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# Foreground and Background: Three Literary Treatments of the Bubonic Plague

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FOREGROUND AND BACKGROUND:  
THREE LITERARY TREATMENTS OF THE BUBONIC  
PLAGUE

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Though many diseases bring suffering and death, plagues strike the imagination with special awe because they threaten death to whole cities and nations. So it is not surprising that novelists have treated of plagues now and then. A visitation of bubonic plague is the central event in Daniel Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* and Albert Camus's *The Plague*. In Alessandro Manzoni's *The Betrothed*, it is the culminating event, through which all the plot lines are finally resolved. Though much separates these writers, including language, culture, century, and philosophical outlook, each presents the plague accurately according to the scientific knowledge of his time, and despite changes in this knowledge, the portraits which emerge of the plague itself are remarkably similar. On the other hand, each author also seeks the human meaning within the disaster, and the human meanings which emerge are rather different, for against the background of a plague which is so similar in each, the three authors create a foreground containing strikingly different images.

As a character in all three works, bubonic plague has a remarkably similar "personality." In all three, it is strong enough to overcome whatever precautions the health authorities, regardless of their degree of knowledge about the disease, have taken. Once in control, it shows no moral or social discrimination, carrying off rich and poor, old and young, good and evil, clever and foolish. So devastating is the mortality that at the height of the plague, civil life is suspended and civil order is nullified. Then, after holding unchallenged sway, the plague suddenly diminishes in virulence (Manzoni 686; Defoe 253; Camus 246).<sup>1</sup> After tapering off, it vanishes as mysteriously as it had come, leaving survivors in the depopulated cities to find the meaning in their experience.

Different meanings are suggested in the telling of these stories by the different foreground scenes which are contrasted with the background in the three works. With these foreground scenes the writers suggest the human meanings to be found in the plague. Alessandro Manzoni (1785-1873)<sup>2</sup> was a devout Catholic who believed in Providence. In the background

his plague is amoral like all the others, but in the foreground, those events which suggest the workings of a beneficent Providence are emphasized. To begin with, the horrors of plague-ravaged Milan are shown through the eyes of Manzoni's protagonist, Renzo, a perspective with intrinsic ambivalence, for when the plague breaks out, Renzo is living elsewhere under an assumed name. Due to a complex series of injustices, there is a warrant out for his arrest in Milan. But by Chapter 33, the plague has paralyzed the government in Milan, where two thirds of the population is already dead (636), and known criminals strut about the city with impunity. Renzo, who is now immune to the plague, having contracted it and recovered, takes this unmatched opportunity to enter the plague-paralyzed city and seek Lucia, his fiancée. So Manzoni suggests the power for good will to make use of horrific situations.

Not that he softens the horrors. Milan's streets in places are littered with bloated corpses, for death runs faster than burial parties. Among the living, plague-paranoia is rampant, and those nobles who dare walk in the street carry pistols to shoot anyone who comes close enough to shed plague-poisons. But against this background, Manzoni chooses to dwell especially on one young mother who insists on observing some decencies. While others leave their dead lying or deliver them naked to the buriers, she comes forward carrying the corpse of her nine-year-old daughter, lovingly dressed, and pays a burier to see that she is "[laid] in the earth exactly as she is" (640). After he agrees, she tells him to come back that night for her and her remaining child, for she is sure they will both be dead by then (640). Much moved by this scene, Renzo prays, "Dear God, hear her prayer! . . . Take her to yourself, together with the little one! They have suffered enough!" (640). So Manzoni dwells on the beauty of courage under stress, while reminding the reader that in his vision, death is not in itself an evil.

