

On 'The Plague'

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Penguin Books has just published a new translation by Robin Buss of *La Peste*, by Albert Camus, and the text that follows is my introduction, written some months ago. Many readers will be familiar with its fable of the coming of the plague to the North African city of Oran in 194–, and the diverse ways in which the inhabitants respond to its devastating impact on their lives. Today, *The Plague* takes on fresh significance and a moving immediacy.

Camus's insistence on placing individual moral responsibility at the heart of all public choices cuts sharply across the comfortable habits of our own age. His definition of heroism—ordinary people doing extraordinary things out of simple decency—rings truer than we might once have acknowledged. His depiction of instant ex cathedra judgments—"My brethren, you have deserved it"—will be grimly familiar to us all.

Camus's unwavering grasp of the difference between good and evil, despite his compassion for the doubters and the compromised, for the motives and mistakes of imperfect humanity, casts unflattering light upon the relativizers and trimmers of our own day. And his controversial use of a biological epidemic to illustrate the dilemmas of moral contagion succeeds in ways the writer could not have imagined. Here in New York, in November 2001, we are better placed than we could ever have wished to feel the lash of the novel's premonitory final sentence.

The *Plague* is Albert Camus's most successful novel. It was published in 1947, when Camus was thirty-three, and was an immediate triumph. Within a year it had been translated into nine languages, with many more to come. It has never been out of print and was established as a classic of world literature even before its author's untimely death in a car accident in January 1960. More ambitious than *L'Étranger*, the first novel that made his reputation, and more accessible than his later writings, *The Plague* is the book by which Camus is known to millions of readers. He might have found this odd—*The Rebel*, published four years later, was his personal favorite among his books.

The Plague was a long time in the writing, like much of Camus's best work. He started gathering material for it in January 1941, when he arrived in Oran, the Algerian coastal city where the story is set. He continued working on the manuscript in Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, a mountain village in central France where he went to recuperate from one of his periodic bouts of tuberculosis in the summer of 1942. But Camus was soon swept into the Resistance and it was not until the liberation of France that he was able to return his attention to the book. By then, however, the obscure Algerian novelist had become a national figure: a hero of the intellectual Resistance, editor of *Combat* (a daily paper born in clandestinity and hugely influential in the postwar years), and an icon to a new generation of French men and women hungry for ideas and idols.

Camus seemed to fit the role to perfection. Handsome and charming, a charismatic advocate of radical social and political change, he held unparalleled sway over millions of his countrymen. In the words of Raymond Aron, readers of Camus's editorials had "formed the habit of getting their daily thought from him." There were other intellectuals in postwar Paris who were destined to play major roles in years to come: Aron himself, Simone de Beauvoir, and of course Jean-Paul Sartre. But Camus was different. Born in Algeria in 1913, he was younger than his Left Bank friends, most of whom were already forty years old when the war ended. He was more "exotic," coming as he did from distant Algiers rather than from the hothouse milieu of Parisian schools



Albert Camus; drawing by David Levine

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and colleges; and there was something special about him. One contemporary observer caught it well: “I was struck by his face, so human and sensitive. There is in this man such an obvious integrity that it imposes respect almost immediately; quite simply, he is not like other men.”¹

Camus's public standing guaranteed his book's success. But its timing had something to do with it too. By the time the book appeared the French were beginning to forget the discomforts and compromises of four years of German occupation. Marshal Philippe Pétain, the head of state who initiated and incarnated the policy of collaboration with the victorious Nazis, had been tried and imprisoned. Other collaborating politicians had been executed or else banished from public life. The myth of a glorious national resistance was carefully cultivated by politicians of all colors, from Charles de Gaulle to the Communists; uncomfortable private memories were soothingly overlaid with the airbrushed official version in which France had been liberated from its oppressors by the joint efforts of domestic resisters and Free French troops led from London by De Gaulle.

