

Spanish flu ended a century ago: references in historiography and art

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Abstract. Spanish flu worldwide appeared for the first time between 1918 and 1919 and Italy has definitely been one of the most heavily affected country. It exactly ended a century ago causing the death of at least 50 million of people according to some authors. Our attention is particularly addressed to the world of art and historiography and to all those works in which a connection with this biological tragedy can be found; the production of books concerning this specific issue has considerably multiplied in the last two decades.

Key words: spanish flu, Richard Collier, Piero Chiara, Edvard Munch

The most terrible pandemic, popularly known as *Spanish flu*, has recently completed its first century. In 1918, while the war, which claimed a large number of lives, was almost over, another terrible tragedy happened in Europe. Spanish Flu worldwide made its first appearance between 1918 and 1919, causing the death of at least 50 million of people according to some authors, after having affected about a billion people. Italy was definitely one of the most heavily affected country, with a mortality rate that ranked second only after the Russian one; from statistical and authors' sources we estimate that more than four and a half million of people were affected in our country, between 375.00 and 600.00 victims (at that time the Italian population was just below 36 million people). According to data from the Central Statistics Office of Rome the deaths caused by the flu in Italy in 1918 were 274,041; however, these data do not consider all those deaths due to bronchopulmonary complications in patients affected by the flu. The economist Giorgio Mortara, by adding the data recorded by the military authorities, calculated that the total deaths in Italy caused by the Spanish flu were about 600,000 (1). In Europe the impact of the virus on people - which

were already completely torn by the Great War- was very terrible making Spanish flu seem even more terrific. Moreover the medical science at that time had no means to defeat it (2). For about a year the whole world was devastated by the flu which ended only in the spring-summer of 1919.

In 2018, the celebrations to commemorate this tragedy were numerous; several authors have recently rediscovered the Spanish flu as a research topic subsequently turned into books. Through this writing we do not want to retrace the epidemiology, etiology and symptomatology of Spanish flu, nor the implications it had for the civil and military population; our intent is actually to investigate how art and historiography dealt with Spanish flu, and thus becoming historical and archival sources on which researchers can base their studies.

We must immediately state that, even if Spanish flu was one of the most terrific pandemics in history, it found it difficult to find room within literature, historiography and art contexts. "*The Plague of the Spanish Lady October 1918 to January 1919*" (published in Italy by Mursia in 1980, under the title "*La malattia che atterrì il mondo*"), printed in 1974, was the first book in



Figure 1. R. Collier, *La malattia che atterri il mondo*, Mursia editore, Milano 1980.

which the effects of the disease were reported for the very first time.

The author, Richard Collier (1924-1996), an English writer and war correspondent, retraced in detail the different phases of Spanish flu and its effects, by interweaving historical events with soldiers and civilians' personal experiences, based on hundreds of testimonials from all over the world.

The work gives information about the pathology and tells tragic and moving tales of those who were infected or took care of the dying instead. We also find all those curious news concerning the aetiologies written by astrologers, who actually attributed the cause of the disease to the planet Jupiter or the star sign Leo. For scientists in Quebec, the flu was caused by the cold and rainy summer, for European ones instead, by the hot and dry summer. There were those who spread also

particular remedies: charlatans and healers proposed the sacred stones of the temple of Kyushu in Japan or a bottle of river water with the mud of Ipoh in Malaysia; in Sweden instead it was believed that white surgical gowns were able to absorb and defeat Evil. In the States, instead, it was suggested to put sulphur inside the shoes, tie cucumber slices to the ankles or keep potatoes in the pockets to prevent infection (3). Collier's book naturally followed the medicine of that time, which had no means to act against the terrific developing of this plague. The cover of the Italian 1980 edition was very particular since it showed a satirical figure published in the newspaper "Avanti", in Milan, and made by Giuseppe Scalarini: the "flu bacillus" was represented with the figure of Napoleon with folded arms, who seemed to be very satisfied being "The conqueror of Europe".

The term "bacillus" refers to a generic germ, since the medicine at that time had not yet discovered the Spanish flu causative organism, which was subsequently identified with the acronym A / H1N1.

