

DANTEAN 'FIGURA' IN CAMUS'S "THE PLAGUE"

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The main characters of Albert Camus's *The Plague* (1947) each interpret the disease differently. For Cottard, the epidemic represents a release from police suspicion and an opportunity to make money on the black market, Dr. Rieux considers the plague an enemy of life and happiness to be fought with complete dedication. To Jean Tarrou the disease exemplifies the universal forces, both human and natural, that kill unjustly while to the old asthmatic the plague is nothing less than life itself, the mentality of man accepted as the ground of all being. As one might expect of Oran's spiritual leader, Father Paneloux interprets the epidemic morally. Citing the plagues of the Old Testament as parallels, Paneloux maintains that the disease is both a punishment for Oran's spiritual laxity and an instrument of God's loving kindness; it is "a red spear sternly pointing to the narrow path, the one way of salvation."¹ In this way he eschews any natural explanation of its advent, either by the laws of cause and effect or by those of historical analysis. As experience, the epidemic is for him rather a sign or *figura* (to use the term of Biblical exegesis and medieval poetry) that points toward a greater reality and moral truth. Like the other plagues of sacred history, this outbreak has no particular but rather a general significance. Or, to put it another way, the particular significance of the epidemic afflicting Oran lies in the eternal reality it foreshadows and will be subsumed by. Within the novel, of course, Paneloux's view does not prevail. Dr. Rieux (the obvious spokes man of Camus's own position) rejects its acceptance

of the disease as a blessing. When later confronted with the horrible suffering of an innocent child, even Paneloux changes his position and finds a more desperate solace in the credo that God's will passes understanding. If the content of Paneloux's position is easily dismissed, his method of interpretation, which is grounded in the ancient traditions of the Church, is not. For Camus's own attitude toward history, as *The Plague* reveals it, is strikingly similar. By examining that attitude, we can better understand what has puzzled readers of the novel since its appearance: the form and meaning of the allegory it contains.

In "Create Dangerously" (1957) Camus best explains his ambivalence as an artist toward history. He rejects any wholehearted surrender to historical forces. Of course, he recognizes that the twentieth century writer can no longer afford the "irresponsibility" of a formalist retreat from the commercialism and soullessness of the self absorbed society he finds himself in. Like everyone else, the artist also finds himself embarked on "the contemporary slave galley." But the artist does his "compulsory service" ever mindful that, in banding too vigorously to his oar, he might lose both his oar, he might lose both his ability and right to create. For Camus, history is not a delusive abstraction that tears the imagination away from the universe within. As his essays, especially *The Rebel* (1952), prove, he is too political and moral a thinker, too much a concerned journalist to ignore the world without. Speaking as a writer, however, Camus rejects *engagement* as risky.

The danger posed by history is finally aesthetic. Camus proposes that artistic freedom depends on a delicate balancing act. In his dynamic if melodramatic image, the artist must maintain himself on a thin ridge above twin chasms: "frivolity and propaganda," the stylistic equivalences of a misguided retreat from and a self-destructive embrace of history. Camus sees the literature of the last two centuries dominated by these extreme positions, formalism and realism. He declares, however, that the writer who denies completely the world of his experience makes of fiction a solitary and meaningless recreation. But if the writer accepts history as the material *and* end of fiction, he aspires vainly to a power only divine, God (if He exists) is the only true and total realist. Camus likewise rejects socialist realism, which, even though it conceives a practical approach to style, must accept a lie about what is in order to shape what should be. The *engagement* demanded by realism and the contempt of the aestheticist for his milieu both deny the dialectic every writer must endorse. For the writer must believe that the world is simultaneously nothing and everything. He must embrace experience as the bond that ties him to others ("history," as the analysis of revolt in *The Rebel* suggests, is the intellectual

consciousness of that tie). But he must never cease to "revolt against everything fleeting and unfinished in the world."²

Camus's scorn for both socialist realism and ivory tower aestheticism, however, has often been underestimated by critics of his fiction. Two mistaken appraisals of Camus emerge. On the one hand, he becomes, like the protagonist of *The Stranger* (1942), a solitary celebrant of the "benign indifference of the universe," a romantic hero whose *anagnorisis* follows his contemptuous rejection of conventional pieties and bourgeois society. On the other hand, Camus becomes a writer whose fiction extends the partisanship of his journalism, a writer who conceives his novels as rhetoric in the service of social reform. These views present us with a Camus capable of only "frivolity" or "propaganda," but not a true artist.

