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‘As others feel pain in their lungs’: Albert Camus’s *The Plague*

Hedley Twidle

for D.B. (1981-2020)

This is an account of reading Albert Camus’s *The Plague* in the wake of various real-world epidemics, and from a place, South Africa, that emerges as a kind of mirror image of the north Africa in which the novel is set. It suggests that what seems at first like a simple story is in fact a deeply complex, even contradictory work: one that that absorbs and reflects back as much history and difficulty as the reader is willing to bring to it. While giving postcolonial critiques of the work their due, I explore how and why *The Plague* still holds energy and meaning for a 21st-century audience.

Keywords: Albert Camus, Algeria, illness and its metaphors

1.

In 1947, Albert Camus published *La peste*, the story of a town struck by bubonic plague. He judged the book a failure, but *The Plague* is probably his most successful and widely read work.

In one sense it is a simple story. Rats come out of cellars and sewers, spitting blood, and begin to die in the streets. Then people begin to die. The town is sealed off and we follow the experiences of a small band of characters as they battle the epidemic. Like a classical tragedy, the book is divided into five acts. In parts one and two, the death toll is rising; in part three it is at its height: ‘the plague had covered everything’ (239).¹ In parts four and five, the disease slowly retreats, and the town is liberated again. Amid the celebrations, the narrator strikes a note of foreboding: ‘He knew that this happy crowd was unaware of something that one can read in books, which is that the plague bacillus never dies or vanishes entirely’ (237).

The opening lines stress the ordinariness of the setting, the French Algerian port of Oran where Camus arrived in 1941 for tuberculosis treatment, and where he began gathering material for the book:

The peculiar events that are the subject of this history occurred in 194–, in Oran. The general opinion was that they were misplaced there, since they deviated somewhat from the ordinary. At first sight, indeed, Oran is an ordinary town, nothing more than a French Prefecture on the coast of Algeria. (5)

This short prelude introduces what is in one sense an allegorical 'everytown'. The daily routines of money and love-making, sea-bathing and newspaper reading are charted in a coolly objective, transparent style: 'the style of absence which is,' as Roland Barthes remarked of Camus's prose, 'almost an ideal absence of style' (*Writing Degree Zero* 77). Further down the page are the most quotable lines, which demonstrate his way with an aphorism: 'A convenient way of getting to know a town is to find out how people work there, how they love and how they die' (5).

The opening section of *The Plague* might touch off various moments of recognition, depending from where you read it. I find some answering echoes in the city where I live. Cape Town mirrors the latitude of Oran and was also once a colonial port. It is also a business-minded, tourism-driven place, at least in the oversold city centre, which is 'ringed with luminous hills' but 'so disposed that it turns its back on the bay, with the result that it's impossible to see the sea, you always have to go and look for it' (trans. Gilbert 3–4).

Camus's narrator suggests that there still exist towns and countries where people have now and again an inkling, or an intimation, of something different: *le soupçon d'autre chose*. A hint, a dash, a suspicion or smidgeon. On the whole, he goes on, it might not change their lives, but at least 'they had an intimation, and that's so much to the good' (6) Oran, on the other hand, appears to be *une ville sans soupçons, c'est-à-dire une ville tout à fait moderne*: 'a town without inklings, that is to say, an entirely modern town' (6).

Like so much else in the book, the confident simplicity of the writing is deceptive. The words let on more, betray more and perhaps know more than their author ever intended. The 'peculiar events' of the novel are indeed 'not in their place'. They are misplaced in a complicated and painful sense, with major consequences for how one interprets the book, and whether the great humanist credo that it arrives at can be believed in: 'to say simply what it is that one learns in the midst of such tribulations, namely that there is more in men to admire than to despise' (237).

The opening lines of *The Plague* contain, in embryo, the whole problem of a literary work that tempts you to read it as a kind of universal fable, an allegory of human suffering, stoicism and resistance – but also stubbornly refuses to give up its allegiance to, and imaginative possession of, an actual place. Today the port of وهران (Oran or Wahran) is the second-largest city in Algeria, with a population of around a million people. In nineteen forty-something, it was the town with the biggest population of French Algerians, or *pièds noirs* (of which Camus, born 1913 in Algiers, was one). The pejorative term, 'black feet,' was possibly derived from the boots of the French army that began the conquest of this vast North African territory in 1830: a brutal imperial venture notorious for the military strategy of *razzia* and *ratissages* – punitive raids on Algerian villages.

And why the blank in '194–'? The convention is more common for proper names, signifying someone or somewhere familiar to the author but lightly or partially disguised for the reader. It is really Oran itself that the opening lines should have rendered as 'O–'. That might have avoided some difficulties. Because when you try to place the book – to properly situate it in its historical moment, and in North Africa – *The Plague* becomes a deeply complex, even contradictory work: one that absorbs and reflects back as much history and difficulty as the reader is willing to bring to it.

2.

'On the morning of April 16, Dr Bernard Rieux emerged from his consulting-room and came across a dead rat in the middle of the landing.' This sentence at the start of chapter two could

also be a workable first line. *The Plague* has a double beginning in this sense. We move from the distant, generalized register of the first chapter into the mesh of individual human lives and destinies. It begins once as moral fable, and then again as medical thriller.

The five movements of *The Plague* generally follow this structure: first a brief prelude in the voice of collective opinion (*de l'avis général*), then the dive into plot. Like the overture to an opera (and the book does contain one: Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*), the preludes introduce general thematic ideas that will then play out in actual human lives and bodies. The exception is the third movement, when the plague is at its height, which is narrated entirely in the voice of generalized experience.

