

FROM DIVERSITY TO NEW IDENTITY: ILLNESS AS PROCESS IN GIORGIO PRESSBURGER'S WRITING

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Abstract

La malattia è generalmente stigmatizzata perché relega la persona malata in un mondo di quarantena dove la sua 'diversità' e 'alterità' vengono limitate per non contaminare la società. Sono queste immagini di pregiudizio, espresse attraverso strutture sociali e letterarie, che Pressburger sembra voler affrontare e neutralizzare con l'idea di nuova identità tramite la metafora della malattia. Non tutti i protagonisti de La legge degli spazi bianchi (1989) riescono a superare il senso del male e il fatalismo punitivo e divino spesso conferito alla sofferenza letteraria. Sotto quest'aspetto negli scritti di Pressburger troviamo la tendenza di cercare nuova illuminazione, e nuova o ritrovata identità nella malattia, cioè da ciò che Susan Sontag chiama 'il lato notturno della vita'.

In 1956, at the age of 19, Giorgio Pressburger, contemporary writer, theater and film director, TV and radio producer, flees to Italy after the Soviet invasion of his native Hungary. He thus knows personally the experience of moving into new identity. Using a language which is not his, he brings to the Italian

narrative tradition a diverse cultural, moral background, rich in religious and *mitteleuropean* character.

The nature of illness is demonstrated in Pressburger's work by the conventional positive/negative polar concepts of life-death, health-sickness, fate-the human powers of control, science-religion. But the inscribing of illness into story in Pressburger is not only a metaphor. It also "isolates, exposes, intensifies and transforms character" and even "structures the work" (Meyers, 1985:1). Pressburger subordinates the negative manifestations often conferred on literary suffering to a larger metaphysical and specifically Jewish mystical scope.

In the Preface of his collection of stories, *La legge degli spazi bianchi* (1989), set in Budapest and its Jewish Ghetto, Pressburger explains: "qualche anno fa mi ero proposto di studiare la vita e la carriera di alcuni medici da me conosciuti nell'infanzia e mai dimenticati" (7). Thus we have five stories, about four doctors, whose failure to heal not only the Other, but above all themselves, leads to a lonely confrontation with their own inadequacy. But the book must also be read as a macro-text, where the specific doctor is seen as a more global figure, and each story as part of a progression within the text. Pressburger hints at the unfair social burdens placed on the doctor, but his downfall is shown to be caused more by his failure to morally and spiritually empower himself through his experience with illness. Through his failure to meet the challenge of probing disease, Pressburger exposes the pathological contradictions of present-day existence and reveals a lack of healing, a flight from meaningful inquiry and personal expression.

It is no coincidence that the illness each doctor suffers from is mental disorder for it is "the ultimate self-expression that is

inevitably self-destructive” (Feder, 1980:xii). He who possesses socially and medically therapeutic goals but is himself in need of therapy, exposes the very fears we have of illness: “Illness is a real loss of control that results in our being the Other whom we have feared [...] Disease, with its seeming randomness, is one aspect of the indeterminable universe that we wish to distance from ourselves” (Gilman, 1986:2-4).

Pressburger’s doctor-figure possesses a binary temperament which oscillates between martyr and tyrant; between seeming medical omnipotence and chronic failure, and which is marked by a lack of power over the Other, and more significantly over himself. But Pressburger will also show that once we attempt to master our fear of pain and illness¹ then the experience of illness can capture the imagination and force new identity, as it had previously held the body hostage. Pressburger thus exploits illness as a metaphor for earthly suffering, but strives to illustrate the metaphysical and mystical opportunity it offers to improve one’s mental and physical well being.

Tormented by the paradox of healing the Other while incapable of healing his own identity, the doctor embodies the reversal of victor into victim, healer into patient, sane into insane. He is never quite up to the challenge of negotiating the diversity of illness, and never comes to know new life, nor the chance to atone for past inadequacies.

In the Preface, a key to reading this world of suffering is provided by a reference to the *Zohar*, the holiest book of the Jewish *Kabbalah*, whose literal meaning is ‘Receiving’: “The fact that the secrets of the universe are revealed through the study of Receiving tells us about the nature of existence [...] the Desire to

¹ As Erna, in the final story, will do through her capacity for reflection.

Receive is [the] dynamic process at the base of all physical and metaphysical manifestations” (Berg, 1988:19-20). We are born with nothing but our instincts and reasoning abilities. But what we do possess, perhaps the key to our survival, as Pressburger suggests, is a need to know and a powerful need for self-expression. Yet, as Pressburger demonstrates, these seemingly indelible primal imperatives become eroded, and in the case of the doctor, are violated.