They have spawned, moreover, criticism of Camus's fiction that either overemphasizes its formal and aesthetic qualities or its concern with political and moral issues. Such distortion becomes in the case of *The Plague* most acute, since this novel, more than his other works, takes contemporary history as its subject. Written during the last part of the war and published not long after its end, *The Plague* treats the occupation and subsequent liberation of France. As any reader of the novel is aware, however, to say that the history of France during this period is the "subject" of Camus's novel is to use the word in a much different sense than when, to take a relevant example, we use it to describe the relationship of the Shanghai rebellion to the events narrated and characters created in Andre Malraux's *Man's Fate* (1933). In *The Plague* Dr. Rieux tells of his experiences during an outbreak of bubonic plague in the French North African city of Oran. The event is strictly fictional, and in the novel no reference is made to the fall of France and its consequences. The experience of the beleaguered Oranians instead evokes the experience of the defeated French. The city is closed off from the rest of the world; radio messages daily beam in support for the suffering citizens; food is rationed, while guards with orders to shoot are placed at the city gates, concentration camps are set up to house those in quarantine, and a crematorium devours the bodies of victims, sending a pall of evil smoke throughout the town. Moreover, the plot turns on the organization of "sanitary squads" to resist the plague's inroads, although the disease's ultimate recession does not come as a result of their efforts.

The novel's setting and plot, we might say, are made in these ways an analogy of the events which are its ostensible ultimate subject. Camus, we must remember, took an active role, as editor of the clandestine paper

Combat, in the resistance to German occupation. But his experiences, unlike the similar ones of Malraux reflected in *Man's Fate* are displaced in favor of a fable that implies but does not, in any substantial sense, fictionalize them. In *The Rebel* he defines the world of the novel as a setting "where life assumes the aspect of destiny," where our desire for a *mythos* is at last fulfilled. Clearly, then, if the novelist's task is Aristotelian, is only to arrange action according to the form of action, then history should figure in *The Plague* much as it does in *Man's Fate*, as events to be illuminated which will in turn illuminate, as setting for characters who in their completeness and timelessness overcome the human limitations of endless becoming. Perhaps even more disconcerting is Camus's choice of the word *Chronique* to describe the book. For such a term seems to mock the abandonment of the historical setting and also overreach in its claim for attention to a narration which, without its carefully contexted implications, lacks any historical interest. The novel's style thus raises two questions. Why is the history (whose presence in the book so strongly insisted upon by Camus) so displaced that it becomes the "otherness" of allegory? And what are the stylistic and intellectual sources of that allegory?

Puzzled by the complex relationship between history and fable, critics have generally explained the novel as either a political document or "ordinary" fiction. Because they thought of Camus as the journalist not only on the side of the Resistance but of the social revolution which would restore post-war France, some contemporary readers accused him of formulating in the novel a "morality of the Red Cross" which, by equating the specific historical evil of Fascism with the natural evil of disease, sidestepped the ethical complexities posed by the experience of the war.⁴ They castigated Camus for an ivory tower retreat from difficult questions such as the use of force when such acts meant certain execution of hostages. More enthusiastic responses to the book, however, have generally come from those who either ignore or quickly pass over its "historical matter."⁵ But such criticism robs the novel of its context, reducing it to a morality play that unfolds *in vitro*. Most recent studies of the novel fall in this category. But such analyses leave unanswered the question asked by the novel's first audience, and Camus's own obvious intentions make this a question which needs answering. Why did Camus apparently choose to evade hard truths in *The Plague* when in *The Stranger* he faced squarely the implications of an absurd life?

The answer is that the novel is no evasion of truth, that it is not a discussion, framed in a meaningless subjunctive, of action and inaction

revolt and acquiescence. The allegory displaces history to clarify rather than distort its meaning. Camus argues for this effect with a quotation, ascribed to Daniel Defoe, that prefaces the narrative proper. One kind of imprisonment, Defoe declares, can be represented by another just as reasonable as anything which exists can be represented by something which does not.⁶ Camus here lets Defoe state the method he will follow, but not, of course, his reason for choosing it. For such an explanation we must turn first to his notebooks where, planning the novel he is about to write, Camus observes: "I want to express by means of the plague the stifling air from which we all suffered and the atmosphere of threat and exile in which we lived. I want at the same time to extend that interpretation to the notion of existence in general."⁷ After the novel's publication Camus reaffirmed this position in responding to criticism, speaking of the resistance fighters who find their fictional places in the novel, he declared that "doubtless they would do it again in the teeth of any terror, whatever its face, and terror has several, which is precisely why I named no single one in order to strike out at all."⁸

In part it is Camus's intention to convey the particular truth of his experience. To present that truth alone, however, is not enough. His experience suggests a general pattern that subsumes it. And because the general pattern has a relevance that, unlike the event that suggests it, is truly timeless, the pattern itself, cast in the form of a fable, becomes the novel's matter. In other words, *The Plague* presents an overwhelming truth that serves as an analogy for the limited truth which guides the artist's imagination. The war made Camus see that exile, suffering, and love are the essentials of the human condition, that resistance is not a conditioned historical response, but a universal and necessary reaction, that that evil is no transitory intrusion into the automatism of ordinary living, but, like the plague microbe which never disappears, is one of the grounds of being, inexorable in the demands it places upon the human spirit.