As soon as we leave Rieux's consulting-room, we meet the old concierge, M. Michel, who is convinced that the dead rats are some kind of practical joke – this is Patient Zero. Dr Rieux is the main character; in fact he is also the narrator, but we only learn that towards the end of the book. For now (if we stay within the realist frame), he is narrating his experience in the third person, while also explaining how it is that he has the authority to tell the story:

Of course a historian, even if he is an amateur, always has his documents. The narrator of this history has his documents: first of all, his own testimony, then that of others since, by virtue of his role in this story, he came to collect the confidences of all the characters in it; and, finally, he had written texts which he happened to acquire. He intends to borrow from them when he sees fit and to use them as he wishes. He intends ... But perhaps it is time to have done with preliminaries and caveats, and turn to the story itself. The narrative of the early days must be given in some detail. (8)

Here is the punctilious, sometimes pedantic tone of *The Plague*, giving us fiction packaged as documentary (a device that goes right back to the origin of the European novel as a kind of false document). After this briefing on the factual basis of what we are about to read, the rest of part one records the 'troubling signs' of the approaching epidemic, while also introducing us to the five main characters. The narrator is like a midfielder moving the ball quickly and accurately around the football pitch – perhaps in the Spanish style of swift, accurate passing that replaces individual showboating for a dogged collective effort. (Camus was a keen player and there is some football chat in the book.)²

First we meet the journalist Raymond Rambert. He is stranded in Oran while on assignment and missing his lover back in Paris. Camus, who obviously split off portions of himself into his ensemble cast, was similarly stuck when he went to central France to recuperate from TB in 1942. With the Allied landings in North Africa in November of that year, the German army occupied the south of France to secure the Mediterranean coastline. Camus was sealed off from his wife and from Algiers.

In letters, Camus described *The Plague* as emerging from a struggle for breath; it was also, he said, a response to a world without women. It is certainly a very male book (but not, I think, a masculinist one) and largely sexless. Dr Rieux's wife (unnamed) leaves Oran just as the story begins. She is going to a sanatorium out of town for treatment; they bid farewell at the train station, promising to make a fresh start on her return. Her place is taken by Rieux's mother, a watchful, largely silent presence who helps take care of her son and his apartment during the epidemic.

Madame Rieux's stoic silence must hold something of Camus's own mother, Catherine Hélène Sintés, who lost her husband in the First World War and during Albert's childhood

cleaned houses in the working-class district of Belcourt. Catherine Camus was illiterate, partially deaf, with a speech impediment that meant she hardly spoke. When her son died in a car accident in 1960, at age 46, a briefcase containing a manuscript titled *Le premier homme* was retrieved from the wreck. Only brought into print in 1994 (by Camus’s daughter Catherine), *The First Man* evokes a colonial, French Algerian childhood in all the historical texture, social detail and depth of field that seems so absent from *The Plague*. Camus had dedicated his unfinished manuscript to his mother: *To you who will never be able to read this book*.

There is a curious moment just as Rambert is introduced. He tells Rieux that he is ““doing an investigation for a large Parisian newspaper about the living conditions of the Arabs”” and wants information on their health situation (11). Rieux asks the journalist if he can tell the whole truth, by which he means ““an unqualified indictment”” (*condamnation totale*): ““I can only countenance a report without reservations, so I shall not be giving you any information to contribute to yours”” (11–12).

Next we meet Jean Tarrou, a newcomer to Oran, living in a hotel in the city centre and a great lover of swimming. He keeps a notebook, and this is one of the documentary sources that the narrator employs. In counterpoint to the growing tension of the plague plot, Tarrou’s notebooks, with their ‘deliberate policy of insignificance’ (21), work to lighten the atmosphere. With an eye for the absurdity of everyday life, they record chance details and snippets of overheard talk.

Tarrou records how each day an old man comes out onto the opposite balcony, tears up bits of paper and scatters them over the edge, while calling to the cats in the side-street. When they come out and lift their paws towards this shower of white butterflies, he spits on the cats, ‘firmly and accurately’: ‘When one of his gobs of saliva hit the target he would laugh’ (22). Elsewhere, Tarrou proposes a kind of mock serious urban fieldwork reminiscent of Georges Perec and the Situationists:

‘Question: how can one manage not to lose time? Answer: experience it at full length. Means: spend days in the dentist’s waiting room on an uncomfortable chair; live on one’s balcony on a Sunday afternoon; listen to lectures in a language that one does not understand, choose the most roundabout and least convenient routes on the railway (and, naturally, travel standing up); queue at the box-office for theatres and so on and not take one’s seat; etc.’ (22)

Camus’s prose, wrote one early reviewer, was like Kafka written by Hemingway.³ Tarrou’s vignettes help to activate a Kafkaian strain of absurdity and dark comedy in *The Plague*. We watch as city authorities fuss over what to call the epidemic and attempt to deal with it in laughably managerial, bureaucratic ways.

We also get a reverse-angle portrait of the doctor-narrator when we read a quoted description of Rieux: ““He is absent-minded when driving and often leaves his car’s indicators up even after he has taken a bend. Never wears a hat. Looks as if he knows what’s going on”” (25). This is like the mirror in a van Eyck portrait: we catch a glimpse of the artist, reflected back in the course of depicting his main subjects: ‘As far as the narrator can judge, it is quite accurate’ (25).

The diaries are also performing another, as yet undisclosed, role in the book. Tarrou, who becomes a close friend of Rieux, will die of the plague, taken cruelly just as the epidemic is ebbing. So the passages that the doctor copies into his chronicle are also a kind of memorial and elegy for a lost comrade. This wry anthology of insignificant acts is edged by unspoken loss and grief.

