis in *And the Band Played On*, puts it this way:

Before. It was the word that would define the permanent demarcation in the lives of millions of Americans, particularly those citizens of the United States who were gay. There was life after the epidemic. And there were fond recollections of the times before. Before and after. The epidemic would cleave lives in two, the way a great war or depression presents a commonly understood point of reference around which an entire society defines itself. Before would encompass thousands of memories laden with nuance and nostalgia. Before meant innocence and excess, idealism and hubris. More than anything, this was the time before death. . . . Nothing would ever be the same again.¹³

Good-bye to All That, the title of Robert Graves's at once nostalgic and ironic memoir of World War I, might well serve as a description of much of the literature of the 1980s, particularly that literature which responds to AIDS, most of which emerges from or describes the male homosexual community.

However, some fiction about male homosexuality avoided the AIDS issue by focusing upon matters of recognition and roles, particularly within the American family. David Leavitt's novel, *The Lost Language of Cranes*, for example, represents a movement into mainstream publication and acceptance of literature about male homosexuals: father and son confront their gay identities within a traditional family structure in a pre-AIDS era.¹⁴ Leavitt places homosexuality at the heart of the American family, but he does not deal with the divisive effects of AIDS. Paradoxically, AIDS would, for some, enlarge the concept of family.

Though plays and novels that are directly about AIDS lend themselves less easily to such happy endings — for the AIDS victim always dies — even in this genre heterosexual harmony is sometimes reaffirmed. In *Intimate Contact*, an English drama presented on cable television in the United States, a husband contracts AIDS — "the big one, the really big one," as his friend calls it — from a prostitute. However, the wife figure, Ruth, who

represents the response of uninfected citizens, is the center of the drama, which traces her evolution from outrage to involvement in AIDS education; eventually, she enlists in the struggle against the disease that has infected her wayward husband.¹⁵ In the popular literature of the AIDS era, terror of transmission of the disease through sexual contact sometimes teaches heterosexual couples that there is good in the old, monogamous ways. More subtle works convey more complex messages.

At the same time, the mass media was trying to have it both ways. Men and women, seized by sudden lust, still strip-searched each other with reckless abandon on movie and television screens. Quick, down-and-dirty sex still had its appeal, for, as A. M. Rosenthal put it, "AIDS is a lousy love story." Hollywood and television were reluctant to surrender their hot-to-trot stereotypes.¹⁶

For all that, in 1987 other popular and serious dramas and fictions reflected a gradual realization that AIDS had changed the artistic landscape of imagination: significantly, if not utterly. Even formerly randy James Bond is now monogamous in the latest film about this fantasy figure, *The Living Daylights*. Sgt. Christine Cagney, who frequently slept around in the television series *Cagney and Lacey*, was off sex in the new season until the program's creators could figure out what to do with her. "For the first time in the history of the show, I am stymied," said its executive producer, Barney Rosenzweig.¹⁷

Others were undaunted by the challenge. CBS presented a docudrama, *An Enemy Among Us*, and ABC has an After School Special planned. Soap-opera creator Agnes Nixon promised cautionary story lines on AIDS in her serial *All My Children*.¹⁸ In prime time, condoms, which until recently were a taboo item on television, were freely and righteously passed around, to prevent disease. In the late 1970s, Dan Wakefield, creator and story consultant for the television series *James at 15*, quit the show when network censors cut out his euphemism for the word "condom." Wakefield had wanted James to say he should be "responsible," but NBC wanted no reference to birth control devices. AIDS has changed all that. "It took AIDS to free up information on birth control," said Peggy Charren, president of Action for Children's Television.¹⁹ "These are the concerns real people are having," said Terry Louise Fischer, co-creator of the NBC *L.A. Law* series, "and to ignore that on a socially conscientious show just wouldn't wash."²⁰

The deaths in 1987 of director and choreographer Michael Bennett, who created *A Chorus Line*, and off-Broadway innovator Charles Ludlam, who founded the Ridiculous Theatrical Company — both men died at age forty-four — symbolized the devastation of AIDS-related deaths in the theatrical world. In a column in the *New York Times*, Fran Lebowitz offered a dozen illustrations under the general heading "The Impact of AIDS on the Artistic Community." In one epiphany of mortality, she recalls a telling moment when she was on the phone with a friend, trying to make plans to leave town; flipping through her appointment book, she heard herself saying, "Well, I have a funeral on Tuesday, lunch with my editor on Wednesday, a memorial service on Thursday, so I guess I could come on Friday, unless, of course, Robert dies."²¹

If he had AIDS, Robert, sooner or later, would surely die. AIDS, a fatal disease with no cure, an expanding epidemic, strained the imagination. In late 1987 it was estimated that there were nearly fifty thousand AIDS cases in the United States, with almost half of the victims already dead.²² However, as staggering as those figures were, the uncertainty of the extent or prospects of AIDS infection was even more frightening. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop said he did not know how many were infected: it could be anywhere between 1 and 4 million! "Those estimates are based on very shaky evidence," Koop said. "We just don't know." Nor could the extent of AIDS be forecast with any accuracy. Health

Commissioner Stephen C. Joseph of New York City said, "The hardest thing for the public, for all of us, is that we desperately want certainty. But there just is no certainty on most of these issues, except that we face an enormous toll of illness and death."²³ Mystery intensified anxiety.

Faced with the unknowable, responsible commentators reached for analogies to awe. In a guest column written for newspapers that served his constituents, Rep. Chet Atkins (D-Mass.) took his text from Albert Camus's novel *The Plague*. "There have been as many plagues as wars in history," wrote Camus, "yet always plagues and wars take people equally by surprise." Then Atkins, as have many other writers on AIDS, invoked the Black Death of the fourteenth century, which killed a quarter of Europe's people; the smallpox outbreak in the eighteenth century, which killed some 400,000 Europeans; the influenza epidemic of 1917-18, which killed 20 million; and other modern scourges caused by typhus and polio.²⁴ Stephen Jay Gould, in an essay on the "ordinary natural phenomenon" of epidemics, went for The Big One in shaping an analogy adequate to the occasion of AIDS: "The AIDS pandemic, an issue that may rank with nuclear weaponry as the greatest danger of our era, provides a more striking proof that mind and technology are not omnipotent and that we have not canceled our bond to nature."²⁵

Like the Great Depression in 1930 or the Vietnam War in 1968, AIDS was moving to the center of the national consciousness in 1987. In such a context, passages from William H. McNeill's *Plagues and Peoples* are instructive, in that they remind us of the pattern of plagues which has shaped human history, particularly "when an unfamiliar infection attacks a population for the first time. . . . The Black Death of the fourteenth century was the chief example of this phenomenon, and the cholera epidemics of the nineteenth century constitute a second, far less destructive, but more recent and better-documented instance."²⁶ So, too, would AIDS stir debate over proper artistic response.