Pressburger’s use of the *Zohar* indicates that there are tools of immense power, that in the face of crises, have the ability to resolve human afflictions by restoring each individual’s relationship with the Divine, for “man’s internal activities can determine external events”(Berg, 219). But they need to be “Desired” in order to be “Received” — Pressburger’s protagonists rarely succeed.

La legge degli spazi bianchi opens with a story of the same title which exposes the pathological contradictions of the doctor’s existence. With the death of his brother, Dr. Fleischmann has to learn by rote the recital of the *kaddish*, a Hebrew prayer honoring the dead. But he becomes aware of not being able to retain the words after nights of attempting to learn it, and at the cemetery, neither sound nor letter return to him. He embarks on memory courses and a manic-obsessive mission not to give in to illness: “Non servivano metodi, ipnosi, calcolatore; serviva la perentoria affermazione della verità del proprio essere: ‘lo sono qui, io esisto!’” (21). But this valiant attempt to combat illness is too late for illness “ha origine nel negativo metafisico e i suoi sintomi si manifestano come sottrazione d'essere”(21). When he is finally admitted to hospital, never remembering he even had a brother, all he says is “tutto è scritto negli spazi bianchi tra una lettera e l'altra. Il resto non conta”(24).

The doctor who fails to learn the prayer, is the doctor who fails to master the Word, to find meaningful inner vision through his medical past or spiritual contemplation. Significantly, the prayer, sung in mourning, does not refer to death. It is dedicated to G-d and to his transcendental power. It does not deal with the pain of the individual but with the union of every life to the eternal existence of G-d. Instead the doctor's obsession with the Word betrays him, for as he realizes on the verge of amnesia, it is not the Word that counts but the in-between silent spaces of meditation.

In the second story "Orologio biologico", Mr Polak, who no longer remembers anything (recalling the first story), is visited by a doctor who once was infatuated with the patient's wife, Adele and who in a reversal of affection, amorously turns to him, erroneously directing her plea for help to the carnal and temporal: "Salvami. Ti ho sempre voluto bene. È così difficile trovare qualcuno con cui confidarsi. Gli uomini muoiono tutti. Aiutami tu! [...] La malattia è una cosa terribile, viene fuori tutto il male"(31). Two days later he hears that the couple have died, suffocated by gas. Overcome by confusion², he becomes the next patient:

Di fronte alla totale incertezza circa il senso di tutto non ho trovato di meglio che darmi alla più antica espressione della desolazione: l'ubriachezza. [...] ho dovuto ritirarmi dalla professione; ho rubato, sono

² "Che cosa era successo alle molecole del mio corpo? [...] In tutto il mio sistema nervoso centrale si era prodotto un rivolgimento? Oppure l'orologio della vita cammina in modo per noi inconcepibile? [...] avrei potuto accettare le profferte d'amore della povera Adele Polak. Avremmo avallato o corretto un errore del meccanismo. Ma forse quel meccanismo può produrre soltanto errori che si perpetuano nel combinarsi e ricombinarsi di acidi da quando si è formata la prima molecola vivente. La vita stessa sarebbe dovuta a un errore" (34).

stato varie volte in carcere, in manicomio. [...] Puoi incontrarmi al mercato dove mi vedrai spazzare la sporcizia [...] spesso parlo da solo [...] e coricandomi per terra, sui cartoni, penso al mio amore e all'ingiustizia. Provo un dolore terribile. Spero che finisca presto. (34)

“Vera”, the longest story, opens with two epigraphs dealing with the Hebrew notion *Schekkinah*. The first: “I nostri Santi Maestri chiamano *Schekkinah* quella parte dell'essenza di Dio in cui la luce è diventata debole, per permettere agli angeli, alle anime di esistere” (37) and the second is from the *Zohar*: “Ecco perché la *Schekkinah* preferisce soffrire per la invasione dei demoni che la feriscono come punte acuminate, piuttosto che ostacolare la felicità eterna degli uomini” (37). The *Shekkinah*, a revelation of the holy in the midst of the profane, in Kabbalistic terms, is described as a daughter, a princess, a feminine principle.