The three other main characters are Father Paneloux (a Jesuit priest), Cottard (a shady character, probably a criminal, a man with something on his conscience) and Joseph Grand, an ironic name for a small, mild-mannered municipal clerk who tends to speak in clichés. We gradually learn (even though he is very secretive about it) that Grand has been at work on a novel for years, but never managed to get past the first line: ‘On a fine morning in the month of May, an elegant woman was riding a magnificent sorrel mare through the flowered avenues of the Bois de Boulogne’ (80).

“‘What do you think of it?’” he asks Rieux after divulging his secret and reading it aloud, while the sounds of curfew and civil unrest reach them through the windows (81). Rieux says diplomatically that the beginning makes him curious to know what will follow. Grand slaps the manuscript with exasperation:

‘That’s only a rough idea. When I have managed to describe precisely the picture that I have in my imagination, when my sentence has the very same movement as the trotting horse, one-two-three, one-two-three, then the rest will be easy and above all the illusion will be such from the very start that it will be possible to say: “Hats off, gentlemen!”’ (81)

A desire for a total and perfect mirroring, or mimesis, of the world in language: the very worst way to set about writing anything. The stuckness and stasis of Grand’s manuscript is literary microcosm for the suspended animation of the town: the same films are shown on a loop; the same blues records spin round in the cafes (*I went down to Saint James Infirmary / Saw my baby there ...*). The stranded opera company puts on the same Gluck tragedy each evening (at least until Orpheus falls down on stage, struck down by the plague in the middle of an aria).

Nonetheless, Grand will emerge as the unlikely hero of the book: the person who takes a major role in organizing the health teams that fight the epidemic. When he falls ill in part four and tells Rieux to burn his manuscript (which is just page after page of crossed-out first lines), we finally break out of the frustrated plotting and narrative cul-de-sacs that detain us so long in the middle of Camus’s novel. Grand unexpectedly recovers and begins a letter to his estranged wife. The plague graph begins to fall and we move towards a denouement: the ‘unknotting’ of the destinies of five solitary men – Rieux, Rambert, Tarrou, Grand, Paneloux – who all come to a greater understanding of human solidarity.

So: a novel within a novel, a diary within a diary, a tragedy within a tragedy – *The Plague*, which starts out by claiming to be an objective chronicle, is actually a hall of mirrors.

3.

A man is sitting in his car at an intersection when suddenly his field of vision goes white. The doctor who treats him also goes blind, and before long the ‘white sickness’ goes global. So begins José Saramago’s 1995 novel *Ensaio sobre a cegueira* (published as *Blindness* in English). When reluctantly selling the film rights, Saramago insisted that the city remain unidentified (in the movie it becomes a digital composite of Toronto, Tokyo and São Paulo) and the characters nameless: ‘The girl with the dark glasses,’ ‘The boy with the squint’ and so on.

Directed by Fernando Meirelles, the 2008 adaptation is not an easy watch. The sufferers are quarantined in a derelict asylum where all human decency soon breaks down into violence, intimidation, rape and the rule of the strong. Unsure about the blurry placelessness and heavy

seriousness of the film, *New York Times* reviewer A.O. Scott wrote that in *Blindness* ‘human civilisation is threatened by a sudden and virulent outbreak of metaphor’ (2008).

It’s tempting to use the same quip about Camus’s work. On publication, *La peste* was immediately read as an allegory for the ‘brown plague’ of Fascism in Europe, as well as the questions of resistance, collaboration and genocide that consumed post-war France. For a friend who had been in the concentration camps, Camus inscribed a copy: ‘To a survivor of the plague’. In his notebooks he suggested that the book ‘may be read in three different ways’:

It is at the same time a tale about an epidemic; a symbol of Nazi occupation (and incidentally the prefiguration of any totalitarian regime, no matter where), and thirdly, the concrete illustration of a metaphysical problem, that of evil. (qtd. in Todd 168)

This symbolic response to historical events has always had its detractors. ‘Camus’s world is one of friends, not of fighters,’ wrote Roland Barthes, who found its ‘ahistorical ethic’ troubling (‘La peste’ 544). Simone de Beauvoir felt that to equate the occupation with a natural scourge was ‘a way to escape History and real problems,’ and as a result, ‘everyone agreed too easily with the disembodied moral emerging from that parable [*cet apologue*]’ (144). As Tony Judt points out in his 2001 introduction, this accusation still surfaces in academic treatments of Camus: ‘he lets Fascism and Vichy off the hook, they charge, by deploying the metaphor of a “nonideological and nonhuman plague”’ (qtd. in Dunn 150: xiv).

If it’s wrong to transmute historical events and agents into a metaphorical plague, one can also level the criticism from the other direction: it’s wrong to make the very real suffering of disease serve as a symbol for anything other than itself. ‘My point is that illness is *not* a metaphor’ wrote Susan Sontag in her 1978 discussion of TB and cancer, ‘and that the most truthful way of regarding illness – and the healthiest way of being ill – is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking’ (‘Illness as Metaphor’ 1978). The work had emerged, in part, from her regret over describing Western imperialism as a ‘cancer’. Ten years later, she extended the argument to HIV/AIDS: ‘The age-old, seemingly inexorable, process whereby diseases acquire meanings (by coming to stand for people’s deepest fears) and inflict stigma is always worth challenging With this illness, one that elicits so much guilt and shame, the effort to detach it from loaded meanings and misleading metaphors seems particularly liberating, even consoling’ (‘AIDS and its Metaphors’ 1988).