During the economic depression of the 1930s, literary figures debated art and politics with vigor. Commenting on one of these spats, between novelist Thornton Wilder and Mike Gold, editor of the *Daily Worker*, Edmund Wilson wrote, "It has now become clear that the economic crisis is to be accompanied by a literary one."²⁷ That is, Wilson implied, literary values are shaped by cultural crisis.

During the early days of World War I, Henry James struggled to come to terms with the horror of European warfare. Though he had long had what he described as an "imagination of disaster," nevertheless he was astounded by the surprise of warfare on such a vast scale. Looking across the Channel from Rye toward France, James wrote to an old friend in August of 1914,

Black and hideous to me is the tragedy that gathers, and I'm sick beyond cure to have lived to see it. You and I, the ornament of our generation, should have been spared this wreck of our belief that through the long years we had seen civilization grow and the worst become impossible. The tide that bore us along was then all the while moving to *this* as its grand Niagara — yet what a blessing we didn't know it. It seems to me to *undo* everything, everything that was ours, in the most horrible retroactive way — but I avert my face from the monstrous scene. . . . The country and the season here are of a beauty of peace, and liveliness of light, and summer grace, that make it inconceivable that just across the Channel, blue as *paint* today, the fields of France and Belgium are being, or about to be, given up to unthinkable massacre and misery.²⁸

This luminous passage shows James simultaneously realizing and articulating the shock of the new.

In *The Great War and Modern Memory*, his study of the writers of World War I, Paul Fussell suggests that the realization of disaster had the effect of substituting irony for grand rhetoric. That is, the war crisis was accompanied by shifts of concern and emphasis for writers. Writers of that era tried, like James, to avert their gaze from the monstrous scene, to retreat into conventional literary formulation. Fussell: "The point is this: finding the war 'indescribable' in any but the available language of traditional literature, those who recalled it had to do so in known literary terms."²⁹ Writers saw what they were coded to see and described what they saw and thought they understood in conventional language and familiar forms. However, as time passed and realization deepened, other writers came to terms with the conceptual and aesthetic implications of the Great War. "Thus the drift of modern history domesticates the fantastic and normalizes the unspeakable. And the catastrophe that begins it is the Great War."³⁰ Eventually the dominant mode of understanding becomes *irony*.³¹ The literature of AIDS has ranged from irony to sentimentality, from realism to fabulation, from redundancy to originality.

Gradually, the belletristic writing on AIDS has come to terms with the cultural and literary implications of the disease. The sudden appearance of AIDS challenges the abilities of our imaginations to *know*. Writers in various fields and forms have registered their surprise in many ways. The literature of the AIDS era is high-minded, didactic, and direct, though also often comic. This literature documents and articulates a major shift of consciousness which accompanies the disease. Much of the writing that responds to AIDS, literature that describes its effects upon the male homosexual community, is raw, unpolished, angry, contentious, as though shouting might break through the walls of ignorance and indifference surrounding the affected. As we might expect from writings on such a horrific topic, much of the fiction on AIDS presents simple characterizations, types who embody positions in didactic designs, and predictable themes: insistence that attention must be paid to AIDS victims, for we are all, directly or indirectly, AIDS victims. (Many writers urge the use of the more oblique description "person with AIDS," but there is no way to deflect the power of AIDS to create victims.) Many works of fiction on AIDS have the feel of thinly disguised autobiographical testimonies: cries in the gathering darkness. No doubt, in time, given the projected progress of the disease and the growing sophistication of those who seek to translate its implications into art, we will have a distinguished literature on the topic, as we have, say, on the Holocaust. There is yet, however, no work of fiction on AIDS to match Leslie Epstein's novel on the Holocaust, *King of the Jews* (1979), a work that mixes modes, comic and tragic, that deals with personal and ethnic identity — what is a Jew? — in complex and subtle ways, a novel that is sustained by a fully articulated sense of irony.

The best literature on AIDS is found in the theater, for several reasons. Not only has the world of the theater been shaken by the disease, but the theater has long been the proper medium to bear bad tidings in artful designs to affected communities in times of crisis. As the early Abbey Theatre sought to raise Irish consciousness and mobilize its energies; as the Group Theater sought to articulate Depression grievances before audiences of the grieved; so too does AIDS theater seek, sometimes in wonderfully inventive fashions, to shock its audiences with the recognition of its human bond with those stage characters who suffer and find symbolic triumphs over AIDS. However, worthy works on AIDS appear, with increasing frequency, in a variety of other forms: journalism, poetry, and fiction.

In the midst of crises — wars and other disasters, natural and man-made — the documentary impulse is strong. One of the most insightful records of the effects of AIDS upon the male homosexual community can be found in Frances FitzGerald's *Cities on a Hill*. Her book examines several utopian or visionary subcultures in America, ranging from Florida's Sun City to Jerry Falwell's Liberty Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia. Her study of the gay male community focuses on the Castro, an area of San Francisco where, in the mid-1970s, homosexual men established their own cultural identity, and where they eventually, in the 1980s, saw their lives and community divide under the threat of plague. FitzGerald approaches her subject with the eye of a cultural anthropologist, aware of the shifts in values and alterations of sensibilities which accompany this decade of change. Men had traveled far, geographically and personally, to come into their own sexual identities — which often meant sexual promiscuity in the Castro's gay bars and bathhouses — only to discover that they had to adapt to a scourge that challenged their personal and community existences. Suddenly, "the Castro became a city of moral dramas — dramas that involved not only the victims but their lovers, their parents, and their friends." The Castro, then, became an allegorical landscape; its citizens were passionate pilgrims who had to confront the new implications of their actions.