As a way of understanding evil, then, the plague is the opposite of a symbol. Literary symbols move from concreteness to a meaning otherwise undefinable or communicable; and it is that meaning, as the terms tenor and vehicle suggest, which justifies or necessitates the symbol's use.⁹ The plague as an image, however, allows Camus to make reference to an isolated historical event but at the same time establish its connection to an enduring moral condition. Such an image suits his aesthetic well. For the writer must avoid a commitment to history because that is a surrender to his material, to a limited being in time, to partial vision of human life. Formalism is

also unacceptable because it prevents the writer from "intending," from making the moral leap that the transcendence of history permits. Only on the thin ridge between these two extremes can Camus moralize as he does, endorsing the double truth of event and fable. He thus achieves a perfect balance between the formal, synthesizing activity of imagination and a faithfulness to the world of action.

In his discussion of the novel's style, Donald Lazere recognizes this deliberate tension between different spheres of meaning. But in terming that style "naturalistic allegory," he inadvertently indicates the difficulty not only in using the modern critical idiom to describe it, but also in tracing it to its antecedents.¹⁰ Aware of Camus's arguments against realism, Lazere apparently has used the term naturalism to explain the novel's "realistic" treatment of life in Oran. While Dr. Rieux scrupulously attends to the impersonal and close reportage associated with naturalism, the novel hardly presents an evolutionary or environmental model of human action, nor does it deal in any rigorously deterministic perspective on that action. Since naturalism as a mode of apprehending human behavior rejects idealism for positivism, one further wonders how the novel's displacement of history can in any sense be termed naturalistic. In short, "naturalistic allegory" seems a contradiction in terms. In addition, allegory itself is problematic. Although I have used it until this point to describe the novel's reference to history, allegory does not properly describe the relationship between event and fable in *The Plague*. For allegory generally means a narrative constructed upon a systematic and sustained symbolism of character, setting, and action. In particular, we associate allegory with such narratives in which human characters and representational settings "stand for" abstractions of one kind or another. Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and the *Romance of the Rose* are allegories of this type. But Camus does not use the plague as such a symbol. Moreover, the novel's narrative does not function as an allegory in the usual sense because fable and event do not work together as vehicle and tenor.

Lazere's "naturalistic allegory," however, is an interesting attempt both to describe the novel's style and categorize its literary ancestry. For Lazere correctly observes the balance between reference to historical conditions (naturalism) and reference to extrahistorical truths (allegory). One may deride Lazere's terms, but what other modern ones would describe more satisfactorily the novel's style as we have been examining it? This difficulty suggests that we must look elsewhere for possible models and influences.

Because Christian Poetry of the Middle Ages, particularly the *Divine Comedy*, provides us with a very close analogue to Camus's style, I would suggest an influence from that direction, even though this is a proposition

I can in no other way prove. Medieval poets developed a style usually termed figural realism (based ultimately on the fourfold interpretation of Scripture) which uses images to suggest the relationship between different levels of reality. In Biblical exegesis events in the Old Testament were seen as *figurae* or the "forms" of events or characters in the New; likewise those events and characters yielded a moral meaning appropriate to the individual life and an analogical one which pertained to the state of souls after the Judgement. Such interpretation differs essentially from the allegorizing classical texts had long been submitted to, for Moses, to take an obvious example, becomes a *figura* of Christ's redemption of mankind in his saving of the Israelites, but not a symbol, since his historicity and the meaning of that historicity are each preserved in the relationship between the two events.¹¹

Since poetry deals in fictions, what Dante calls "the truth disguised under a beautiful lie," the use of *figurae* there yields a somewhat different result. As Dante suggests, poetry tells the truth by lying. Thus the *Divine Comedy* traces the poet's imaginary journey through the three kingdoms of eternity, but this fiction, as a *figura* interpreted morally, also signifies, as Dante says, "man, in the exercise of his free will, earning or becoming liable to the rewards or punishments of justice."¹² The journey, however, is also a *figura*, of Dante's own spiritual crisis, the mental trek from despair back to reason and grace. And the poem, again as a *figura*, likewise traces the entire history of mankind from sin to salvation, as men learn the gifts of reason and grace and, with God's help, build the just city. In the *figura* itself the various meanings are established by context. Thus Virgil, for example, through the role he performs and the qualities he is made to display, signifies not only the Roman poet who inspired the imitation of Dante's epic, but also the voice of reason, the triumph of the Empire, and the sweet truthfulness of poetry itself.¹³