For me, none of the above charges really stick when applied to a work as subtle and self-aware as *The Plague*. If imagining the Nazi occupation as a seething bacterial epidemic blurs the question of accountability, then perhaps this is because (as Judt points out) Camus’s work is suspicious of identifying and blaming too quickly. Or of allowing blame to dominate other, more diffuse questions about everyday accommodations to suffering and tyranny that do not resolve into the easy binaries of victim and perpetrator. In his reflections on ‘Paris Under the Occupation,’ Jean-Paul Sartre remembered the ‘instinctive humanitarian helpfulness’ that French citizens would find themselves showing to German soldiers, even while opposing Nazism:

We remembered the command we had given ourselves once and for all: don’t ever speak to them. But, at the same time, faced by these lost soldiers, an old humanitarian willingness to help awoke in us, and another command that went back to our childhood and which enjoined us to not ever leave a person in difficulty. Then, according to one’s

mood and the occasion, one decided to say: 'I don't know' or 'Take the second street on the left' and in both cases, one left unhappy with oneself. (3)

Granted, it is odd to read Camus's response to France's wartime experience and find no outright villains. Even Cottard, the shady criminal type who thrives under the plague, is treated with a kind of tenderness. But in the closing moments of the book, as we see him go down under the fists of the police, one senses Camus's scepticism about a post-war climate where individuals were being shamed as collaborators, becoming scapegoats whose publicly advertised crimes might have worked to draw attention away from more subtle and widespread forms of complicity.

As for the question of using disease as metaphor: on one plane the work does full naturalistic justice to the horrors of bubonic plague itself, and the long history of the bacillus *Yersinia pestis* in human affairs (so long that the word 'plague' is, of course, inescapably metaphorical). In the book-length version of *Illness as Metaphor*, Sontag actually exempts *The Plague* from her critique. The work, she says, is not really a political allegory:

Camus is not protesting anything, not corruption or tyranny, not even mortality. The plague is no more or less than an exemplary event, the irruption of death that gives life its seriousness. His use of plague, more epitome than metaphor, is detached, stoic, aware – it is not about bringing judgment. (147–8)

The sober narrator is all too aware of the rush to judgment that the plague brings, most obviously in the sermon by Father Paneloux. The Jesuit priest interprets the pestilence (in time-honoured religious fashion) as the language of God's displeasure: "Calamity has come on you, my brethren," he begins, "and, my brethren, you deserved it" (73). In the book's even-handedness, though, Paneloux is also a sympathetic character; or, at least, not a caricature (still no easy villains). Paneloux has made a study of Augustine (like Camus himself, who wrote a thesis on this African saint). And the second sermon he gives is a much more complex and compelling justification of religious faith. It is a chapter in which one can sense Camus wanting to give full weight to the spiritual counter-argument to his own secular vision. A much fuller weight than that given, for example, to the priest in *The Outsider*, none of whose certainties, says Meursault, 'was worth one strand of a woman's hair' (118).

The Plague, in other words, does not take the easy way out by imagining the worst. It does not scapegoat, nor does it tend towards the complete breakdown of social order that we see in *Blindness* and the many stories of apocalypse that modern human societies like to feed themselves: stories in which civilization is revealed to be (as the aspiring but cliché-ridden novelist Joseph Grand might have said) 'just a thin veneer'.

In an early chapter, Rieux stands at the window looking out at the town, both indulging and resisting the aura surrounding the word 'plague'. 'A word that conjured up in the doctor's mind not only what science chose to put into it, but a whole series of fantastic possibilities utterly out of keeping with that grey-and-yellow town under his eyes' (trans. Gilbert 37):

A tranquillity so casual and thoughtless seemed almost effortlessly to give the lie to those old pictures of the plague: Athens, a charnel-house reeking to heaven and deserted even by the birds; Chinese towns cluttered up with victims silent in their agony; the convicts at Marseille piling rotting corpses into pits; the building of the Great Wall in Provence to fend off the furious plague-wind; the damp, putrefying pallets stuck to the mud floor at

the Constantinople lazaret-house, where the patients were hauled up from their beds with hooks; the carnival of masked doctors at the Black Death; men and women copulating in the streets of Milan; cartloads of dead bodies rumbling through London’s ghoul-haunted darkness – nights and days filled always, everywhere, with the eternal cry of human pain. No, all those horrors were not near enough as yet even to ruffle the equanimity of that spring afternoon. The clang of an unseen tram came through the window, briskly refuting cruelty and pain. Only the sea, murmurous behind the dingy chequer-board of houses, told of the unrest, the precariousness of all things in this world. (trans. Gilbert 38)

Occasionally the restrained, even pedantic, narrative voice gives way to rhetorical set pieces like this. One can sense Camus the lyrical essayist seizing the controls from his alter ego Dr Rieux. But the passage conjures up these nightmarish images – climaxing with the plague-fires described by Lucretius, where Athenians fight each other with torches on the seashore to secure a space for the funeral pyres of their loved ones – only to set such visions aside.

Most of the time, *La peste* offers something much less sensational, much more humdrum: a lockdown, sometimes terrifying, but often just boring and frustrating, that we all have to get through after our own fashion: ‘The trouble is, there is nothing less spectacular than a pestilence and, if only because they last so long, great misfortunes are monotonous’ (138).

4.

In March 1900, a ship called the SS Kilburn arrived in Cape Town from the grain-exporting port of Rosario, Argentina. It was carrying fodder for the horses of the British army, then fighting against the Boer republics in the South African War.