In the Castro those who had spent a good part of their lives in the struggle against the sexual taboo now had to acknowledge that the sexual liberation they had fought for so strenuously — and on which they had laid their claims of being the avant-garde of a national revolution — had deadly consequences. What was more, they had to face the fact that they were giving the disease to one another.³²

Life in the Castro changed when its residents acknowledged this *memento mori* in their midst. It is estimated that between 1981 and 1987, 2,030 people, almost all of them gay men, died in San Francisco, nearly 10 percent of the nation's AIDS fatalities.³³ After much intense debate, the baths, and many other establishments that catered to homosexual men, closed; their former patrons were dead, had fled, or were chastened. A report in the *New York Times* cites a young man, on Castro Street, holding a gay newspaper: "It's full of obituaries for people you know and ads for mortuaries, crematoriums and lawyers who warn you to write a will. I'm weary of grieving."³⁴ At the same time, others in the Castro community were made tougher, more resilient, and more humane by the presence of death in their midst.

By far the most comprehensive and moving work of journalism on the AIDS crisis, Randy Shilts's *And the Band Played On* is driven by similar impulses of grief, protest, and the celebration of courage and heroism among those who fought the good "fight for acceptance and equality, against ignorance and fear," first in establishing a gay male community and later in protesting that the Reagan administration and state and local agencies were criminally negligent in dealing with the killing disease.³⁵ Where FitzGerald had placed the life and death cycle in the Castro in the context of other fringe communities in American culture, Shilts's massive and impassioned book, which catalogues nearly a decade of the growth of the disease and the recognition of its threat, establishes AIDS and its implications at the heart and soul of American life.

Shilts structures *And the Band Played On* on a time line of ever increasing dramatic occasions; ironic juxtaposition sets the AIDS crisis in relation to major public events in American life. For example, at the bicentennial celebration in New York City, in 1976, tall ships from fifty-five nations brought sailors, some of whom may have been carrying

the AIDS virus, to America. In November 1984, Ronald Reagan, who had never spoken out on AIDS, was reelected president, an occasion upon which Shilts casts a cold eye. "When claiming victory on election night, President Reagan told a cheering crowd, 'America's best days lie ahead.' It was during the month of Reagan's reelection that the nation's AIDS caseload surpassed 7,000."³⁶ Shilts notes that by the time Reagan tentatively spoke out on AIDS, in mid-1987, 36,058 Americans had been diagnosed with the disease and 20,849 had died.³⁷ The two Americas portrayed in *Band* — Reagan's myth of morning in America and the dark night of the soul created by AIDS — are traced in lines that, eventually, converge.

And the Band Played On is at once a chronicle — jump-cuts intersect moments of medical research, political in-fighting, and case histories of those affected — and a polemic, a work of vivid advocacy journalism, an indictment of national bigotry. Shilts details the various ways in which Americans respond to what some of them ironically call "gay cancer."³⁸ Some showed a stunning insensitivity. For example, columnist and former Nixon adviser Patrick Buchanan, in 1983, thought the diseased got what they deserve. "The sexual revolution has begun to devour its children," wrote Buchanan. "And among the revolutionary vanguard, the Gay Rights activists, the mortality rate is highest and climbing. . . . The poor homosexuals — they have declared war upon nature, and now nature is exacting an awful retribution."³⁹ Most politicians, particularly in New York and Washington, tried to ignore the problem, until the news of Rock Hudson's illness, in 1985, drew public attention and shifted sympathies sufficiently to make AIDS a safe topic for political discourse. Throughout the crisis, medical institutions reacted with confusion, denial, territorial bickering, and occasional courage. People continued to die, mystified, terrified, often bravely, sometimes ignobly. Particularly fascinating is Shilts's tracing of the florid sexual career and finally horrid death of Gaetan Dugas, an airline steward from Canada, who was one of the first North Americans diagnosed with AIDS. Knowing he was infected, Dugas continued coupling in bathhouses; after sex he would taunt his partners, telling them they too would surely die. After sexual encounters, Dugas would turn on the lights, point to the purple lesions on his chest, then say to his shocked lover, "Gay cancer. Maybe you'll get it too."⁴⁰ Poe's gothic story "The Masque of the Red Death" had turned real.

There's no doubt that Gaetan played a key role in spreading the new virus from one end of the United States to the other. The bathhouse controversy, peaking so dramatically in San Francisco on the morning of his death [March 30, 1984], was also linked directly to Gaetan's own exploits in those sex palaces and his recalcitrance in changing his ways. At one time, Gaetan had been what every man wanted from gay life; by the time he died, he had become what every man feared.⁴¹

Yet Shilts celebrates more than he denigrates. Particular praise is reserved for social activists. Shilts praises Cleve Jones, famous for his memorial marches in San Francisco in memory of Harvey Milk, member of the city's Board of Supervisors and gay rights activist, and George Moscone, the city's mayor — both of whom had been killed by a deranged politician; later, Jones founded the Kaposi's Sarcoma Research and Education Foundation. Shilts also praises Larry Kramer, writer and organizer of Gay Men's Health Crisis in New York City. It was Kramer's article in March 1983, "1,112 and Counting," argues Shilts, which "irrevocably altered the context in which AIDS was discussed in the gay community and, hence, in the nation."⁴² Kramer attacked the medical community, especially the Centers for Disease Control, for its hesitancy; the political community,

particularly Mayor Ed Koch of New York, for its callous disregard; and the gay male community, for its refusal to change its ways: "Unless we fight for our lives we shall die. In all the history of homosexuality we have never been so close to death and extinction before. Many of us are dying or dead already."⁴³

When the novelists and playwrights examined those who suffer, directly or obliquely, from AIDS, they too found enormous strengths. Occasionally these writers match and surpass, in fiction, poetry, or drama, the level of conviction and sense of crisis achieved in documentaries. Whatever the form, some writers who emerge from the gay male community to tell the story of AIDS have the authenticity and the passion of some Holocaust testimony, from Anne Frank to Elie Wiesel. "I had the energy to do my book because I'm gay," Randy Shilts told *Newsweek*. "AIDS wasn't somebody else's problem. I live every day with the knowledge that friends will be dead in five years. I had to write the book, or go crazy."⁴⁴