In this context, Albert Camus's allegory of the wartime occupation of France reopened a painful chapter in the recent French past, but in an indirect and ostensibly apolitical key. It thus avoided raising partisan hackles, except at the extremes of left and right, and took up sensitive topics without provoking a refusal to listen. Had the novel appeared in 1945 the angry, partisan mood of revenge would have drowned its moderate reflections on justice and responsibility. Had it been delayed until the 1950s its subject matter would probably have been overtaken by new alignments born of the cold war.

Whether *The Plague* should be read, as it surely was read, as a simple allegory of France's wartime trauma is a subject to which I shall return. What is beyond doubt is that it was an intensely personal book. Camus put something of himself—his emotions, his memories, and his sense of place—into all his published work; that is one of the ways in which he stood apart from other intellectuals of his generation and it accounts for his universal and lasting appeal. But even by his standards *The Plague* is strikingly introspective and revealing. Oran, the setting for the novel, was a city he knew well and cordially disliked, in contrast to his much-loved home town of Algiers. He found it boring and materialistic and his memories of it were further shaped by the fact that his tuberculosis took a turn for the worse during his stay there. As a result he was forbidden to swim—one of his greatest pleasures—and was constrained to sit around for weeks on end in the stifling, oppressive heat that provides the backdrop to the story.

This involuntary deprivation of everything that Camus most loved about his Algerian birthplace—the sand, the sea, physical exercise, and the Mediterranean sense of ease and liberty that Camus always contrasted with the gloom and gray of the north—was compounded when he was sent to the French countryside to convalesce. The Massif Central of France is tranquil and bracing, and the remote village where Camus arrived in August 1942 might be thought the ideal setting for a writer. But twelve weeks later, in November 1942, the Allies landed in North Africa. The Germans responded by occupying the whole of southern France (hitherto governed from the spa town of Vichy by Pétain's puppet government) and Algeria was cut off from the continent. Camus was thenceforth separated not just from his homeland but also from his mother and his wife, and would not see them again until the Germans had been defeated.²

Illness, exile, and separation were thus present in Camus's life as in his novel, and his reflections upon them form a vital counterpoint to the allegory. Because of his acute firsthand experience, Camus's descriptions of the plague and of the pain of loneliness are exceptionally vivid and heartfelt. It is indicative of his own depth of feeling that the narrator remarks early in the story that “the first thing that the plague brought to our fellow citizens was exile,” and that “being separated from a loved one...[was] the greatest agony of that long period of exile.”

This in turn provides, for Camus and the reader alike, a link to his earlier novel: for disease, separation, and exile are conditions that come upon us unexpectedly and unbidden. They are an illustration of what Camus meant by the “absurdity” of the human condition and the seemingly chance nature of human undertakings. It is not by accident that one of his main characters, Grand, for no apparent reason, reports a conversation overheard in a tobacco shop concerning “a young company employee who had killed an Arab on a beach.” This, of course, is an allusion to Meursault's seminal act of random violence in *L'Étranger*, and in Camus's mind it is connected to the ravages of pestilence in *The Plague* by more than just their common Algerian setting.

But Camus did more than insert into his story vignettes and emotions drawn from his writings and his personal situation. He put himself very directly into the characters of the novel, using three of them in particular to represent and illuminate his distinctive moral perspective. Rambert, the young journalist cut off from his wife in Paris, is initially desperate to escape the quarantined city. His obsession with his personal suffering makes him indifferent to the larger tragedy, from which he feels quite detached—he is not, after all, a citizen of Oran, but was caught there by the vagaries of chance. It is on the very eve of his getaway that he realizes how, despite himself, he has become part of the community and shares its fate; ignoring the risk and in the face of his earlier, selfish needs, he remains in Oran and joins the “health teams.” From a purely private resistance against misfortune he has graduated to the solidarity of a collective resistance against the common scourge.