The reference to Europe did not actually correspond to reality, since the first cases of the pandemic were reported, in the early 1918, in the States, subsequently in Europe and finally, during the summer months of the same year, in China, India, Japan and Australia. Also the subtitle of the 1980 book (*Storia della "Spagnola", il terribile flagello che uccise in pochi mesi 20.000.000 di persone*- The story of Spanish flu, the terrible plague that killed 20,000,000 people in a few months) is the result of science and statistics of that time; unfortunately the number of deaths for Spanish flu was actually over twenty million. Collier did a great job by collecting testimonies and through historical bibliographic research, but let us not forget that, unfortunately, his communication and research were fully linked to the knowledge of that time.

In Italy, Piero Chiara (1913-1986) gave a precious testimony about Spanish flu, through the brief tales "Le corna del diavolo" - The devil's horns- (1977), dedicating a short chapter to the disease, which told what happened when the virus came in the countries along the valleys and the shores of Lake Maggiore.

During those years Chiara was a five years old child and lived in Luino (Varese), the town where he was born (4). For the writer it was a very tragic expe-

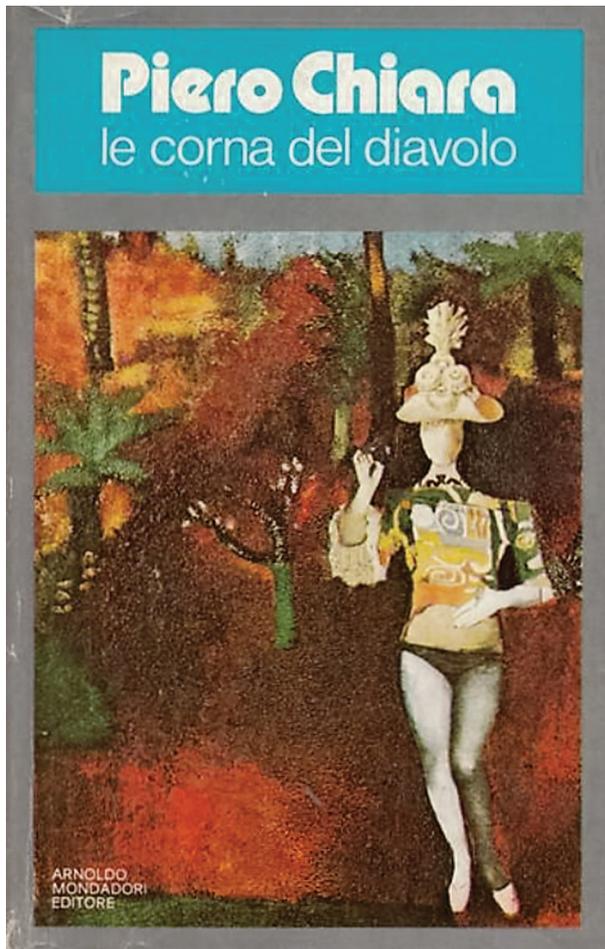


Figure 2. P. Chiara, *Le corna del diavolo*, Arnaldo Mondadori editore, Cles (TN) 1977.

rience defined by him as “*the direct route*” due to its rapid evolution and how fatal his prognosis was. He also used to call it “*a real pestilence, such as that of earlier times*”. Fear of death, the popular belief and the lack of effective new medicines led the population to rely on unconventional therapeutic remedies, including amulets, medals, precious stones and potions.

The cult of saints was also usual and the belief that the use of wine and grappa against infection considerably increased the number of alcoholics. Many Chiara’s acquaintances therefore left their homes choosing to find refuge in the mountains and in the shepherds’ huts while trying to escape illness and death. In the late 19th century, Luino, like many other Italian towns and cities, became a holiday resort thanks to railway connections, where numerous hotels were built which

then, during the flu epidemic, became places of shelter for the soldiers who fell ill while engaging on the fields of battle.

Even the writer’s family, who lived near one of these hotels converted into hospitals, was infected and marked by some deaths. His beloved mother did not escape from the disease and healed after a long period, while his father, committed to looking after relatives and friends, did not have time to raise his little son Piero, who started going to the hotel-shelter near home, unaware of the risks he could face.

He could feed on what the soldiers gave him in exchange for odd jobs or on some loaf of bread or soup leftover found in the rooms where the sick were hospitalised. He was often assigned to post letters or make small purchases and buy lard, bacon, mountain cheeses, dried chestnuts and peanuts. Those were times of shortage both for the war and for the flu pandemic that was spreading and Piero Chiara’s story and experience can be considered as a slice of daily life, able to tell in detail the health and economic situation of those days. In April 1919, Spanish flu stopped and the survivors, marked by both the war and the disease, gradually repopulated the streets of the towns.