Larry Kramer was goaded by the epidemic to move from form to form until he discovered the best way to portray and convey its pain and importance. His novel of male homosexual life in New York City and Fire Island in the 1970s, *Faggots*, had stirred attention for its graphic description and its theme: that the lives of these men centered too much on sex and too little on love. As we have seen, Kramer turned to polemical journalism and political organization in response to the AIDS crisis in the early 1980s. Having exhausted himself and his effectiveness in those forms, he had an epiphany of renewed mission in a visit to Dachau, in 1983. There, he was impressed that the camp had been opened as early as 1933. "They were killing Jews, Catholics, and gays for eight years and nobody did a thing."⁴⁵ Suddenly, Kramer knew what he had to do, so he returned to the United States and wrote a play, *City of Death*, about the AIDS epidemic in New York City in the early 1980s, a play that he eventually titled *The Normal Heart*.⁴⁶

This play, which had its premier in New York City at the Public Theater in April 1985, brought the AIDS crisis to community attention and translated its tensions into dramatic terms with clarifying insistence. The elaborate, alarmist set for *The Normal Heart* made Kramer's point as effectively as its language. A wall count of AIDS cases was displayed, the number of the dead updated during performances. Another wall graphic cited options American Jews had during World War II: to fight government indifference to the Nazi camps openly or to work secretly from within. The play insists that it is futile to try to work from within a system that tolerates genocide. Another wall graphic showed a list of names in the manner of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington. Stage setting, then, places the AIDS crisis within the larger context of our era's many victims.

People were affected by Kramer's play, as perhaps only a theater audience can be, for drama, at its best, involves audiences in an ancient ritual of recognition and purgation. In the theater, if not in life, we occasionally transcend differences, feel joined as a group. The play was widely praised: one critic said it did for the AIDS epidemic what Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* did for the McCarthy scare of the early 1950s.⁴⁷ The comparison is apt, for Kramer, like Miller, dramatizes an era of social crisis in documentary fashion, with arias of prose-poetry inserted for moments and messages of heightened effects. Miller's brotherhood theme in *All My Sons* is repeated in an exchange between Ned, the play's gay protagonist who resembles Kramer, and Ned's brother, Ben, who has never been able to accept Ned's homosexuality.

Ben. My agreeing you were born just like I was born is not going to help save your dying friends.

Ned. Funny — that's exactly what I think will help save my dying friends.⁴⁸

Finally, Ben does accept Ned as he is; Ben even attends a pseudo-wedding, performed by Dr. Emma Brookner, an AIDS researcher, between Ned and his lover, Felix, who is dying of AIDS. In the play, Ned separates from Mickey, who represents erotic celebration, to care for Felix, who represents one effect of that style of open sexuality. Kramer's point: that gay men should leave bathhouse encounters, where they use each other's bodies, and learn to care for each other.

Mickey. What are you, a closet straight?

Ned. Mickey, more sex isn't more liberating. And having so much sex makes finding love impossible.⁴⁹

The Normal Heart seeks to shock its audience into an understanding of AIDS: politicians (particularly Mayor Koch) are excoriated for inaction; gay male leaders are criticized for pushing liberation instead of politicking for the right to marry; and the straight audience is shamed for its detachment from those who are affected. Kramer, like the Clifford Odets of *Waiting for Lefty*, breaks through the barrier between drama and audience when he has Dr. Brookner deliver an impassioned monologue to an invisible doctor, in the audience. She, like Kramer, is addressing us. "We are enduring an epidemic of death," she says.⁵⁰ "Attention must be paid," she might insist, as did Linda Loman in Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Linda was speaking of Willy Loman, but her words effectively address the cautionary themes of the literature surrounding AIDS. "He's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person."⁵¹ Larry Kramer conveys a similar message, though he has not yet achieved the authority of Miller's language and the imaginative power of Miller's dramatic structure.

The AIDS epidemic increasingly is a challenge to the imagination's capacity to make credible its threats. Reporters found it hard to conceive; in a series on AIDS in the *Boston Globe*, for example, Judy Foreman said this:

If an enemy of humankind had set out to design the most terrifying, insidious biological agent imaginable, he could hardly have done better — or worse — than the AIDS virus.⁵²

Some creative writers were driven to construct horrific visions of a plague-ridden, fascist future; others, as we see, were driven to drama by the memories of historical horrors.

William M. Hoffman's play, *As Is*, opened at the Lyceum Theater in May 1985. Hoffman, like Kramer and so many others who seek to understand and articulate into art the AIDS crisis, used the Holocaust as an apt analogy.

I knew intellectually that the epidemic was *not* the Holocaust, but I had no other experience of mass death and public indifference and brutality to compare it with.⁵³

Dramatically far more adventurous than Kramer's *Heart*, Hoffman's *As Is* sets out to break the psychic barrier of the proscenium arch, which safely separates audience from the onstage drama. As Marshall W. Mason explains in the Production Note to *As Is*, actors remain onstage throughout the performance in choral testimony,

to witness as a community the events of the play in which they do not participate as characters. The audience must not be kept from feeling “safe” from this subject, so the actors of the “chorus” must act as a bridge between the fictional characters and the real theater events, and also as an unconventional kind of “threat” — keeping the audience aware that entertaining as the play may be, the subject is deadly. The desired effect is to assist the audience in a catharsis, as they are required to contemplate our common mortality.⁵⁴

As Is, then, is an exemplum: it illustrates a moral point. The audience here too bears witness so that we may acknowledge our common humanity with the suffering stage characters. As in *The Normal Heart*, *As Is* presents a straight man who overcomes his repugnance and hugs his gay brother. As in *The Normal Heart*, *As Is* presents an extended monologue, by a hospice worker, who stresses the courage and style of a dying AIDS victim who affirms his diminishing life by having his nails painted.

As that anecdote illustrates, Hoffman is sly in conveying his message, while Kramer is blunt. *As Is* uses all the resources of the modern theater — quick shifts of scene, tone and time shifts, lighting, character ambiguity — to make its point: artfulness is affirmation of the spirit in a time of crisis.

Above all, Hoffman draws us into his play and elicits our sympathy through humor. A TV announcer gives exposition on the disease, then Clone 1 and Clone 2 enact gay male dating bar rites that ignore AIDS:

Clone 2. Thought you were this guy Chip I met here on Jockstrap Night.