Though amoral in itself, Manzoni's plague can be a sort of "judgment by revelation," for like a stroke of lightning, a plague-death illuminates everything around it, revealing surprising glory or shame in the life it brings to a close. The best example is Don Rodrigo, the callous and arrogant persecutor of Renzo and Lucia. Don Rodrigo has been spending his time in "debauch, to overcome the melancholy of the times," even though his friends are dying off (605). Not unnaturally, he himself is soon smitten with the plague and wakes one morning from "ugly and . . . tangled dreams" to find

that the pain which has been disturbing his sleep comes from a bubo. Terrified of being brought to die among the neglected poor of the *lazaretto*, he promises his most trusted bravo (or thug), Griso, great rewards to fetch a physician who will treat him at home. But Griso goes directly to the corrupt *monatti* and together they overpower Don Rodrigo, plunder his chamber before his eyes, and carry him to the *lazaretto*. This plague-death both exploits and reveals the shallowness of Don Rodrigo's life. Since plague-terror strains the closest and truest of human relationships, more distant ones can hardly be expected to last, and that Don Rodrigo does not perceive that the plague has annulled the power of his wealth and aristocratic privilege to protect him from Griso's deprivations only shows the nobleman's weak grasp of reality.

But a plague-death can also reveal glory, as it does with Father Cristoforo, who, though safe at Rimini when the plague breaks out, gains permission to go and help the sick at Milan (654). As he tells the heroine, Lucia:

It's a long time now . . . since I first asked the Lord to grant me a favour . . . to be allowed to finish my life in the service of my neighbor. If he is going to grant my prayer, everyone who cares for me must help me thank him. (684)

Manzoni's attitude toward the plague is perhaps best summed up by the Capuchin Father Felice as he exhorts the plague survivors leaving the *lazaretto*. God, he says, sent the plague to "make us feel more keenly that this life is a gift of his hands, to be cherished as a thing given by him, to be used in works which we can offer up to him" (666). The plague, in other words, comes to teach people not to take their lives for granted but to use them well. The injustice and shallowness in the society before the plague suggested that they needed such reminding.

Daniel Defoe, in *A Journal of the Plague Year*, is writing for an audience which (unlike Manzoni's) has reason to fear another visitation by plague. His narrator's mention that the plague has come again to Holland immediately establishes a bond between him and Defoe's audience, which has just heard that the plague has come to Marseilles. The narrator then wishes to outline the elements of a proper human response to the plague. Although Defoe's narrator understands that the plague is "a distemper arising from natural causes," and thus to be fought with individual and public

health measures, he also believes that it is "a stroke from Heaven upon a city, or country, or nation where it falls" (205) and thus to be met with patience, courage and resignation. He is careful to warn that neither innocence nor virtue guarantees safety, but he does believe that the remarkably evil are apt to be singled out as special targets. He gives an example in the case of the four roisterers whom he sees mocking a grief-stricken "gentleman," first for mourning his plague-dead wife and children, and then for believing in God. H. F. has words with them and then goes home "grieved and afflicted in my mind at the abominable wickedness of those men, not doubting, however, that they would be made dreadful examples of God's justice" (86), for though "in this terrible judgement of God many better than I were swept away" (83), still he thinks it unlikely that God would ignore "such open and declared enemies" when he is striking so many less guilty (87). H. F. is not surprised that all four roisterers die, the unkindest blasphemer being smitten first (85). Therefore, one should keep a pious tongue in one's head during a plague. One should also do one's civil duty and at the risk of death if one must. The saddler himself serves as an examiner (to identify the plague-sick) for three weeks at the height of the plague in August but gets out of it as soon as he can (182). Many others also did their duty and thus the machinery of government never utterly broke down: H. F. boasts that there never was a time when there were not enough living to bury the dead (118, 192). But there is no parallel to Father Cristoforo, who considers it a privilege to die serving others. Defoe's characters think it is good to live doing their duty, but death, whenever it occurs, is merely neutral.

Like Manzoni, Defoe never shows characters at the moment of their deaths. Instead, he chooses for his extended anecdotes stories which show people coping vigorously, determinedly, and resourcefully with this dreadful visitation. This is the burden of the extended account (137-164) of the three men, John, the biscuit maker, and Tom his brother, and their companion Richard the joiner, who set out from London with a tent to take refuge in the country and encounter help and persecution, variously, along the way. Human nature also appears solid and honest in the neighbors who come to H. F.'s help in the looting scene, which many might have thought trivial enough to ignore in such times (104-5). There is also the poor man who stays with the boats to earn his living and keep free of plague but sneaks

back to bring food and money to his plague-stricken family (122-127). Such people who truly care to keep the community together are those who will most appreciate its survival. H. F. vividly expresses the delight of the people when the plague lifts and the Londoners find they still have a city. "They shook one another by the hands in the street, who would hardly go on the same side of the way with one another before. . . . [T]hey would cry out, 'God be praised'! and weep aloud for joy. . . ." (253).