Indeed at the center of this story is Vera who suffers from an epileptic-type illness and with whom the doctor becomes obsessed. She has had 3 brain operations, has not spoken for 3 years, and although she is 16 years old, looks only 6 or 7. Her expression is “del tutto privo di intenzioni e di significato, era d'una neutralità irresistibile” (40). The doctor becomes amorously involved with her mother, relinquishes contact with his wife, son and mother in America; loses all sense of time, and ultimately becomes “[u]n attonito essere attivo e passivo insieme, ma praticamente già al di fuori dell'esistenza” (84) for he is obsessed with trying to penetrate Vera's silence and indifference.

One day the mother forgets to give Vera her medication and Vera gains almost a normal mobility which she never had before. The doctor is overjoyed for he believed there was more to her

than silence. But when she has a seizure again, the doctor is shaken “in tutto il suo essere, come se fosse stata la morte stessa ad annunciarsi [...] Ma non la morte della bambina o la propria: la morte di tutto” (75).

She becomes imprisoned anew in indifference, and he, with an attitude of victim, attempts to destroy not only himself but Vera too: “Di nuovo vuoi farmi soffrire? Ma io non lo permetterò. E non permetterò al tuo sguardo di vedermi morto. Tu verrai con me, dovunque io vada, chiunque tu sia” (83). He gives both himself and Vera sleeping pills to kill both of them, which Vera obediently swallows. Before drinking it himself, he asks “dove andrò adesso? Nel nulla? Nel nulla senza nulla, o c'è un altro che mi sorveglierà ancora? Una risposta, prima che io non esista più. Una risposta, ti prego!” (84). In that moment she vomits up the liquid, her mother appears, hurls the glass away, and holds him tight to her chest. He rejects her and from that day he wanders the streets, is admitted to a neurological ward, then to a mental asylum, returns to America, and then participates in the Korean War. Vera and her mother move to the Terra d'Angeli district but

nessun documento attesta la loro permanenza in quel luogo. [...] il mondo esiste per mezzo del segreto. Nel sogno che il dottor Friedmann fece [...] parlò a lungo con [Vera], e lei con lui, ma nel risveglio le parole svanirono. Nulla testimonia il loro ritorno nella coscienza dell'illustre, quanto sfortunato uomo di scienza. (85)

In the fourth story, “Il morbo di Bahdy” a doctor sees three brothers, in different years — two die and the third has a chance of recovery. They all suffer from a rare case of tumor. When the

mother accuses the doctor of having killed her sons, the doctor too will question whether there exists hope in any Truth, especially that of Medicine. Despite recognizing similarities among the brothers³, the doctor's indifference is such that he doesn't use the first brother as a means of gaining insight into the second, and by the time he encounters the third, any attempt at curing him is too late. When the mother, who has been silent, exhorts the doctor to cure her third son, he realizes that he has done very little: "Che cosa avevo fatto io per salvare o semplicemente soccorrere quei due uomini? E il secondo dov'era?" (97). Both are already dead. The anguished mother questions him:

non le basta avermi ammazzato due figli, ora vuole [...] togliermi anche l'ultimo? Non ha un briciolo di coscienza, lei? [...] Lo aiuti, oppure ci lasci morire in pace, dottore. Era da tempo che avrei voluto dirglielo [e] con che coraggio lei può affermare che mio figlio non ha una malattia tanto grave? (98)

After this visit "la carriera ebbe un intoppo, vecchie inimicizie mi privarono della cattedra. Ora non me ne rammarico. Un medico, in fondo, cerca la verità. Senza la certezza della verità

³ Firstly, a physiological similarity: a rare tumor in the right leg, fatal in the first two cases. The second brother even refers to the first: "Ora tocca a me, [...] I sintomi sono [...] uguali" (92), and indeed the third speaks of the second in the way he had spoken of the first, using the same words "adesso tocca a me" (97). Secondly, the first two brothers come with a raincoat over their arm which grabs the doctor's attention for he interprets it as "un vezzo un po' aristocratico, oppure un sostegno alla scarsa disinvoltura dell'uomo" (89), and the second "[r]assomigliava moltissimo, nelle fattezze e nei modi - persino nel vestire - al primo" (90). Thirdly he notices that the first has "un aspetto starei per dire radioso" (88), the second, "una certa radiosità" (91), and then "ebbi per la terza volta, in tanti anni, la sensazione di trovarmi di fronte a una persona circonfusa da un'aura luminosa" (96). During his visit to the third brother, in a photo he sees "tutti e tre con quell'aria radiosa di cui non riuscivo ancora a dare una vera definizione" (95).

non mi riesce di praticare la scienza. Perciò vi rinuncio. [...] e aspetto”(99). The doctor who wanted truth, is the same doctor who doesn't delve deep enough for answers, nor for a cure. As he had practiced passively so he will wait passively.