Clone 1. Haven't been here since the Slave Auction.⁵⁵

A black humor sustains the courage of his characters, who reveal a jaunty elan in the face of death. Saul, who is standing by his afflicted lover, Rich, finds another common analogy for AIDS, but gives it his own wry twist:

I feel the disease closing in on me. All my activities are life and death. . . . [Bars and clubs] remind me of accounts of Europe during the Black Plague: coupling in the dark, dancing till you drop. The New Wave is the corpse look.⁵⁶

Unlike Kramer, Hoffman includes a strain of nostalgia for the days of open sexual expression. Perhaps the diaries of British playwright Joe Orton, which revel in sleaze, inspired this ironic reflection by Rich: “God how I love sleaze: the whining self-pity of a rainy Monday night in a leather bar in early spring. . . . God, how I miss it.”⁵⁷

Such passages qualify the sentimentality that is always built into the situation of early death. Rather than put off the general audience, such recollections of lost days of lust authenticate and humanize characters who are caught in a lethal fate that tests their capacities to love before it kills them. Hoffman validates his audience's need to express grief and gives voice to their desire to deflect that grief through laughter.

Harvey Fierstein's play *Safe Sex* dramatizes the AIDS crisis with rare wit and imagination. Two young men, Ghee and Mead, teeter on opposite ends of a giant seesaw, discussing their relationship. Mead accuses Ghee of using AIDS to withdraw from commitment: “You're not scared of AIDS, you're scared of sex.”⁵⁸ Ghee takes a larger view, noting the shift in consciousness that has taken place in the public attitude toward homosexuals (“We were Gay. Now we're human.”), yet mourning the old days of reckless passion: “We can never touch as before. We can never be as before.”⁵⁹ In *Safe Sex*, which premiered in January 1987 at the La Mama ETC, in the East Village, Fierstein caught a moment with the quick clarity of a Walker Evans photograph. As he said in his preface to three one-act

plays, “So new is the world from which I address you that nothing in these plays can be assumed common knowledge. So new is the concept of safe or unsafe sex that I still can’t accept its reality. I believe these plays have a great deal to say about who and what we are.”⁶⁰ After the premier of *Safe Sex*, *New York Times* theater critic Frank Rich agreed: “At La Mama, the theater had become a temple again, offering the temporary illusion — and, with AIDS, it is most definitely an illusion — that there’s at least some safety in numbers.”⁶¹

Kramer’s *Heart*, Hoffman’s *As Is*, and Fierstein’s *Safe Sex* (all published plays) present different strategies for responding, humanly and theatrically, to the AIDS crisis. Many more AIDS plays have been produced, particularly in New York. On Broadway, Stuart Spencer’s *Last Outpost at the End of the World* portrays AIDS and its multiple effects. Off Broadway, Robert Chesley’s *Jerker, or the Helping Hand* dramatized the safest sex, while Alan Browne’s *Beirut* portrayed the effect of AIDS on heterosexuals. In a *New York Times* article on these plays, Don Shewey concludes,

These plays are significant in that they assert the theater’s ancient function as a public forum in which a community gathers to talk about itself. What’s happening onstage and what’s happening in the audience is sometimes so similar that the script seems to disappear.⁶²

Poetry on AIDS tends to be traditional in form and moral in intent: direct and didactic. Robert Boucheron, in *Epitaphs for the Plague Dead*, invokes Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* as his model. Boucheron draws his technique — testimonies from those killed by AIDS — from Edgar Lee Master’s *Spoon River Anthology*, Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*, and A. E. Housman’s *A Shropshire Lad*, works by writers who also composed epitaphs as dramatic monologues. Boucheron’s volume, however, owes more in form than in achievement to those predecessors. Rather than devise a new form to fit this new threat to our health and consciousness, Boucheron has forced a contemporary horror into the rigidities of Victorian verse, all the better to instruct. Still, some of his poems convey the shock of sudden awareness of the threatening ways of this plague, as in “Epitaph for an Innocent”:

I got it from my mother’s breasts,
unknowing, as an infant sips.
She got it from my father’s lips,
conceiving in my interest.

He got it lying still in bed,
his arm connected to a sack
that, as a hemophiliac,
he needed any time he bled.

A small, unhappy family,
we shared more than a common cold.
For my part, the sum is soon told:
nine months I lived, dying in three.⁶³

In another collection of AIDS poetry, *An Intimate Desire to Survive*, Bill Becker keeps a diary in poetic form during the eighteen months in which he suspected he had contracted AIDS. Both poets obey a documentary impulse: Boucheron moves through a range of characters for his AIDS chronicle, while Becker moves through time. Becker, too, dramatizes the plight of the victim who cannot imagine what has happened to him. Like Job,

Becker asks, "Why me?"⁶⁴ However, Becker poses his questions and finds his working metaphors in more original poetic forms, which, in turn, convey more complex impressions, as does this entry of choppy lines and patterned associations which records the disease cycle, "5 Feb 85":

The body collapses
into itself
Structured demolition
surface unseen
Candid eruption
doing havoc on nerve
Nuclear fission
on a human scale —

Cellular chain reaction
An immunity implosion
Self interest
Self pity
Schizophrenic optimism
Relapse — ⁶⁵

Poetry in the AIDS crisis is commemorative and dedicatory, written in memoriam. It is the verbal equivalent of the "performance art" emblem displayed at the October 1987 gay rights march on Washington: a giant quilt, composed of three-by-six-foot, hand-made panels, each containing the name of a person who had died of AIDS. More than two thousand names were recorded, from forty-eight states and five nations, on the Names Project, which covered an area equal to two football fields.⁶⁶ Like the Vietnam Memorial wall nearby, this quilt recorded and preserved in artful arrangement the names of victims of a war few wanted to fight. The Vietnam War, however, is over, its body count complete, while the number of AIDS crisis victims is still climbing. Some poets have enlisted in the war against AIDS.