Though the saddler, like Manzoni, sees some spiritual improvements have occurred during the plague, he thinks they are only temporary. As he puts it, "[F]or the generality of the people, it might too justly be said of them as was said of the children of Israel . . . when they passed the Red Sea . . . that they sang His praise, but they soon forgot His works" (256). So it appears that further plagues are all too likely for whatever chastening purpose God may have, and as a consequence, Defoe's Londoners of 1722 had better read his book and prepare.

Camus, unlike Defoe and Manzoni, deals with a fictional rather than a historical plague. Also unlike the other two writers, he portrays plague victims as they die. Death itself, apparently, is the mystery he must penetrate. He focuses especially on three deaths which are in different ways offensive or problematic. The first is of the concierge, Michel. "Isn't there any hope left?" cries Michel's wife, seeing the doctor turn away from the patient while they are riding in an ambulance to the hospital. Rieux answers, "He's dead" (22). From then on Rieux is the one who must insist on announcing death and the plague in a culture which will deny both as long as it can. For, presumably, it is an outrage that either exists.

When the plague is manifestly raging through the population, Camus focuses on the death-bed of a child, a scene offensive partly because Camus evidently regards it as the ultimate refutation of the notion that plagues come as just punishment and partly because this boy suffers more than the usual. The doctors do not expect him to live and have tried an experimental plague serum, which temporarily increases both his resistance and his suffering. Observing his struggles, the Jesuit, Father Paneloux cries in agony, "My God, spare this child!" (121). But when the child dies anyway, Rieux turns on Paneloux, saying, "That child, anyhow, was innocent, and you know it as well as I do!" (202). Later, Rieux apologizes for the outburst but is firm in

maintaining his intellectual position: "[U]ntil my dying day I shall refuse to love a scheme of things in which children are put to torture" (203).

The two men agree to disagree, but Rieux's reactions trigger the collapse of Father Paneloux's resources for dealing with the crisis. Until then, Father Paneloux had, indeed, provided very confused leadership in plague-times. Earlier he had taken it upon himself to justify the plague to the people of Oran, and unlike Father Felice he conveys an entirely negative concept of the plague as punishment, using words which suggest he has temporarily forgotten what species he belongs to. He says, "Calamity has come upon *you* my brethren, and, my brethren, *you* have deserved it" (89) (*italics mine*). About the sins for which he believes Oran is being punished, Paneloux is vague; perfunctoriness in religious observance (92) is the only fault he specifically mentions. No wonder the chief impact of the sermon is to make the people of Oran feel "that they had been sentenced, for an unknown crime, to an indeterminate period of punishment" (94). By contrast, Paneloux is vivid and dramatic in threatening his audience with death and judgment. His admiring mention of the Abyssinian Christians who wrapped themselves in plague victims' sheets to assure themselves of death betrays his failure to make any positive sense of earthly life (93); at the same time, it betrays a deep-rooted fear of death. One must fear death if one admires those who do not fear it; as Renzo's prayer suggests, it is merely natural to desire death when one believes it will improve one's situation. After the trauma of the child's death and Rieux's rebuke, Paneloux abandons all pretext of having a way of life to offer and comes to the conclusion that it is illogical for a priest to call a doctor. He soon dies. There is nothing in Paneloux of the spirit of joyous sacrifice which Father Cristoforo had displayed. He does not so much lay down his life as resign it, and with him dies the illusion of religious meaning in the disaster which Paneloux had only faintly succeeded in evoking to begin with.

The third problematic death is that of Tarrou, the quirky would-be atheist saint who has organized volunteer help and become Dr. Rieux's special friend in the course of the plague. It is he who has exemplified the most practical and adaptable way of reacting to the plague, yet he is smitten, ironically, after the plague's virulence has decreased and despite the precautionary inoculations all the health workers have taken, thus making further mockery of the notion that there is justice or logic in the patterning of the plague. In a final irony,

Tarrou does not regard his dying in the service of his fellow man as the sainthood he has sought, but evidence that he is "losing the match" (264). He associates the plague with a flaw in the human spirit, a tendency toward death which everyone must be careful not to pass on to others (235). To die of it is to be defeated. So for Tarrou, it seems all life is a hopeless struggle against death in a world that is "shaped by death" (121); one only tries to keep it up as long as possible.