The recurring antithesis between silence and questioning, and between authority and victimization, associated with the patient-doctor relationship, and the doctor-as-patient situation, indicates the doctor's inability to renew himself in newfound reflection and identity. In “Legge” the doctor's role of communication, highlighted by the prayer for the dead, becomes his affliction: the cessation of remembering capped by the silence of death. The antithesis is then picked up in “Orologio” by the silent suicide of the couple; by the doctor's initial silence and then his confession, once Adele is dead, that “un desiderio fortissimo mi prese di lei, della sua voce aspra e dolce, delle sue mani così come mi avevano accarezzato quella notte [...] Quel desiderio mi tormentava non meno del rimorso”(34). In “Vera” the narrative itself is divided in two opposing camps: the doctor's exhibition of pathological extremism, in contrast to Vera's hushed mother, and the silence of Vera herself.

The antithesis silence-questioning is also picked up by the doctor's indifference in “Bahdy”. He does not attempt in any way to confirm the three brothers' identity or difference by closing the gap between them, and self-destructs by not moving forward in his search for “la certezza della verità” (99). He has three opportunities to cultivate inner vision, to correct his reductionist attitude, but the result is a triple failure. His indifference, together with the brothers' own inexpressive composure, which although referred to as ‘radiant’ as if to hint at an allegorical enlightenment, eventually silences them forever. At the end, the doctor

perceives “dietro quella decenza radiosa dei tre fratelli l'impossibilità di parlare. La propria vita rimaneva incomprensibile a loro stessi. Esibire i loro mali, la forma della loro fine, sarebbe stata l'unica possibilità di comunicazione” (99). Even the mother’s muteness overrides her ultimate speaking out for it comes too late. Each patient passes without his voice being heard, just as the amnesic doctor’s Word is never achieved. But silence is the language of suffering which entails a shattering of language, or a “resistance to language which is not [...] incidental or accidental [but] essential to what it is” (Scarry, 1985:5)⁴.

By the end of each story, Pressburger makes it clear that the central problem is not illness but a false sense of moral superiority and an apparent self-exemption from moving toward some constructive sense of identity as an equal participant in existence. The predicament of those who experience illness entails more than figuring out how to learn the prayer, or figuring out what the illness is. Like the *Zohar* is a symbolic reflection of the inner metaphysical realm through which one could perceive the hidden mysteries of our universe, so too the narrative of the doctor or patient cannot be taken as tales relating simply to the lives of individuals. Even though each story has an element of ‘poor patient/poor doctor’, the greater sense is loss of the opportunity to be saved by the possible construction of a more balanced identity.

The ideal that by honouring our physicians perhaps we pay tribute to what we hope is the best within ourselves, is questioned. Pressburger’s doctors exemplify the kind of identity which never finds the balance to counter pathological tendencies

⁴ “[P]ain - unlike any other state of consciousness - has no referential content. It is not *of* or *for* anything. It is precisely because it takes no object that it, more than any other phenomenon, resists objectification in language” (Scarry, 1985:5).

and male egotism. But nor do his female characters who go from seduction (Adele) to maternal purity (the three brothers' mother) to a kind of prostitution in the case of Vera's mother. They either lose their male counterparts to illness, or the father/husband is never mentioned, or through her offspring she proliferates disease. The female characters come to represent the opposite of diversity: sameness. They are ultimately one character type, who promises the new yet delivers the same, and is a dialectical image of the futile proliferation of repetition and emptiness pervading society. Like the repetitive monologues of the amnesic doctor, Adele's repeated calling out to the doctor, and that of Vera's mother, lead them to the same dead-end as the doctor's. But the sameness she embodies is also her silence (the brothers' mother rarely speaks, Adele is silenced by suicide; Vera is mute) and amidst the verbal disorder of the doctor, this becomes an interruption of sameness. Her silence underscores his mind-numbing disorder.

In contrast, the patient-figure embodies the eruption of diversity into everyday sameness : in Adele's husband's case, it is incongruous behavior; in Vera it is repressed abnormality; in the three brothers, it is an irregularity in triplicate. Because they don't have, or have relinquished obsessive and scientific thought, they have the greatest potential for genuine reflection, for reconstituting ordinary consciousness, as figuratively signified by their illness. Their outcry seems to attain the communal resonance of a parable, where illness occupies more than individual significance.