Fiction on AIDS can be loosely grouped in two categories: first, horrific cautionary tales of fascist responses to the AIDS crisis: dystopias, in the manner of *1984*, in which writers posit scenarios of massive retaliation against homosexuals by a society — set some time in the near future, or in the reconfigured immediate past — which seeks a Final Solution to the plague; second, documentary, largely autobiographical records of case histories of persons with AIDS, along with the ramifications of the disease for the victim's immediate family and loved ones. In *Plagues and People*, William H. McNeill makes the distinction between external and internal threats to man's survival: "One can properly think of most human lives as caught in a precarious equilibrium between the microparasitism of disease organisms and the macroparasitism of large-bodied predators, chief among which have been other human beings."⁶⁷ The social and science fiction fantasies on AIDS move from lethal microparasites, fostered by the AIDS virus, to speculations upon the form of lethal macroparasites: those who seek the Final Solution against AIDS through elimination of its carriers.

The AIDS crisis has stirred fears — paranoia, unfounded hysteria, justly founded anxieties — in the male homosexual community over social isolation and retaliation. Testing for AIDS was advocated by the Reagan administration; some police wore masks in the presence of male homosexuals; and a Florida boy with AIDS was assaulted, his family's house

burned. Where will all this lead? Two novelists, Jed A. Bryan and Toby Johnson, fear they know.

Bryan's *A Cry in the Desert* imagines a "pogrom" against male homosexuals in Nevada, in the early 1980s, a genocide that began with AIDS testing.⁶⁸ It is an insistent example of message literature. As Bryan notes, in a brief preface, "the message is clear. AIDS is not a gay plague. It is a very real danger to us all."⁶⁹ The novel is driven and sustained by a sense of threat and betrayal. Its epigraph is from Luke (21:16), a passage that could serve as the epigraph for many illustrative works on the AIDS crisis.

And ye shall be betrayed both by parents and brethren and kinfolk and friends; and some of you shall they cause to be put to death.⁷⁰

Bryan construes Luke's text into a wild parable. Alfred Botts, himself a repressed homosexual, heads up Project ERAD (Emergency Research and Development), on two thousand acres of Nevada desert, near a nuclear plant, and works for a new Emergency Quarantine Act, under which he seizes homosexuals, then brings them to ERAD, where they undergo experiments, then are eliminated. Botts is aided by the Reverend Theophilis Stokeswood, a radio minister, who preaches on the scourge of God: AIDS as God's punishment against male homosexuals. Industrialist Kurt Stakl bankrolls Botts's research project, hoping to patent an AIDS cure through which he seeks world control! Arrayed against this powerful triumvirate are a few journalists, doctors, and others who are fighting for the rights of homosexual men. Incredibly, despite many lurid assaults — one homosexual man is nailed to a cross, another is dehydrated to death! — this group of citizens, working together, brings down Botts and his nefarious associates. *A Cry in the Desert* is a model of improbable fiction.

So too is Toby Johnson's *Plague: A Novel About Healing*.⁷¹ Johnson, a psychotherapist who has worked with AIDS victims and has sought to educate the public about preventive measures, contrives an equally unlikely, melodramatic parable of warning. Like Bryan, Johnson sees his fantastic story — the planned use of nuclear weapons against AIDS carriers — as reasonable. "The projections for the resolution of the plague that haunts us in 1987 are reasonable extrapolations of current medical fact."⁷² Set in "Early Autumn, in the Possible Near Future," *Plague* imagines evil men, Dr. Strangeloves and Dr. Frankensteins, who are repressed homosexuals; they manipulate the crisis, developing and withholding an AIDS antidote so that they can seize money and power. Arrayed, once again, against them are various high-minded gay males who struggle within encompassing plots. The AIDS crisis, in this dystopia, reveals the homophobic depths of American culture: "Curiously, at the very heart of this discussion was the notion that pinko-leaning homosexuals were undermining American morality."⁷³ AIDS, we are told, allows fag-bashing fascists to come out of the closet and do their damndest, though they, in turn, are done in by noble gay males and their fellow travelers. While all literature tends toward mythic reductions, these fictions tend toward the simplifications of comic strips.

Though one can easily understand the sense of psychic dread that motivates the writing of *A Cry in the Desert* and *Plague*, it is difficult to take them seriously as analyses or as predictive models. In both works, AIDS is seized upon to settle old scores — hostility to homosexual men comes from those who repress their own homosexual inclinations — and imagine fantastic political scenarios, in the manner of the suspense fiction of Robert Ludlum, Ken Follett, or Tom Clancy. But then, it might be argued, until recently AIDS itself would have seemed to most people an imaginative extravagance, a science fiction.

Jed A. Bryan and Toby Johnson have tried to think about the unthinkable in implausible but haunting fictions. Voices crying in the wilderness don't have perfect pitch!

It is as difficult to plot a plausible mystery on the AIDS topic as it is to contrive happy endings for an AIDS story, for the same reason: because persons with AIDS die. As soon as a lesion appears, sadly, we know the rest of the story. Some writers, as we have seen, shift readers' attentions to plots against homosexual men either by the disease itself or by those who want to gain wealth or power through their extinction. Other writers take the AIDS story head-on, without embellishment or imaginative contrivance. They resort to plain-style prose and accessible plots to bear witness to the devastation of AIDS. Either these writers are dying or their loved ones have died. Their books are records that implicate the reader in the victim's suffering and in the impact of the victim's suffering upon his lovers, his friends, and his family. Most of these autobiographical works avoid artful indirection: they make their claim for the victim's humanity with the blunt insistence of a heart's cry.

J. W. Money's *To All the Girls I've Loved Before* has the artless authenticity of dying words, for that is just what they are: brief, self-reflective essays written, during March 1986, while the author suffered high fevers that kept him up at night.⁷⁴ He wrote his entries on the bathroom floor to keep from disturbing his companion. This, then, is a version of prison literature, though the author was to be released from his sentence only by death. Many of Money's reflections — notes, memories, whimsies, farewell missives, and thank-you notes — are not on AIDS, but on music, fashion, people, and places he has loved. He thanks his mother for introducing him to opera; she died of cancer at age forty-three, the same age he would contract AIDS. He recalls his crushes on media stars: Bette Davis, Natalie Wood, and Joan Baez. He tries to construe his life as an allegory in a stiff, jingly poem about Prudence and Folly. He, of course, assumed the role of Folly, who "was last seen somewhere near the docks" with a sailor.⁷⁵ That is, he blames himself for AIDS, but defends his choices. "I have AIDS in part, because I was promiscuous. I'm not complaining: If God's punishing me, He's certainly allowed me to have a lot of pleasure." At that point, words fail Money and he invokes a sentimental song to speak for him: "Kiss the day goodbye, and I won't regret what I did for love."⁷⁶

J. W. Money died in October 1986. His lover, who had stood vigil over him during his illness, died a few months later. All that remains is this fragmentary, flawed, but moving work, written in feverish conviction, when he knew that time was running out.