All the same, Camus's plague is not without its positive effects. Oran, like Milan before the plague, needed some changing. Camus, lacking the firm moral categories of Defoe and Manzoni, relies on aesthetic principles to depict its faults; it is "ugly" and "smug" (3) and "soulless" (5). People are interested in little but their own comfort. Though rats are dying quite visibly for several days before the human plague begins, people's first reaction is either to deny that there are really rats (7) or to deplore the inconvenience of removing their corpses (14). No one thinks to wonder why they are dying. The plague forces the individuals out of their egotism. It gives Tarrou's energies a focus, overcomes the egotism of Rambert and the self-righteousness of Paneloux, and brings to its peak the friendship between Tarrou and Rieux, who probably would not have known each other otherwise. Pestilence, Rieux thinks, teaches us "that there are more things to admire in men than to despise" (287). Should people forget, then, "for the bane and enlightening of men" the plague will "rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city" (287).

The rat imagery in Camus operates on many levels. A rat dying, spurting blood, at the beginning of the work reminds Rieux of his young wife, who has tuberculosis (8). Through this, Camus causes the reader to endow the repulsive rat with human qualities. Later, when Rieux visits Cottard after his suicide attempt, he thinks he hears rats squeaking (18), thus tempting the reader to endow the human Cottard with repulsive rat-qualities. Rats are made to represent the plague in some places; the Concierge, Michel, dies raving about rats, and rat-like Cottard is the only important character who enjoys the plague. Yet, at the end, the return of living, healthy rats is hailed as a sign of returning health (247). It seems that human beings cannot really exist apart from rats any more than they can exist apart from death in a world "shaped by death" and their only useful strategy is to keep up a certain level of resistance.

It appears, then, that all three authors displayed their



separate concerns in their choice of foreground images: Manzoni was seeking for hidden signs of the Providence of a loving God, Defoe searched to find the wisest human attitude toward the plague, and Camus sought to portray the best of humanity struggling with death in a seemingly unjust universe, winning small but ephemeral victories. Still, all three authors find in plagues a challenge which forces people to abandon their isolation and unite against a common enemy, and in the process find the meaning of friendship and community. Perhaps this is a meaning around which many with different visions can unite.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>In fact such changes of virulence, though recorded historically, have not been satisfactorily explained (Pollitzer 517), though some believe it is part of a natural process of adjustment between host and victims (McNeill 174).

<sup>2</sup>Though Manzoni (1785-1873) is a later writer than Defoe (1660-1731), I deal with him first because his plague (1630) is earliest.

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THE SENIOR PROFESSOR CONSIDERS  
INDIAN SUMMER FROM THE FACULTY LOUNGE

by Mark DeFoe  
West Virginia Wesleyan College

Alone, here in the lounge, I sag,  
Reading the coffee table dust. The term  
Gusts toward frost. How many autumns have I  
Twiddled my tongue, Lord Bombast prancing  
A thousand pages? Learning, as always, curls  
Like a dry leaf, shivering at zero.

I crack a window. Shambles of memo rattle.  
The air rocks. Cheerleaders rah-rah. On this  
Mellow edge of winter, the wind lurks.  
I start to warn the balmy walks below—  
“Trust not the seasons!” I swallow such talk.  
The wind, like a good test, carves away  
The extraneous, the soft and fuzzy.  
No, what the wind repeats cannot be taught,  
And the wind always answers in dust.

So, content to puff from ear to ear, I breeze  
Toward class. Though my lectures are artifacts,  
My voice propels me and I twirl  
Extravagantly each Autumn, thumbing  
Like time's hitchhiker, chapter to chapter—  
Droll old fart, merry melancholiac  
Declaiming from the parchment  
Of my darkening veins, the glory  
Of this passage into falling weather.