Elsewhere I have noted that Dante and Camus share a similar humanistic perspective, in particular the simultaneous endorsement of the unity of human experience and its inviolable individuality.¹⁴ In that essay I also suggested that the settings of both novel and poem function as images of ultimate truth. Camus and Dante portray human characters delivered to the ultimate laws that control their destiny, in the *Divine Comedy* the mystery of God's justice and in *The Plague* the inevitability of individual destruction. The imaginative structure of the two works, however, is close in another way. Like Dante, Camus sees individual and collective history as signposts on the road to a greater truth which completes their meaning. Dante's loss of Beatrice and Florence thus "works" much like Camus's enforced exile from his wife and his encounter

with Fascist evil. These personal troubles lead each writer to attempt a *mimesis* of the human experience. The three kingdoms of eternity and plague-ridden Oran can only be understood as images of the earthly city, images whose intent is nothing less than a universalization of human destiny. In *Malraux's Fate*, Malraux creates characters who in the typicalness of their selves and action are imagined, as the book's title suggests, to point outwards or symbolically toward the eternal laws they exemplify. For Malraux, as for other novelists contemporary with Camus, it is the fact which signifies not the idea signified that demands representation. In *The Plague*, as in Dante, this order is reversed through the use of figural realism, with the result that the reader's imagination is directed down from an all-consuming apocalypse to the particularity of *figurae*, experience of which we share, both individually and collectively, with the artist.

We can, I think, trace the allegory *The Plague* to two sources. First, as we have seen, Camus's attitude toward history derives from a dialectic whose extremes are the total acceptance and rejection of the world as it is constituted. Stylistically, this attitude toward history demands the balancing of the different claims of realism and formalism. *The Rebel* assigns the artist the Aristotelian task of delivering action to its form and thereby "perfecting" it in both senses, but the artist's burden, his obligation to reject, must, as both *The Plague* and *The Fall* (1956) establish, go further in the direction of moral principle in *The Plague*, which depends on the displacement of history, cannot, I think, be explained by Camus's conception of the artist's predicament alone. Camus's use of allegory cannot be traced to any of the novel's obvious sources, nor can it even accurately be described, as Donald Lazere's failure bear witness, in the modern critical idiom. The similarities between Camus's and Dante's conceptions of human history, however, suggest that in medieval poetry Camus discovered a mode of representation that could contain the reach of his moral vision. If the *Divine Comedy*, which Camus certainly knew well and was to use as one of the chief sources of his last novel, is also accepted as a source for *The Plague*, then we can more easily understand the difficulty critics have had with the novel's allegory, for it is an anachronism. Unlike many of *The Plague's* first readers, a medieval audience would have little difficulty in making the connection between the fable and the history figured by it; nor would such an audience permit itself a "formal" interpretation that empties the story of its real relevance to the pageant of human life. The distorting traditions of the realist novel and of formalist literature, however, make correct interpretation difficult, as Camus himself seems to have understood when he felt it necessary to explain his stylistic procedure after being accused of ivory tower moralism. In Dantean figural realism,

however, Camus did discover a style that suited the simultaneous rejection and acceptance of the world. For the image of besieged Oran, like the horror and unspeakable beauty of Dante's eternity, reveals the limitations of our particular vision as it validates its undeniable and irresistible concreteness.

Notes and References

1. Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Modern Library, 1948), P. 90.
2. Albert Camus, "Create Dangerously," trans. Justsin O' Brien in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961) P.564.
3. Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), 263.
4. For a full discussion of this controversy see Pol Gaillard, *La Peste: Camus* (Paris: Hatier, 1972), PP.28-31.
5. See for example, Adele King, *Camus* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1964), pp. 64-80.
6. Camus does not indicate the precise source of this quotation.
7. Albert Camus, *Notebooks: 1942-1951*, trans. Justin O Brien (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1936), P. 53.
8. Quoted in Gaillard, *op. cit.*, p. 31 (translation mine).
9. See William York Tindall, *The Literary Symbol* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1355), pp. 3-57.
10. Donald Lazere, *The Unique Creation of Aibert Camus* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), p. 173.
11. See Erich Auerbach, "Figura," in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (New York: Meriderian Books 1959), pp. 11-76.
12. Robert S. Haller, ed. and trans., *Literary Criticism of Dante Alighieri* (Lincoln, University of Nabraska Press, 19J3), p. 99.
13. See Auerbach, *op. cit.*, p. 71.
14. The Novel of Revolt, Humanism and Style in *The Plague*," *Renascence* 32 (1980) 67-78.

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