The art world rarely offers testimonies of Spanish flu. Only Edvard Munch (1863-1944), Norwegian painter, author of one of the most famous paintings in the world, “*The Scream*”- 1893, painted two self-portraits during the period in which he contracted the disease, at the end of 1918, and then he healed. In the first canvas, “*Self-portrait after the Spanish Flu-1919*”, Munch portrayed himself as a sick person in his room; the use of colour and technique fully express the different phases of the disease: the death approaching, the defeat of evil. The painter portrayed himself as a weak person, meeting the viewer’s gaze through a sort of witness of events, wrapped in a dark robe, with thinning hair and an olive complexion, while sitting on a chair by an unmade bed. The paint strokes are simple and the use of his own figure’s dark tones, in contrast with the light ones of the background, gives and expresses a feeling of restlessness and confusion in a fragile man. His face is almost indefinite and anguished and mouth, nose and eyes are just hinted. In the second oil painting of 1919-1920 Munch painted a close-up of himself, through a great use of colours he represented

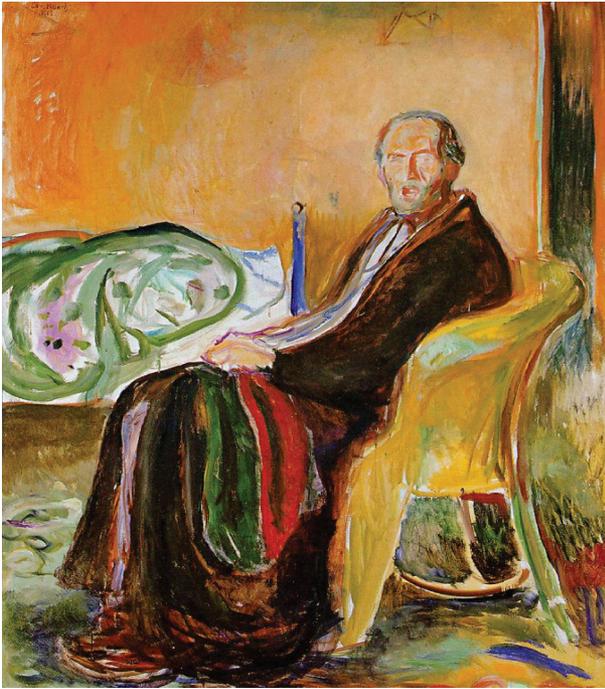


Figure 3. Self-portrait after the Spanish Flu 1919, Edvard Munch, Munch Museum, Oslo.



Figure 4. Self-portrait after the Spanish Flu, Edvard Munch, 1919-1920, Galleria Nazionale, Oslo.

his sunken dark face, due to the lack of oxygenation probably because of bronchopulmonary complications, and a blank stare, tried by illness. His figure is defined by black and grey colours, in marked contrast with the red of the carpet that lies on the floor. These two self-portraits are part of the late phase of Munch's works, also known as *"the author of anxiety"*, which is well rep-



Figure 5. Arrivo della signora febbre spagnuola, watercolour by Friar Menotti, september 1918, Biblioteca Nazionale, Bari.

resented through these paintings; with these works the painter returned to take care of himself, his humanity and his pain of living.

As for Italian art, we know a watercolour by Friar Menotti, dated September 1918, *"Arrivo della signora febbre spagnuola"* – When Spanish flu arrived- today preserved at the National Library of Bari. It is an allegory that represents the personification of the flu pandemic; a Spanish woman dressed in mourning wear is depicted in the middle of the canvas, holding a basket full of skeletons in her right hand and a coffin in the left one. Above the lady, visibly sad and painted in dark colours, an little owl is flying; the background is portrayed in cold colours and depicts a cemetery surrounded by grey cypresses and a man intent on making wooden coffins, waiting for the numerous deaths which will soon arrive laying on that stretcher next to him.

This particular sort of collective oblivion, which involved the literary world but also the historiographical and the artistic one and the information and history manuals (including those of the History of Medicine), created an information vacuum maybe truly wanted by the population that suffered this immense tragedy.

The pain of losses, the shock of illness, the stress and fear that reached inside people's minds were not appropriate to write books or painting canvases. It was a pandemic consisting of many personal tragedies; probably the population only wanted this scourge to slip into oblivion, without the need to create "tangible memories", being able to forget and start living again, which was actually really complicated, considering that they were also just coming out of the terrifying war experience.

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