

La Peste

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The existential crowd, headed by Sartre and Beauvoir, thought of Camus' *La Peste* as an allegory of the German occupation of Paris. This is stupid and pointless; an allegory is an encoding where certain things correspond to something else and much of the pleasure of reading it is to figure out the correspondence. For somebody reading it in time of the corona the natural thing is to take it literally. It is a fictional documentary of a plague hitting a town, named as Oran to which the author has ambivalent feelings, with the ensuing disruption of life caused by a confinement closing the town to the surrounding world. Much actually rings true, the initial alarm of a dramatic beginning slowly to be replaced with ennui and impatience as to when this state of affairs, which has lost its flair and excitement of novelty. Characteristic is that *Les journaux, naturellement, obéissaient à la consigne d'optimisme à tout prix qu'ils avaient reçue. À les lire, ce qui caractérisait la situation, c'était l'exemple émouvant de calme and sang-froid que donnait la population.* The epidemics persists for quite some time. In fact the first affected rat is spotted by the hero of the narrative, a certain dr. Rieux in the spring and first in February the next year does the plague retreat and things can return to normal.

Rieux is the hero, the hardworking doctor whose one concern is to treat his patients, ameliorating, giving comfort and ultimately to cure (it is not clear whether the latter actually lies within his power). Opposite him we have the pater Paneloux who delivers rhetorically brilliant sermons on the plague and how we need to submit ourselves to the will of God, and that it is after all in the nature of a punishment to which we should pay heed. To Rieux this is nothing but words, he has a much narrower conception of his duties, as described above.

Camus trained as a philosopher is clearly deeply influenced by Dostoevsky in making his fiction being the vehicle for moral lessons and philosophical meditation. There is a scene in which the death of an innocent child becomes the point of departure for moral reflection. Can God exist if he allows this? The classical argument on moral grounds against the existence of a God, at least one who is supposed to be both omnipotent and good. The pater is clearly shaken and as a result he invites Rieux to listen his next sermon when he will expound on the conflict between faith and medicine. Rieux obeys, but it is far from clear that the sermon has any effect on him, beyond that of indifference. The pater expresses views such as *Les souffrance des enfants était notre pain amer, mais sans ce pain, notre âme périrait de sa fame spirituelle.* Shortly after that the pater succumbs to the plague and dies.

Around Rieux there are a number of people. Grand, Cottard, Castel, Tarrou and the young journalist Rambert, a visitor who finds himself trapped in the stricken town and pleads with Rieux to be give a certificate to allow him to leave. Rieux informs him patiently that it is not in his power to do so. Rambert does not take no for an answer, he does not belong to the town he has no business being entrapped here. Rieux tells him

that as a journalist he has his work cut out for him here, to follow and to report on the epidemic. Rambert protests that he has no interest in his profession as a journalist, all what he desires is to be reunited with the woman he loves and from whom he has become forcibly separated. All the arguments that Rieux has provided against his leaving are too abstract and does not address the concrete situation in which he finds himself. Rieux concedes a point but will not budge. After that Rampert tries to get in contact with the shady underworld of the town, people dealing in contra-bands to be smuggled out. Several *rendez-vous* are arranged, money is being paid, but it is perpetually postponed. Finally it seems that it is going to work but at the last minute he changes his mind. The point being that in the interim he has occupied himself by being useful in various capacities to the work Rieux is engaged in, and over time it has given him a sense of mission of actually belonging to the town.

One of the characters, a certain Cottard remarks, that diseases and frights cannot accumulate. One serious sickness excludes automatically all others, as one fright blinds others. One surely cannot worry about more than one thing at the time. This is a matter of subjectivity, one may remark, and as such quite possibly true, but as to diseases, ostensibly far more objective, it smacks too much of wishful thinking.

Tarrou, a close friend of Rieux, responds to a question posed by the young love-sick journalist as to whether he is sincere. *À mon âge, on est forcément sincère. Mentir est trop fatigante.* Is lying really more exhausting than telling the truth? The point of lying is after all to evade responsibility and unpleasantness; on the other hand, it is an act of invention that outs demand on consistency and thus a good memory. There is a meditation on hard mental work, on really thinking on something, the immensity of effort involved, being pointed out by Bertrand Russell, as only being possible for a minute or so, and the really great men, having been able to keep on for two. Tarrou puts it in terms of really thinking of somebody as *Car penser réelement à quelqu'un, c'est y penser minute après minute, sans être distrait par rien, ni les soignes de ménage, ni la mouche qui vole, ni les repas, ni une démangeaison. Mais il y a toujours des mouches et démangeaisons. C'est pourquoi la vie est difficile à vivre.* And finally Tarrou again, who expresses his wish to be a saint, to which Rieux ripostes *Mais vous ne croyez pas en Dieu* and Tarrou sadly confirms *Justement. Peut-on être un saint sans Dieu, c'est le seul problème concret que je connaisse aujourd'hui.* Tarrou, with a hoist of similar words of wisdom, is one of the very last to succumb to the plague, at the time the danger is thought to have been gone. Rieux takes it hard, he has along with his knitting mother, nursed him the last day, and when he shortly thereafter learns by a telegram that his wife, absent at a sanatorium, has died, he has no longer any mourning strength left.