Camus’s identification with Dr. Rieux echoes his shifting mood in these years. Rieux is a man who, faced with suffering and a common crisis, does what he must and becomes a leader and an example not out of heroic courage or careful reasoning but rather from a sort of necessary optimism. By the late 1940s Camus was exhausted and depressed at the burden of expectations placed on him as a public intellectual: as he confided to his notebooks, “everyone wants the man who is still searching to have reached his conclusions.” From the “existentialist” philosopher (a tag that Camus always disliked) people awaited a polished world view; but Camus had none to offer.³ As he expressed it through Rieux, he was “weary of the world in which he lived”; all he could offer with any certainty was “some feeling for his fellow men and [he was] determined for his part to reject any injustice and any compromise.”

Dr. Rieux does the right thing just because he sees clearly what needs doing. In a third character, Tarrou, Camus invested a more developed exposition of his moral thinking. Tarrou, like Camus, is in his mid-thirties; he left home, by his own account, in disgust at his father’s advocacy of the death penalty—a subject of intense concern to Camus and on which he wrote widely in the postwar years.⁴ Tarrou has reflected painfully upon his past life and commitments, and his confession to Rieux is at the heart of the novel’s moral message: “I thought I was struggling against the plague. I learned that I had indirectly supported the deaths of thousands of men, that I had even caused their deaths by approving the actions and principles that inevitably led to them.”

This passage can be read as Camus’s own rueful reflections upon his passage through the Communist Party in Algeria during the 1930s. But Tarrou’s conclusions go beyond the admission of political error: “We are all in the plague.... All I know is that one must do one’s best not to be a plague victim.... And this is why I have decided to reject everything that, directly or indirectly, makes people die or justifies others in making them die.” This is the authentic voice of Albert Camus and it sketches out the position he would take toward ideological dogma, political or judicial murder, and all forms of ethical irresponsibility for the rest of his life—a stance that would later cost him dearly in friends and even influence in the polarized world of the Parisian intelligentsia.

Tarrou/Camus’s apologia for his refusals and his commitments returns us to the status of *The Plague*. It is a novel that succeeds at various levels as any great novel must, but it is above all and unmistakably a moral tale. Camus was much taken with *Moby-Dick* and, like Melville, he was not embarrassed to endow his story with symbols and metaphors. But Melville had the luxury of moving freely back and forth from the narrative of a whale hunt to a fable of human obsession; between Camus’s Oran and the dilemma of human choice there lay the reality of life in Vichy France between 1940 and 1944. Readers of *The Plague*, today as in 1947, are therefore not wrong to approach it as an allegory of the occupation years.

In part this is because Camus makes clear that this is a story about “us.” Most of the story is told in the third person. But strategically dispersed through the text is the occasional “we,” and the “we” in question—at least for Camus’s primary audience—is the French in 1947. The “calamity” that has befallen the citizens of fictionalized Oran is the one that came upon France in 1940, with the military defeat, the abandonment of the Republic, and the establishment of the regime of Vichy under German tutelage. Camus’s account of the coming of the rats echoed a widespread view of the divided condition of France itself in 1940: “It was as though the very soil on which our houses were built was purging itself of an excess of bile, that it was letting boils and abscesses rise to the surface which up to then had been devouring it inside.” Many in France, at first, shared Father Paneloux’s initial reaction: “My brethren, you have deserved it.”

For a long time people don’t realize what is happening and life seems to go on—“in appearance, nothing had changed.” “The city was inhabited by people asleep on their feet.” Later, when the plague has passed, amnesia sets in—“they denied that we [*sic*] had been that benumbed people.” All this and much more—the black

market, the failure of administrators to call things by their name and assume the moral leadership of the nation—so well described the recent French past that Camus's intentions could hardly be misread.

Nevertheless, most of Camus's targets resist easy labels, and the allegory runs quite against the grain of the polarized moral rhetoric in use after the war. Cottard, who accepts the plague as too strong to combat and who thinks the "health teams" are a waste of time, is clearly someone who "collaborates" in the fate of the city. He thrives in the new situation and has everything to lose from a return to the "old ways." But he is sympathetically drawn, and Tarrou and the others continue to see him and even discuss with him their actions. All they ask, in Tarrou's words, is that he "try not to spread the plague knowingly."