In *The World Can Break Your Heart*, Daniel Curzon tells the familiar story of a sensitive young man (Benjamin Vance) who grew up in a tough environment (Detroit), with a sense of his difference and a need to discover his own place in the wider world: "I'm gonna be a movie star like Sonja Henie!" declares the boy.⁷⁷ Though he is shamed by adults and Catholic clergy, Benjamin accepts his identity as a homosexual, then goes to Hollywood in search of fame. There he meets gay men who celebrate their sexuality: "Leave Detroit behind, sweetie," says one.⁷⁸ Benjamin learns to turn tricks, but, when one of his partners contracts AIDS, Benjamin quickly grows up; he learns love and compassion. Here, as in other AIDS-related literature, the disease concentrates the mind upon Final Things and intensifies the humanity of those affected. As in Money's commitment to writing during his last days, Curzon's Benjamin affirms art over deteriorating life: "Life may be a 'long disease', as Hamlet said. But a work of art, I see now, is the cure!"⁷⁹

Of course, this asks too much of art. In *The Renewal of Literature*, Richard Poirier questions the powers and responsibilities of literature to address the problem of culture. "Literature is a very restricted passage into life, if it is one at all."⁸⁰ At its best, said

Auden, writing on Yeats, "poetry makes nothing happen." Even granting that art has limited powers, *The World Can Break Your Heart* is not the best art: the novel seems hasty, episodic, undeveloped, with no detailed sense of its Detroit and Hollywood settings. In form, it is a conventional novel of coming out with the consciousness of AIDS tacked on, as Curzon's own words imply: he dedicates his novel "to all straight readers so that they will know what it felt like to grow up gay and for all gay people so they won't forget."

⁸¹Still, this novel follows the pattern of direct appeal for the sad plight of those who struggle to accept and have accepted their sexual identities only to discover that their lives are threatened by AIDS. These writers are correct in insisting that this story must be told and told again, whatever the effects or achievements of their art. Fiction, too, as Auden said of poetry, "survives in the valley of its saying."⁸²

Paul Reed's *Facing It: A Novel of AIDS* is a romance of sorts, with a love story in the foreground and AIDS looming in the background. In the summer of 1981, Andy Stone, a handsome young worker for gay rights in Manhattan, grows ill. His macho father rejects his dying, homosexual son. Andy finds support from his elected, gay male "family." His lover, David, is ennobled through suffering. A writer for various gay presses, David had been "waiting for something to write about, something worth the effort; he knew inspiration would hit him in time."⁸³ Andy's illness and the wider threat of AIDS give David a worthy personal mission and a significant public topic for his writing. He investigates the AIDS disease, in search of explanations. David finds some dedication in the medical profession but also uncovers much callousness — "Fags are big news nowadays, and dead ones are even better news," says one calculating researcher — and evil.⁸⁴ As in *A Cry in the Desert* and *Plague*, the villain in *Facing It* is a closet homosexual man. Dr. Arthur Maguire won't release funds for the dedicated Dr. Branch's research: "What with the homosexual element and all — well, it's all delicate and avoidable," says Maguire.⁸⁵ It turns out that obese Maguire had been Kinder-Mann's lover in medical school, that he had used a woman, Carolyn, who later became Branch's rich wife, as his cover. However, now Carolyn threatens Maguire with exposure if he does not release funds. That is, the novel descends to soap opera villainy and intrigue to make its point. In *Facing It*, the AIDS crisis renews the bonding not only of gay male lovers but of this married couple. Like every other work in the genre, this novel sets out to raise the consciousness of its readers and to renew the covenant between gay men, even in the face of AIDS. The disease is, it seems, a great teacher as well as a great killer.

The most subtle and moving fiction on AIDS that I have read appears in George Stambolian's anthology *Men on Men: Best New Gay Fiction*.⁸⁶ Despite its flaunting title, many stories in this anthology do more than celebrate coming-out parties for young men, though that pattern appears. As Stambolian notes, AIDS-era fiction is likely to be even more controversial, particularly descriptions of sexual practices. "This situation partly explains why many stories involving erotically unrestrained behavior are now habitually set in the years preceding the advent of AIDS."⁸⁷ It is the turn away from scenes of explicit sexuality and the turn toward mature and eloquent confrontation with disease, death, and the effects of death upon the living which distinguish these stories. Paradoxically, but justly, as the gay male community suffers its Holocaust, its fiction has increasingly been accepted by mainstream publishers and readers. Gay male literature has gone past the stage of either justifying itself to American straight culture or shocking the bourgeoisie; rather, at its best, it portrays characters who are confronting the meaning of their lives and the mystery of death.

John Fox's "Choice" is a poignant tale of a gay antihero, Jimmy Abooz, who suppresses his lusts out of the fear of AIDS, though his caution has so far protected him and given him a wry humor. "He doesn't know a single person with AIDS and hopes he never does. . . . The previous summer he wore shorts almost every day to show off his lesion-free legs."⁸⁸ Still, he does not know which way to turn. He still does not get along with his family, though they drink chi-chis (piña coladas with vodka) together during a dreary Christmas day. Jimmy, weary of his family, afraid of sexual encounters, stays in his room, alone. "He decided to start saving for a video-cassette player so he could watch porn videos in the privacy of his own home."⁸⁹ Fox catches the AIDS-era state of personal paralysis: isolation and masturbation.

The central character in Edmund White's "An Oracle" resists changing his life. Though he has buried his lover, Ray feels "dying would be easier than figuring out a new way of living."⁹⁰ In Greece, Ray reads Homer, weeps over Achilles' death, and confronts his own fragile mortality. "He thought it very likely that he was carrying death inside him, that it was ticking inside him like a time bomb but one he couldn't find because it had been secreted by an unknown terrorist."⁹¹ Still, he cannot keep his hands off a local boy. However, no longer able to see other men as sex objects, Ray falls in love with the Greek boy, who, wary of involvement, rejects him. The old wanton ways of Ray's gay days are long gone.