Five crew members were ill and the captain had died a day before docking. A quarantine camp was set up in Saldanha Bay and the crew taken there under armed guard. But by September 1900, large numbers of rats were dying in the Cape Town docks. ‘The stench was unendurable,’ an officer reported to the Plague Advisory Board: ‘they had to have the floors up to remove the dead rats. He himself had seen numbers of sick rats coming out to the open in daylight, in a dazed state so that you could catch them with your hand’ (qtd. in Phillips 42–43).

In early 1901, a number of cases were reported among dockworkers who had been unloading the grain and fodder that harboured rats (and their fleas carrying the plague bacillus). Tented camps were set up: first on the beach, then at Uitvlugt Forest Station, a few kilometres away from the city centre. Using a Public Health Act introduced in 1883 after a smallpox epidemic, the city’s Medical Officer ordered that over 6 000 black Africans living in the city centre were to be forcibly removed from their homes and marched there.

Untouched by the sixth-century Plague of Justinian and medieval Europe’s Black Death, southern Africa was now part of the so-called Third Pandemic. It began in Chinese ports in 1894 and encircled the globe for the next decade, a seaborne epidemic carried along the global shipping routes established by European colonialism.

The southern African story, as told by Howard Phillips in *Plague, Pox and Pandemics*, makes for grim (and grimly predictable) reading. The outbreak provided authorities with an ‘unchallengeable opportunity’ to effect rapid, large-scale social engineering (60). At a time when the germ theory was radically changing ideas of disease transmission (but had not yet vanquished more nebulous ideas of plague being transmitted through miasmas and bad sanitation), authorities could draw on the ‘richest genealogy of fear in the Western psyche’ as a tool of

political expediency (Cradock qtd. in Phillips 40: 124). All of which was now further infected by the most harmful elements of colonial ideology: racial pathology, prejudice, scapegoating, stigma and paternalism.

In Cape Town, the tented camp at Uitvlugt became Ndabeni, the first ‘native location’ in the city. Special legislation was rushed through, preventing those detained there from living anywhere else. This was met with widespread protest, including rent and train boycotts. Slum dwellers in the city centre tried to prevent the removal of bodies; Cape Town’s Islamic community opposed the isolation of patients, and especially the handling of their dead by non-Muslims. Mounted police were called in to break up mass meetings against forced removals. ‘By what legal process or right of law or equity have you acted?’ asked community leader Alfred Mangena in 1901: ‘Let us assume a *vice versa* position and what would the white man feel and say?’ (qtd. in Phillips 60).

In retrospect, the arrival of plague in Cape Town can be seen as a catalyst and trial run for the political project – continuing throughout the 20th century via different methods and in different guises – which sought to unscramble a creolized port city into fixed racial blocs and then lock these down spatially. Responding to this prototype of apartheid’s Group Areas legislation, the *Cape Argus* speculated that the outbreak might have been ‘a blessing in disguise’ (qtd. in Phillips 61).

To tell the story of a deadly bacillus, parasite or virus – whether *Yersinia pestis*, malaria, HIV/AIDS, Ebola or COVID-19 – is to reveal, unerringly, the fault lines and psychopathologies of human societies. The question of disease is always political, and hardly a flight into disembodied allegory or apolitical moral fable. This is why *The Plague*, when read in the time of coronavirus, ‘doesn’t need the lens of metaphor to maintain its resonance’ (Williams 8). It is a work that has been re-literalized by global events and comes across, in one sense, as an all-too-plausible account of life under lockdown: ‘a malevolent holiday’ in which ‘a jittery simulacrum of normal life persists’ (Williams 8).

And yet for all its verisimilitude, Camus’s book retains a great and puzzling silence about its Algerian setting, and about the way that an epidemic would actually have played out in a colonial city like Oran: who would have been treated, and treated humanely, and who not.

5.

Why does Rieux refuse to help Rambert with his investigations into ‘the Arab quarter’? Why is the matter raised – and in the context of an insistence on the whole truth – only to be dropped?

For Conor Cruise O’Brien, writing in his 1970 Fontana Modern Masters series on Camus, the answer is simple. To include the Muslim, Arab and African inhabitants of Oran (and so to frankly acknowledge the colonial setting) would cause the allegory of resistance and oppression to break down. O’Brien suggests that it came naturally to Camus, because of his background and education, to think of Oran primarily as a French town, ‘and of its relation to the plague as that of a French town to the Occupation’:

But just below the surface of his consciousness, as with all other Europeans in Africa, there must have lurked the possibility of another way of looking at things – an extremely distasteful one. There were Arabs for whom ‘French Algeria’ was a fiction quite as repugnant as the fiction of Hitler’s new European order was for Camus and his friends. For such Arabs, the French were in Algeria in virtue of the same right by which the Germans were in France: the right of conquest. The fact that the conquest

had lasted considerably longer in Algeria than it was to last in France changed nothing in the essential resemblance of the relations between conqueror and conquered. From this point of view, Rieux, Tarrou and Grand were not devoted fighters against the plague, they were the plague itself. (47–48)

O’Brien’s short book lands a tremendous polemical blow. It did much to dislodge the Western idea of Camus as a kind secular saint, and to reveal how his works – most often read as universal, existential parables – are actually riven by the paradoxes of the colony. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said extends this idea of Camus as a late imperial writer who, in assuming the ordinariness of a place like Oran, comes to naturalize what was really a vast geographical and ideological fiction: that Algeria was part of France, even down to its French postcodes. For Said, Camus is someone who could never quite face the historical reality of Algerian nationalism, and whose work is profoundly marked by this imaginative failure. His writings, Said concludes, ‘express a waste and a sadness we still have not completely understood or recovered from’ (224).

