

instantly and widely popular and was soon translated into English and other languages. In the spring of 1948, Camus visited Britain, and in October his newest play, *L'État de siège* (*State of Siege*) was first performed. In 1949 he traveled to South America, and in that same year he also opposed the execution of Communists in Greece. Also in 1949, another play—*Les Justes* (*The Just Assassins*) was well received.

It was in 1952, however, that an especially important event occurred in Camus's life. In late 1951 he had published a book titled *L'Homme révolté* (*The Rebel*), in which he had argued against wholesale ideological revolutions (such as those in Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and most recently in Communist China) in favor of more modest rebellions. Revolutions, he argued, easily turned totalitarian and oppressive, whereas more modest rebellions were less likely to lead to widespread deaths and suppression of freedom and other human rights. This book appeared when many on the left were trying to justify not only the Soviet Union, which had now extended its dictatorial control over much of Eastern Europe, but also the 1949 Chinese revolution, which eventually led to millions of deaths. For daring to attack Communist gulags and other forms of repression, Camus found himself at loggerheads with many leftists both in France and elsewhere, including Jean-Paul Sartre, the French existentialist who had long been one of Camus's friends and supporters. In 1952, Sartre commissioned a hostile review of *The Rebel*—a review that led to attacks and counterattacks by Camus, Sartre, and their allies and opponents. Eventually Camus found himself increasingly isolated in French intellectual life. His friendship with Sartre was at an end, and his confidence as a writer was shaken. Moreover, in 1953 his wife Francine suffered a nervous breakdown because of Sartre's continuing involvements with other women, especially Casares. Camus eventually (if implicitly) dealt with his guilt over her suffering in his 1956 novel *La Chute* (*The Fall*).

The beginning of the Algerian War of Independence in 1954 only complicated his life even further: Camus sympathized to some degree with the Arab revolutionaries, but he sympathized as

seems to endorse the existential exhortation to combat the hostile forces of the universe by the puny means man has at his disposal.” Sutton thought that although the

philosophical implications and the suggestive allegory of “The Plague” will recommend it to thoughtful readers, . . . the novel’s greatest achievement is perhaps at the descriptive level. It is doubtful if any writer since Pepys and Defoe has succeeded better in describing the gruesome sights, horrifying sounds and loathsome odors of a plague-ridden city.

“Yet Camus,” he continued “writes simply, employing an unpretentious style to describe grandiose and almost apocalyptic events. The message of the book,” Sutton suggested, “is doubtless summed up in the statement of one of the characters, that the essential thing is to do one’s job well. That is the most we can aspire to in a world where the plague (red evil, or death, if you like) is checked at one point only to break out elsewhere.” By “red evil,” Sutton seems to have meant communist expansionism (this review was, after all, written around the beginning of the “Cold War” between the West and the Soviet Union). But in any case, Sutton claimed that *The Plague* was “certain to impress even those readers who shy away from [critical] superlatives as a work of real strength and substance. Albert Camus,” he concluded, “has firmly established himself as one of the authentic voices of his generation.”

John C. Herman, in his “Book of the Week” column for the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*, considered Camus’s new novel evidence “that new and affirmative forces are working among the younger French writers. For this,” Herman thought, “is a powerful novel yet a balanced and sure-handed one, [the] product of a mind that is objective, sensitive and above all compassionate. There is,” Herman continued, “no anger here, no rancor or despair; there is a wide and deep view of humanity, an underlying tolerance which is felt as a fresh breeze coming from what many had thought an airless, hopeless place”—namely contemporary France, where nihilistic existentialism had recently been (and to some extent still was) all the rage. Herman thought that “Camus’ motive for writing about

report on this topic remains “unfinished in the novel, swallowed up by his personal misery.” Kaplan also finds herself untouched “by his love story” because she “can’t picture his lover in my mind: I don’t know her name, or what she does. She’s a cloud of his own regrets. Without much sympathy,” Kaplan continues, “I have to put up with his indulgent indecision, the should-I-stay-or-should-I-go that became the pet question of so many privileged city dwellers during the first months of COVID” (28). Rambert’s “desire to unite with a lost love” has paradoxically “become a kind of self-centeredness” (29).

As these remarks (especially the ones about COVID) indicate, *States of Plague* is not a typical academic book; its tone is often personal rather than dryly objective, and that is frequently part of its appeal. It is the kind of book “regular,” nonspecialist, nonacademic readers are likely to enjoy, but in its best moments it is also more than merely personal. Rather than simply offering private opinions, it is also often full of helpful facts, as when Kaplan notes that Camus’s first draft of *The Plague* is “almost unrecognizable” in ways she then details. She contends that “[e]xile, separation, and solitude gave [Camus] the energy to conceive a new draft, where the personal and the political would come together in one collective experience of the plague,” whereas the first draft had focused too much on one character in particular. The new draft also incorporated a kind of “gallows humor [that] sets the tone for the whole novel, tragic but also funny” (30), as in the depiction of the lowly civil servant named Grand, whom Camus considered the book’s real hero in a text that shied away from making anyone seem blatantly heroic. In essays such as the one just described, Kaplan does an especially fine job of blending literary analysis with historical information and personal reflections, keeping a fine balance among them so that the personal comments never overshadow the literary and contextual analysis.