In Andrew Holleran's fine story "Friends at Evening," mourners gather for the funeral of Louis, an AIDS victim. Louis is a symbolic figure who stands for all the friends and lovers they have lost. Unlike Clifford Odets's Lefty or Samuel Beckett's Godot, chimeras of hope and rescue, Holleran's Louis presents only an occasion for mourning. The narrator gathers Louis's friends for the occasion. One cites Walt Whitman: "It is enough to be with friends at evening."⁹²

The gathering turns into an extended elegy. "We're all going, in sequence, at different times. And will the last person please turn out the lights?" says one mourner.⁹³ Another, who refuses to detach his identity as a homosexual man from sexual practices, complains, "*The wrong people are dying.*"⁹⁴ The city has become a cemetery through which this group of sad men passes, like a funeral procession. "More Than You Know" serves as their plaintive theme song: "Oh how I'd die. Oh, how I'd cry, if you got tired and said good-bye."⁹⁵ Romance is gone. Yet their friendships are intensified and narrowed, their lives reaffirmed in their ceremonial mourning.

In Sam D'Allesandro's "Nothing Ever Just Disappears," a survivor grieves for his lost lover in similarly plaintive yet oddly affirming terms. "Someone said the pain would go away, but I'm not sure that's where I want it to go. It's how I feel him most sharply."⁹⁶ In Robert Ferro's "Second Son," a tough antiromantic note is struck when a son dying of AIDS wards off his father's bluff reassurances. "The bottom line is that there's no cure," the wise child tells his stunned father.⁹⁷ The wise children of AIDS have much to tell us all.

The literature of AIDS, then, is

- divided between conflicting impulses: realistic and antiromantic or satiric and fantastic;
- more concerned with death than sex, though nostalgic for the lost old days of wine and roses;

- family-centered, whether that means a reconciliation with the victim's biological family, the affirmation of one's elected family, or both: fellowship and family renewal in the face of death are the constant themes of these works;
- antibourgeois; evil and indifferent men from the social establishment exploit the crisis;
- self-reflective: these works raise questions about the nature, form, and substance of gay male literature and ask members of the male homosexual community to question what it means to be gay;
- committed to the proposition that most victims and their loved ones are ennobled through suffering;
- intensely, bleakly humorous; thoughtful, inward, plaintive, eloquent; often artless or excessive;
- cautionary: AIDS affects us all; no man is an island.

The AIDS crisis has already produced a considerable body of literature, though not yet a great work of art. In a provocative survey, Daniel Harris dismisses most recent gay male fiction. "It's a literature caught in limbo between the hell of outlandish grotesques and the heaven of recipes and salads, one twisted and misshapen by its own extreme ideological tensions."⁹⁸ Certainly it is true that AIDS has shaken the identity of the gay male community, but Harris's objections to new gay male literature are excessive.⁹⁹ Though much of the literature that responds to AIDS — most of which emerges from or studies the male homosexual community — is pedestrian, repetitious, or special-pleading, all of it resonates with the shock of recognition of the power of AIDS to alter our collective consciousness, to change *all* our lives. Some writings on this topic are achieved works of literature: the journalism of FitzGerald and Shilts; the plays of Kramer, Hoffman, and Fierstein; the fiction of Holleran and a few others who have raised gay male literature from the celebration of uncloseted sexuality to the level of a requiem. AIDS literature will expand and, in time, will find its genius, as AIDS increasingly finds its place at the center of the American mind.

On Tidy Endings, Harvey Fierstein's brief play, is the most successful treatment of the AIDS crisis in literature which I have read. It meets the challenge of incorporating the horrific fact of AIDS — *memento mori*, masque of death, plague — in a drama that, without resort to theatrical tricks, teaches us how to see, prods us to feel our way to new levels of understanding. In the play, a recent widow, Marion, confronts Arthur, her deceased husband's lover, in the cooperative apartment in which Arthur had cared for Collin, the man they both loved, who has died of AIDS-related disease. Marion had sent her son, Jim, away before her meeting with Arthur, who is hurt that the boy blames him for Collin's death. Marion and Arthur are each wary and jealous. "He died in my arms, not yours," cries Arthur.¹⁰⁰ They bicker over mementos of Collin: a teapot that had been given to Collin and Marion as a wedding gift, though Arthur tells her it is a replacement for the burnt-out original, bought by Collin and Arthur in the Village. Marion and Arthur cannot acknowledge each other. They savage each other so thoroughly that, at last, nothing is left but compassion. Arthur tells Marion of Collin's final moments.

Arthur. Marion, you've got your life and his son. All I have is an intangible place in a man's history. Leave me that. Respect that.

Marion. I understand.¹⁰¹

Here Marion comes a long way, from the role of the conventional, aggrieved wife, to stand before and understand her dead husband's lover. Moved by his pain, she asks Arthur how he is. Arthur is not infected, he says, but when he asks how *she* is, Marion admits that she has AIDS antibodies in her blood. No one, then, is free from the threat of infection, so no one can remove himself/herself from the human family, which has no choice but to stand together in the face of this awesome threat.

Marion calls her son, Jim, back into the room and insists that the boy tell Arthur what his father had told him. Reluctantly, Jim speaks:

Jim. He said that after me and Mommy he loved you the most. . . . And that I should love you too. And make sure that you're not lonely or very sad.

Arthur. Thank you.¹⁰²

At the end of *On Tidy Endings*, Marion and her son are on one side of a door; Arthur is on the other side. That separation symbolically acknowledges the social division between those who choose either heterosexual or homosexual relationships in America. However, the real story of Fierstein's fine play is that doors have been opened and thresholds of understanding have been crossed between different kinds of people who have been affected and infected by a family death caused by AIDS. Indeed, AIDS, in this play, knows no barriers; it has forced characters to acknowledge each other's humanity and to accept each other's love. The common threat posed by AIDS may redefine and restore our idea of the American family.

Larry Kramer drew the title of *The Normal Heart* from W. H. Auden's poem "September 1, 1939," a poem that also embodies Kramer's theme, the theme of most AIDS literature, in one memorable injunction: "We must love one another or die."¹⁰³ 🍷

Notes

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