At the end Cottard is brutally beaten by the newly liberated citizenry—a reminder of the violent punishments meted out at the Liberation to presumed collaborators, often by men and women whose enthusiasm for violent revenge helped them and others forget their own wartime compromises. Camus's insight into the anger and resentment born of genuine suffering and guilty memory introduces a nuance of empathy that was rare among his contemporaries and it lifts his story clear of the conventions of the time.

The same insights (and integrity—Camus was writing from personal experience) shape his representation of the resisters themselves. It is not by chance that Grand, the mousy, downtrodden, unambitious clerk, is presented as the embodiment of the real, unheroic resistance. For Camus, as for Rieux, resistance was not about heroism at all—or, if it was, then it was the heroism of goodness. "It may seem a ridiculous idea, but the only way to fight the plague is with decency." Joining the "health teams" was not in itself an act of great significance—rather, "not doing it would have been incredible at the time." This point is made over and over again in the novel, as though Camus were worried lest it be missed: "When you see the suffering it brings," Rieux remarks at one point, "you have to be mad, blind or a coward to resign yourself to the plague."

Camus, like the narrator, refuses to "become an over eloquent eulogist of a determination and heroism to which he attaches only a moderate degree of importance." This has to be understood in context. There were of course tremendous courage and sacrifice in the French Resistance; many men and women died for the cause. But Camus was uncomfortable with the smug myth of heroism that had grown up in postwar France, and he abhorred the tone of moral superiority with which self-styled former Resisters (including some of his famous fellow intellectuals) looked down upon those who did nothing. In Camus's view it was inertia, or ignorance, which accounted for people's failure to act. The Cottards of the world were the exception; most people are better than you think—as Tarrou puts it, "You just need to give them the opportunity."⁵

In consequence, some of Camus's intellectual contemporaries did not particularly care for *The Plague*. They expected a more "engaged" sort of writing from him and they found the book's ambiguities and the tone of disabused tolerance and moderation politically incorrect. Simone de Beauvoir especially disapproved strongly of Camus's use of a natural pestilence as a substitute for (she thought) fascism—it relieves men of their political responsibilities, she insisted, and runs away from history and real political problems. In 1955 the literary critic Roland Barthes reached a similarly negative conclusion, accusing Camus of offering readers an "antihistorical ethic." Even today this criticism sometimes surfaces among academic students of Camus: he lets fascism and Vichy off the hook, they charge, by deploying the metaphor of a "nonideological and nonhuman plague."

Such commentaries are doubly revealing. In the first place they show just how much Camus's apparently straightforward story was open to misunderstanding. The allegory may have been tied to Vichy France, but the "plague" transcends political labels. It was not "fascism" that Camus was aiming at—an easy target, after all, especially in 1947—but dogma, compliance, and cowardice in all their intersecting public forms. Tarrou, certainly, is no fascist; but he insists that in earlier days, when he complied with doctrines that authorized the suffering of others for higher goals, he too was a carrier of the plague even as he fought it.

Secondly, the charge that Camus was too ambiguous in his judgments, too unpolitical in his metaphors, illuminates not his weaknesses but his strengths. This is something that we are perhaps better placed to understand now than were *The Plague's* first readers. Thanks to Primo Levi and Václav Havel we have become familiar with the "gray zone." We understand better that in conditions of extremity there are rarely to be found comfortingly simple categories of good and evil, guilty and innocent. We know more about the choices and compromises faced by men and women in hard times, and we are no longer so quick to judge those who accommodate themselves to impossible situations. Men may do the right thing from a mixture of motives and may with equal ease do terrible deeds with the best of intentions—or no intentions at all.