The doctor too, once he becomes the patient will also embody diversity in the form of deviation from the norm and derangement. He who embodied repetition, indifference and sameness will now depict its antithesis. His mental confusion

becomes a negative self-reflectiveness, where the body and brain turn within instead of outwards. He who did not look deep enough for answers, now as patient, is guilty of an individual and collective amnesia⁵. Not perceiving the circumspect ways in which truth may be glimpsed, he interprets his failure to perform, his lack of faith, especially in Science, to mean that there is nothing left other than final resignation.

As supposed figureheads, the doctors never really extol the virtues that learned enlightened men should cultivate. Instead, in the last story, it is Erna, the most simple of characters, who counters the obsessiveness and narcissism of the doctor figure which spans four stories. The story, significantly entitled "Scelte", records moments of illumination, suspending its pathological dynamics in images of parabolic truth: Erna has inner vision, and this gives her the choice of her lifetime when she experiences the death of her husband. The hints of parable encountered previously are now summed up in a story whose quality is that of a paradigm which conveys a general truth about life.

⁵ It would be inaccurate to not give due credit to the colossal albeit failed attempt at reflection of the amnesic doctor in "Legge". The narrative itself reinforces his attempt: in her reexamination of modern narrative, Dorrit Cohn emphasizes the analogical structure of the "narrated monologue" where a character's thought is presented "as if he were formulating it in his mind," even though "the words on the page are not identified as words running through his mind" (1987:103). The narrative thus achieves a non-identical correspondence between character and narrator that makes the latter a kind of spectator and just such a vigilance emphasizes the presence of, or attempt at, observation and reflection. Additionally, the doctor in "Bahdy" does attempt to understand the brothers' death in metaphorical terms: "[Capisco ora] che le malattie e la forma stessa d'una morte altro non sono che simboli. Non è il meccanismo che conta [...] ma ciò che il meccanismo vuole esprimere. In questo senso la nostra vita sarebbe soltanto il preambolo insignificante di un'unica verità verso cui tutto confluirebbe e che noi saremmo capaci di indicare soltanto con le malattie del nostro corpo, e, in definitiva, con la nostra stessa morte" (98-99).

“Scelte” spans 80 years in which Eugenio and Erna are married for 40; she is 65 when he dies and the story ends with her at 98. She is a religious Jew and the seamstress serving the prostitutes on via Conti; he is a diligent typographer, completely absorbed by his work. He also bets on the horses, but his greatest vice is food in unthinkable quantities.

After their son, Aaron, leaves home, Eugenio requires an operation on his rectum as if, physically and symbolically, he has been blocked by his son’s departure. But their greatest pain is when Aaron departs for Canada, after which Eugenio, one day, loses his entire pension on the horses, as if “volesse la propria rovina prima che l'Eterno gli ordinasse di scendere dalla sua scacchiera” (108). Not having the courage to face Erna, he disappears for days while Erna thinks he’s gone mad, but vows “[n]on mi farà diventare scema [...] Se lui è impazzito io non voglio seguirlo su quella strada” (109)⁶. She eventually finds him, cap at his feet, begging. After dragging him home, he confesses to having lost not only the money but his dignity, to which she responds “[c]he sia per il bene” (109). But Eugenio gets fatally ill: the disease of his rectum has now moved to his bones.

At his funeral, the self-possessed Erna turns to the coffin and with undramatic acceptance of death says “portami presto via di qui. Mi hai sentito? Beh, ciao” (113). When Aaron writes asking her to join him, she goes to the cemetery and explains to Eugenio that, yes, she had said that she wanted him to call for her, for life without him nor Aaron was meaningless. But now she wants an extension, she likes coming to chat to him and she

⁶ In line with the sense that she chooses not to be a victim and not to be sick, when Eugenio, distressed by Aaron’s departure, is intolerant towards her, she is unfazed, simply saying “Sei impazzito, Eugenio?” while “cancellandolo dal suo mondo” (108).

wants to experience the world from 'down here, not up there'. She wants to continue to be useful, for "c'è qualcuno che potrà avere bisogno di me [...] sai che mi piace assistere ai malati, non mi disgusta nulla. E puoi avere bisogno di me anche tu. Chissà, da quassù. Non ti dimenticherò mai" (113). She writes to Aaron about her choice to not join him but to neither join Eugenio, and to remain alive. Faithful above all to herself, she lives to 98 years old.