When Marris returns in the next essay, she also revisits the kind of topic she, as the novel’s translator, is especially qualified to discuss: the novel’s *style*, which is sometimes also one of the novel’s *themes*. She comments, for instance, that

he “rubbed shoulders with death” (180). No longer is Paneloux preaching from the safety of his pulpit; he is now engaging directly with the collective struggle and, in so doing, is casting aspersions on his own earlier conduct. Nowhere is this psychological turmoil more clearly exposed than in Paneloux’s second sermon, where inclusivity and humility replace the earlier accusatory delivery: “He spoke in a gentler, more thoughtful tone than on the previous occasion, and several times was noticed to be stumbling over his words. A yet more noteworthy change was that instead of saying ‘You’ he now said ‘We’” (182).

It is noteworthy that the audience for Paneloux’s second sermon is not as numerous as that for the previous address, a sign of the changing mindset of the community, now experiencing the reality of the plague rather than its theological representation:

A high wind was blowing on the day Father Paneloux preached his second sermon. The congregation, it must be added, was sparser than on the first occasion; partly because this kind of performance had lost its novelty for our townspeople. Indeed, considering the abnormal conditions they were up against, the very word ‘novelty’ had lost all meaning. Moreover, most people, assuming they had not altogether abandoned religious observances, or did not combine them naïvely with a thoroughly immoral way of living, had replaced normal religious practice by more or less extravagant superstitions. (180)

Interestingly, while listening to Paneloux’s second sermon, Rieux considers that the priest was “dallying with heresy” (183) in the way that he attempts to correct the earlier absolutist interpretation of the plague as divine retribution. This view is echoed by a conversation between an old priest and young deacon, battling against the elements and overheard by Rieux as the congregation leaves:

An old priest and a young deacon, who were walking immediately in front of Rieux, had much difficulty in keeping their headdress from blowing away. But this did not prevent the elder of the two from discussing the sermon they had heard. He paid tribute to the preacher’s eloquence, but the boldness of thought Paneloux had

object of all his conscious efforts. It is Christmas Day. She, not the novel he intends, is the meaning of his very ordinary life. To love her properly each day is what he has actually tried to do. “Hats off, gentlemen!” (102, 105).

Conclusion

The women are absolutely essential to *The Plague*; they provide the principles of intelligibility in the otherwise unintelligible world of seemingly random yet systemic evil. Without them the novel would be destitute of light and hope; all love would be dead. But love is not dead; it is present. One further proof of this is Cottard. From the first time we meet him, having attempted suicide, he is regularly associated with the rats—“plump little . . . lying there, breathing heavily, . . . gazed . . . with bloodshot eyes. Rieux stopped short. In the intervals of the man’s breathing he seemed to hear the little squeals of rats. But he couldn’t see anything moving in the corners of the room” (19). Cottard’s room is “in almost complete darkness” (57). He grows more voluble and lively as the plague waxes; he is a veritable

mine of stories about the epidemic. One of them was about a man with all the symptoms and running a high fever who dashed out into the street, flung himself on the first woman he met, and embraced her, yelling that he’d ‘got it.’

‘Good for him!’ was Cottard’s comment. (81)

Plague-ridden Oran is a world he has, “personally, no wish to leave” (140). He has affinities with the plague, and so it is fitting that Tarrou, who is generous toward him, points out that he has been through everything that the Oranais are now going through “—with one exception; we may rule out women in his case. With that mug of his! And I should say that when tempted to visit a brothel he refrains; it might give him a bad name” (197).

The lost soul in the thoroughly modern city of Oran is the one who has no association with women at all. The book proves more

Although Camus's representation of Rieux's response to the emergent plague is psychologically plausible, this self-analysis does not get at a critical assessment of what Rieux's response is, or what it signifies. Rieux's reaction is neatly summarized by the narrator's phrase "lucidly recognizing what had to be recognized . . . and doing what needed to be done." There is little real sense in this phrasing, which adopts the bland bureaucratism of the administrator. This positioning has specific consequences, for Rieux and Oran. It undermines, for instance, the affective power of the bubonic plague as a disease, which Foucault argues evokes more than just social memory of contagion, but also "the haunting memory of . . . rebellions, crimes, vagabondage, desertions, people who appear and disappear, live and die in disorder" (198, see also McKinlay). Rather than acknowledging the impact of the disease on Oran, which exceeds the blank calculation of deaths and recoveries, Rieux's response sharply foreshortens his attention, which now looks to the task of administering the disease rather than supporting the community. This makes it easier for him to employ necropower while downplaying his culpability.

It is at this moment that Rieux is significantly transformed, from detective to administrator. His self-reflection shifts hastily from the imaginary to the mundane: "Rieux pulled himself together. There lay certitude; there, in the daily round . . . The thing was to do your job as it should be done" (Camus 31). Rieux's daily rounds take him back to the "command centre" of Oran's epidemic response, the "Statistical Department" of the "Municipal Office" (Camus 31). Working with Joseph Grand and Cottard, Rieux assesses the data that shows a rise in cases and plans a response. In his self-appointed role as administrator, the decision-making calculus does not afford total commitment to the truth.

'Well,' [Rieux] said, 'perhaps we'd better make up our minds to call the disease by its name. So far we've only been shilly-shallying.'
'Quite so, quite so,' Grand said . . . 'I, too, believe in calling things by their name . . . But what's the name in this case?'