In one sense, such charges are unanswerable. Oran does become a ‘partly unreal’ place, a ‘never was’ city in which the stuckness of quarantine might be figuring another kind of paralysis (O’Brien 49, 47). In the decade after the Second World War, Algeria entered a political interregnum in which the old order was dying and the new had not yet been born. This was a context in which, as Antonio Gramsci wrote in his prison notebooks, ‘a great variety of morbid symptoms appear’ (a line often applied to South Africa in the dying days of apartheid).

Yet it is not true that Camus was disengaged from the reality of a dying colonialism, and the question of what would come after it. He started his career as an investigative journalist for *Alger républicain*, writing exposés about how French policy had caused poverty and famine in Kabylia. And the analogy between Nazi occupation and French colonialism was not (as O’Brien claims) beyond the horizon of his awareness: he had made the point himself in an editorial of the journal *Combat*. In a piece of 10 May 1947, Camus denounced the ‘methods of collective repression’ used by the government in Algeria in the wake of anti-colonial protests, along with torture and all forms of racism:

Three years after having experienced the effects of a politics of terror, the French received this news with the indifference of people who had seen too much. Yet the fact is there, clear and hideous as the truth: we are doing in these cases what we reproached the Germans for doing. (*Actuelles I* 28).

The editorial, appearing in the same year as *La peste*, was titled ‘La contagion’.

So one can adduce evidence to refute the charges levelled by O’Brien and Said, and to defend Camus’s honour – but that is not really the point. The real quandary that *The Plague* presents is its ethic of non-violence amid the morbid symptoms of the late colony. In the wake of the French empire and the terrible conflict that brought it to an end, is Camus’s vision of human fellowship credible? And how does his steadfast refusal to justify ‘the necessary murder,’ or glorify any form of killing, read today, at a greater historical distance, and from a different part of the world?

6.

In 1961, Nelson Mandela, the ‘Black Pimpernel’ who was banned and in hiding from the apartheid regime, travelled to Morocco. In Oujda, just over the border from Algeria, he received his

first military training from the armed wing of the *Front de Liberation Nationale* (FLN). As with the massacres at Sétif in 1945 that had radicalized Algerian nationalists, the killings at Sharpeville in 1960 had made the African National Congress abandon its strategy of non-violent resistance: they were one of the last liberation movements in the world to do so. In *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994), Mandela wrote that the situation in Algeria ‘was the closest model to our own in that the rebels faced a large white settler community that ruled the indigenous majority’ (298). After his release in 1990, Algeria was the first country that Mandela visited; he never forgot the support that the FLN offered to the South African liberation struggle.

In this photograph from 1962, one sees the future icon of peace and reconciliation receiving guerrilla training from the revolutionary movement that had sworn to erase utterly the French Algerian culture into which Camus was born – such was the cruelty, bitterness and ideological polarization of the Algerian War of 1954 to 1962.

This was a political climate – structurally violent, highly militarized – in which Camus’s call for a civilian truce (delivered as hardliner *pieds noirs* shouted for his death outside the venue in Algiers) was regarded by many on the Paris left as hopelessly naïve. Camus’s language ‘had never sounded hollower than when he demanded pity for the civilians,’ wrote de Beauvoir: ‘The conflict was one between two civilian communities’ (qtd. in Horne 125). When she heard Camus’s statement after he won the Nobel Prize in 1957 – ‘I believe in justice, but I will defend my mother before justice’ – de Beauvoir was ‘revolted’ (qtd. in Horne 235). ‘Between justice and my mother, I choose my mother’: this was what Camus’s words were soon reduced to in the press, a formulation for which he was roundly mocked and condemned.

What he actually said was different from either of the two versions above:

I have always condemned terror. I must also condemn the blind terrorism that can be seen in the streets of Algiers. People are now planting bombs in the tramways of Algiers. My mother might be on one of those tramways. If that is justice, then I prefer my mother.
(*Algerian Chronicles* 216)

The whole meaning of the statement was held in the conditional premise (‘If that is justice’), but this did not survive the press paraphrases and subsequent polemics. ‘He was not sentimentally exalting his mother above justice,’ writes George Scialabba in a review of Camus’s *Algerian Chronicles*, ‘he was rejecting the equation of justice with revolutionary terrorism’ (2013).

After the failure of his 1955–1956 campaign for a civilian truce, and holding steadfast to his position – that no values can remain after a justification of torture or terror – Camus lapsed into public silence on Algeria, a silence seen as culpable by his detractors on the left. In private, he campaigned against the death sentence for Algerian freedom fighters, intervening in over 150 cases (Todd 399). But he could never accept the FLN’s version of nationalism, or the idea of Algeria as an essentially Arab nation. He viewed his native land as a polyglot society – partly Arab, African, Mediterranean, Jewish, indubitably French – and argued for a federation that would recognize and reconcile these elements. He believed (contra O’Brien) that 130 years of French settlement in Algeria had rendered the society like the one he grew up in ‘an indigenous population in the full sense of the word’ (*Algerian Chronicles* 3) – a comparable but more plausible claim lies at the heart of the white Afrikaans experience in South Africa. And finally, the poverty of Camus’s upbringing in Belcourt meant that he could not easily imagine himself or his family as colonial elites or oppressors. In Algiers, the telegram bringing news of his Nobel had to be read aloud to his illiterate mother.

‘Yes, there is beauty and there are the humiliated,’ he wrote in the essay ‘Return to Tipasa’: ‘Whatever difficulties the enterprise may present, I should like never to be unfaithful either to the second or the first’ (*Selected Essays* 153). It is one of several gnomic formulations in which one senses, even in the syntax, the impossibility of the undertaking – it can only be broached negatively, conditionally, hypothetically. After these lines, the essay continues: ‘But this still sounds like ethics, and we live for something that goes beyond them. If we could name it, what silence ...’ (153).