Erna is neither medical figure nor patient, and her qualities are the antithesis of those encountered thus far: her dedication to those closest to her contrast with the previous egotism and indifference. She pursues truth rather than calling. Furthermore she takes over, in a primary role, from the preceding female characters, and unlike them, moves beyond the death of her male counterpart, in order to come into her own. Although Eugenio is diligent, he is indulgent as symbolized by the food he gorges. Instead her diligence and belief in a higher power leads her to being contemplative of others, of G-d and of herself, as exemplified in her constant prayers, themselves an act of meditation. For example, at the Jewish Ball "si affidava al destino, cioè alla volontà dell'Eterno. La trovò Eugenio. Lei gli disse subito di sì. La sua mancanza di attrattive fisiche era, per Erna, la garanzia d'un matrimonio che non le riservasse le stolide emozioni degli innamorati e degli amanti" (104).

Her devout essence keeps her rational at the height of suffering: at Aaron's departure, she says "anche gli uccelli, quando spuntano loro le ali, se ne volano via dal nido. L'Eterno ha ordinato che fosse così. Perciò non fare lo stupido. Vieni, andiamo a letto"(106). Her repetitive use of the term "Eterno" has to do with reflection in Jewish mysticism, as G-d is the

Endless One and not the Beginningless One. If He were called the Beginningless One, it would be impossible to even begin to speak about Him. But to some extent, it is possible to comprehend Him through His creation. This is a beginning, but it has no end. (*Zohar*, text in Kaplan, 1986: 303)

Her greatest moments of inner vision come through her self-reflectiveness, in her talks with the dead Eugenio and in her writing to Aaron, where she says: "Onestà e rispetto per me sono tutto, sono la vera dimostrazione dell'amore [...] Il mio posto è qui: ecco la mia scelta. [...] Ti penserò sempre ma non me ne andrò mai da qui, resterò sempre vicino a tuo padre [...] Ma parliamo d'altro", and she closes with, "che l'Eterno benedica i tuoi passi"(114). Where Eugenio might have chosen to die, she chooses to change her mind about joining him, and chooses to live. She then chooses to not follow her son but to follow her heart. Illness and loss become empowering for her choice is to be her own person.

Unlike the mothers before her, she actualizes in a healthy body and mind a purity of feeling and an inner ability to mature into a new identity which protects her from illness and from self-destructing. Erna doesn't get ill because she wills it this way, and because she constantly reflects on a higher power, which is factored into her life from youth. Because of this, she doesn't fear life nor death, for all is godly and endless to her, as opposed to the doctor who gives into the fear of a lack of control, and therefore fears life. Too fearful of changing, he drives himself insane. Insanity is his way of staying stuck, of not taking responsibility for his own life.

Ultimately this story is about the spiritual rather than the scientific: medical science is a minor aspect in dealing with

illness, it is instead questioned and seen as conflicting with religion and mysticism, and the absence of the doctor figure is significant. Here the antithesis between silence and questioning is broken. Pressburger's patient, whose illness and diversity signify a gesture of reflection, exemplifies in a negative guise, what Siegfried Kracauer calls "the simple man" who inhabits "a Utopia of the in-between" (in Vieth, 1993:18). Likewise the doctor when he becomes the patient and a case for diversity, has discoveries in which he too, briefly encounters the "in-between" where one must be "content to think in images" (in Vieth, 1993:19), but the questions he asks, go unanswered. This becomes his madness. A fine rendition of Kracauer's 'simple plain figure', Erna's difference are her reflections, her faith, her choices, which carry the utopian force of powerful yet practical proposals once derived from the classical story or parable.

Pressburger thus portrays illness along the lines of the older model of illness as a moral deficiency, an imbalance of life's forces and fluids, but in addition he strives to reform this view by presenting illness as a challenge to probe life's mysteries. For Pressburger, illness is untreatable by the doctor who is indifferent in the face of other-worldly powers and thought. Illness has a moral coefficient that, as symbolized by the doctor's relinquishing of Medicine, impedes the growth of medicine as a discipline. Jeffrey Meyers' statement that "the effect of disease on a victim is both the realistic subject of [a] book and the symbol of moral, social or political pathology" (1985:1) mirrors how Pressburger attempts to transcend the level of social criticism of pathology. His work focuses instead on the metaphysical and mystical realm of life and death, and although it questions human power in the Universe, a growing and fulfilling identity and a 'happy ending' are possible.

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