It does not follow from this that the plagues that humankind brings down upon itself are “natural” or unavoidable. But assigning responsibility for them—and thus preventing them in the future—may not be an easy matter. And with Hannah Arendt we have been introduced to a further complication: the notion of the “banality of evil” (a formulation that Camus himself would probably have taken care to avoid), the idea that unspeakable crimes can be committed by very unremarkable men with clear consciences.⁶

These are now commonplaces of moral and historical debate. But Albert Camus came to them first, in his own words, with an originality of perspective and intuition that eluded almost all his contemporaries. That is what they found so disconcerting in his writing. Camus was a moralist who unhesitatingly distinguished good from evil but abstained from condemning human frailty. He was a student of the “absurd” who refused to give in to necessity.⁷ He was a public man of action who insisted that all truly important questions came down to individual acts of kindness and goodness. And, like Tarrou, he was a believer in absolute truths who accepted the limits of the possible: “Other men will make history.... All I can say is that on this earth there are pestilences and there are victims—and as far as possible one must refuse to be on the side of the pestilence.”

Thus *The Plague* teaches no lessons. Camus was a *moraliste* but he was no moralizer. He claimed to have taken great care to try to avoid writing a “tract,” and to the extent that his novel offers little comfort to political polemicists of any school he can be said to have succeeded. But for that very reason it has not merely outlived its origins as an allegory of occupied France but has transcended its era. Looking back on the grim record of the twentieth century we can see more clearly now that Albert Camus had identified the central moral dilemmas of the age. Like Hannah Arendt, he saw that “the problem of evil will be the fundamental question of postwar intellectual life in Europe—as death became the fundamental problem after the last war.”⁸

Fifty years after its first appearance, in an age of post-totalitarian satisfaction with our condition and prospects, when intellectuals pronounce the End of History and politicians proffer globalization as a universal palliative, the closing sentence of Camus’s great novel rings truer than ever, a firebell in the night of complacency and forgetting:

The plague bacillus never dies or vanishes entirely,...it can remain dormant for dozens of years in furniture or clothing,...it waits patiently in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, handkerchiefs and old papers, and...perhaps the day will come when for the instruction or misfortune of mankind, the plague will rouse its rats and send them to die in some well-contented city.

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1. Julien Green, *Journal*, February 20, 1948, quoted in Olivier Todd, *Albert Camus: Une Vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), pp. 419–420. ↵
2. The literary editor Jean Paulhan, meeting Camus in Paris in January 1943, noted how he “suffered” from his inability to return to Algiers, to “his wife and his climate.” Jean Paulhan to Raymond Guérin, January 6, 1943, in Paulhan, *Choix de lettres, 1937–1945* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), p. 298. ↵
3. “I am not a philosopher and I never claimed to be one.” In “Entretien sur la révolte,” *Gazette des lettres*, February 15, 1952. ↵
4. In his posthumous autobiographical novel *Le Premier homme*, Camus writes of his own father coming home after watching a public execution and vomiting. ↵
5. It is worth noting here that it was in Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, the very same mountain village where Camus was convalescing in 1942–1943, that the local Protestant community united behind their pastor to save the lives of a large number of Jews who took refuge among the remote, inaccessible farms and

hamlets. This uncommon act of collective courage, sadly rare in those years, offers a historical counterpoint to Camus's narrative of moral choice—and a confirmation of his intuitions about human decency. See Philip P. Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed: The Story of the Village of Le Chambon and How Goodness Happened There* (Harper and Row, 1979). ↵

6. See Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Viking, 1963). The point is well illustrated in Christopher Browning's study of mass murder on the Eastern Front in World War II: *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (Aaron Asher Books, 1992). ↵
7. In an early (1938) review of Jean-Paul Sartre's *La Nausée*, written long before they met, Camus observed: "The mistake of a certain sort of writing is to believe that because life is wretched it is tragic.... To announce the absurdity of existence cannot be an objective, merely a starting point." See *Alger républicain*, October 20, 1938. ↵
8. Hannah Arendt, "Nightmare and Flight," *Partisan Review*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (1945), reprinted in *Essays in Understanding*, edited by Jerome Kohn (Harcourt Brace, 1994), p. 133. ↵