In his 2016 biography, Robert Zaretsky suggests that Camus’s silence over the war ravaging his native Algeria ‘did not transcend ethics. Instead, it flowed from his recognition that the humiliated were on both sides in this conflict: the great majority of *pieds noirs* as well as Arabs’ (86). This is, perhaps, something like the understanding that Nelson Mandela evolved during his long incarceration: of white Afrikaner nationalism as emerging from British colonialism and the humiliation of the South African War. This late imperial catastrophe would incubate apartheid thinking across the 20th century, with black South Africans becoming (as Edward Said claimed of the Palestinians) the victims of the victims.

For the exiled Algerian writer Assia Djebar, Camus was a Mandela-like figure: she read his campaign for a civilian truce as a moment in which Algerian history might have gone differently, a last chance for reconciliation instead of bitter violence. This is very different to Said’s idea of Camus as a late imperial writer unable to imagine a postcolonial future. In *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* (1985), Djebar classes him (with Frantz Fanon) as an annunciator of a history that never came to be, a herald of a lost possibility that he died too young to see so utterly lost. In *Algerian White* (1995), she keeps circling back to the unfinished manuscript of *Le premier homme* found in the car wreck that killed him, wondering what the book might have become.

7.

At the back of my mind when reading *The Plague* is always the sense that the histories of Algeria and southern Africa mirror each other in some ways, even as their paths out of colonialism and white minority rule are in another sense diametrically opposite.

In one case a suspended revolution and negotiated settlement; in another an eight-year war of liberation, one of the most violent and brutal of all the decolonial conflicts, in which between 400 000 and 1,5 million people lost their lives. In South Africa, a project of national reconciliation, based on the assumption that erstwhile victims and beneficiaries of apartheid were ‘condemned to live together’: a phrase from Camus’s 1955 ‘Letter to an Algerian Militant,’ his friend Aziz Kessous (*Algerian Chronicles* 114). In North Africa, the expulsion of virtually the entire population of French Algerians (and Algerian Jews) after the FLN government took power in 1962 (and warned the *pieds noirs* that they could leave either via *la valise ou le cercueil*: with a suitcase or in a coffin). The torture, atrocity, spiralling violence, reprisals and the targeting of civilians on both sides of the conflict had by that time made any negotiation or reconciliation unthinkable.

In a 1996 preface to his book on the Algerian conflict, *A Savage War of Peace* (1977), Alister Horne begins at Tipasa, the site of the Roman ruins where Camus had asserted the ‘invincible’ or ‘unconquerable’ summer that lay at the heart of his being. Horne points out how the beauty of the place ‘casts a deceptive cloak over a much more ferocious past,’ as the violence of the Algerian Revolution spills, retroactively, into Camus’s lyrical essay:

For it was on a sunny beach close to Tipasa that French women and children, as well as men, were machine gunned as they bathed by freedom-fighters of the Algerian FLN. At Zeralda, just a few miles to the east, Algerian suspects died in a French torture camp; and it was from the barracks of Zeralda that rebel units of the elite French paras launched a nearly successful coup against President de Gaulle's Fifth Republic in April 1961. (12)

In the same year, 1961, that *la guerre d'Algérie* almost precipitated a right-wing coup on French soil, Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* appeared with a preface by Sartre. The preface seems partly addressed to his old adversary; though one wonders if Sartre would have published it in this form, had Camus still been alive:

In Algeria and Angola, Europeans are massacred at sight. It is the moment of the boom-rang; it is the third phase of violence; it comes back on us, it strikes us, and we do not realize any more than we did the other times that it's we that have launched it. The 'liberals' are stupefied; they admit that we were not polite enough to the natives, that it would have been wiser and fairer to allow them certain rights in so far as this was possible; they ask nothing better than to admit them in batches and without sponsors to that very exclusive club, our species; and now this barbarous, mad outburst doesn't spare them any more than the bad settlers. (17-18)

How different this is to Sartre's earlier reflections on occupied Paris, and the 'instinctive humanitarian helpfulness' that Parisians found themselves offering, despite themselves, to German soldiers. In writing about what he had lived through, Sartre's language is measured, reflective, humane, alert to moral complexity, ambiguity and failure. But in addressing violence far removed from his own experience, Sartre's prose has taken on another tone:

They would do well to read Fanon; for he shows clearly that this irrepressible violence is neither sound and fury, nor the resurrection of savage instincts, nor even the effect of resentment: it is man re-creating himself. I think we understood this truth at one time, but we have forgotten it – that no gentleness can efface the marks of violence; only violence itself can destroy them. The native cures himself of colonial neurosis by thrusting out the settler through force of arms. (18)

Sartre's preface is torrential, passionate, scornful. It brought Fanon's work to a wider European audience, but perhaps also traduced it. Fanon wrote from the experience of a psychiatrist treating those damaged by the violence of the colony, both as victims and perpetrators, and on both sides of the conflict. Nothing in his writing approaches the kind of relish Sartre shows here: a glee in violence seen and celebrated from afar. Out of a self-appointed sense of historical necessity, it is working – polemically but also with a sense of unmistakable rhetorical self-satisfaction, even pleasure – to justify the indiscriminate killing of men, women and children. In other words, it is infected with the plague bacillus.

Contrast this with the preface that Camus wrote to his 1958 collection *Algerian Chronicles*, his last published statement on his native land. The book was met with deafening silence at the time. The author's embattled humanism seemed impotent and irrelevant in the wake of revelations of widespread torture by the French army. But how does it read today?

The truth, unfortunately, is that one segment of French public opinion vaguely believes that the Arabs have somehow acquired the right to kill and mutilate, while another side is prepared to justify every excess. Each side thus justifies its own actions by pointing to the crimes of its adversaries. This is a casuistry of blood with which intellectuals should, I think, have nothing to do unless they are prepared to take up arms themselves. When violence answers violence in a mounting spiral, undermining the simple language of reason, the role of the intellectual cannot be to excuse the violence of one side and condemn that of the other, yet this is what we read every day. ... Metropolitan France has apparently been unable to come up with any political solution other than to say to the French of Algeria, ‘Die, you have it coming to you!’ or ‘Kill them all, they’ve asked for it.’ Which makes for two different policies but one single surrender, because the real question is not how to die separately but how to live together. (*Algerian Chronicles* 28–29)

Sartre, de Beauvoir and their followers ‘won’ the battle with Camus at the time. Only violence, writes Sartre, never gentleness, can efface the marks of violence. The diagnosis, the whole tonality, of *The Plague* could not be more different. It carries the sense not of rhetorical victory but incipient moral failure. Written out of a personal reckoning with disease, Camus’s work is not a triumphal diagnosis; it reads instead as a record of what it means to live through the pain and contradiction of French Algerian history. Many times in his letters and diaries, Camus runs together the metaphors of his native land and his illness: ‘Sometimes I think of health as a great land full of sun and cicadas which I have lost through no fault of my own’ (qtd. in Todd 153). The blurring of private body and body politic reaches towards something not quite coherent or articulable, but deeply felt and deeply embodied: ‘Believe me when I tell you,’ Camus wrote to his radicalized friend Kessous as the conflict escalated, ‘that Algeria is where I hurt at this moment, as others feel pain in their lungs’ (*Algerian Chronicles* 113).

Ultimately, *The Plague* is a pacifist text (and unexpectedly, given that it emerges from the French Resistance). Whatever violence there is occurs in the background: heard as distant gunshots through the window as Rieux and Grand discuss the endlessly trotting horsewoman, or listen to Louis Armstrong sing ‘St James Infirmary’ one more time. This makes the work partly unreal, but also unfinished, in the sense that it is never finished saying what it has to say. Today, it stands as prescient of the painful historical irony borne out in so many postcolonial and post-conflict societies: when no limits are placed on the means being used to resist injustice, then the form of resistance to one form of the plague can become the carrier for the next outbreak.⁴

8.

‘A literature of failure is not a failure of literature,’ wrote Albert Memmi, reflecting on the French literature of the Maghreb.⁵ *The Plague* fails to resolve its internal contradictions or the noise within its allegorical schema. But Camus’s failings can seem preferable to the success of those intellectuals who cheered on murders and massacres from afar. He himself judged *La peste* a failure; but perhaps the ability to perceive this, and then to write from within it, is what carries the book’s wisdom.

“I was already suffering from the plague long before I knew this town and this epidemic” (189). In Tarrou’s confession to Rieux, just before they take a night swim together, the idea of a ‘healthy carrier’ is broached by the work (one of several moments when the text seems to half-

acknowledge the unspoken, colonial occupation that flickers on the edge of its awareness). Within the story, Tarrou is talking about living in a society that condones the death penalty. But his words reach further than that, and continue to reach out in a world where so much of what passes for politics rests on the desire to construct a simplified, less-than-human other – and then to argue for their removal, expulsion, cancellation, disappearance or death. ““And this is why,”” Tarrou concludes, ““I have decided to reject everything that, directly or indirectly, makes people die or justifies others in making them die”” (195).

When we hear, in the final section of *The Plague*, about the death of Tarrou, Rieux reflects that his friend ““had lost the game””: ‘But if so, what has the narrator of his history won?’ In his measured way (and how difficult to have brought off a novel with such a restrained narrator), Rieux answers:

All he had gained was to have known the plague and to remember it, to have known friendship and to remember it, to have known affection to have one day to remember it. All that a man could win in the game of plague and life was knowledge and memory. (224)

The work moves to close with a double ending (much as it had a double beginning). There is the hopeful motto about there being more in men to admire than to despise. And then the foreboding cadence of the bacillus never disappearing or vanishing entirely – a kind of suspended sentence hanging over the whole work. The famous last lines loop back into the work we have finished, inviting rereading: ‘He knew that this happy crowd was unaware of something that one can read in books ... ’ (237).

But much of the book’s life is actually held in the smaller, less quotable moments. ““Next thing they’ll be wanting a medal,”” says the old man who Rieux has been treating, watching the townsfolk celebrating, ““But what does it mean, the plague? It’s life, that’s all”” (236):

‘Tell me doctor, is it true that they’re going to put up a monument to the victims of the plague?’

‘So the papers say. A pillar or a plaque.’

‘I knew it! And there’ll be speeches.’

The old man gave a strangled laugh.

‘I can hear them already: “Our dead ... ”’ (236)

January 2019 – March 2021

Notes

- 1 All quotations are from the 2001 Penguin Modern Classics translation by Robin Buss, unless otherwise stated.
- 2 At one point we hear that ‘there is no finer place in the team than a midfielder’: ‘the centre-half is the one who positions the game and that’s what football is about’ (113). Though Camus himself took on the greater moral anguish of being goalie.
- 3 See Todd 155.
- 4 This formulation is adapted from Carroll (*Camus the Algerian* 55–6).

- 5 Memmi’s line from *Anthologie des écrivains français du Maghreb* (1969) is used by Carroll as an epigraph (‘Camus’s Algeria’ 517).

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