

9 Plague as Metaphor

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There is a real difference between describing a public health crisis as an epidemic and calling it a plague. As far back as we can go in the European tradition, words associated with 'plague' carry an extra charge; they connote something more than accident and bring into the account we give of medical disaster the suggestion of some kind of personal agency. Homer's *Iliad* famously starts with a picture of disaster, sickness striking the Greek troops under the walls of Troy, and shows us the god Apollo unleashing his arrows against animals and human beings, in revenge for an insult offered to one of his priests. In the first book of the *Iliad*, the sickness is variously called *nousos*, *loimos* and *loigos*: roughly, a disease, an outrage or injury, and a disaster or devastation – though Homer does use *plege* elsewhere, the origin of the Latin *plaga* – a blow or stroke. Simple description gives way to a mode of speaking that is not only dramatically personal but also moralised: sickness is not only connected with someone's agency but is understood as a moral consequence of events, a punishment.

At the most obvious level, speaking like this is a way of asserting meaning in a situation where we may otherwise feel helpless, at the mercy of arbitrary forces. It may not exactly be welcome to think of ourselves as receiving punishment for our misdeeds; but it makes sense of a kind. When the workings of natural processes are made personal in this way, we can imagine 'negotiating' with them: what we do or say may make a difference. Even if we are too late to avert the plague that now afflicts us, we can perhaps shorten its duration by searching out the cause and taking appropriate remedial action, and we may be better able to avoid such disasters in future. Plague understood in this sense as the stroke of a hostile agent prompts us to examine our memories, to retell our stories, so that we can discover what we ought to negotiate about and with whom. The Athenian altar 'to an unknown god' which St Paul makes so much of in the seventeenth chapter of the Acts of the

Apostles probably reflected originally not a pious reaching out towards unutterable divine mystery but the anxious attempt of someone to render proper acknowledgement to whatever divine force had brought about a particular piece of good or bad fortune, when it had proved impossible to work out exactly what piece of good or bad behaviour, in relation to which god, had caused it. It is an insurance policy, an open cheque for the business of negotiation.

To call an event a 'blow' or 'stroke', *plaga*, is to set in train both an investigative and a narrative process. It is also of course to set in motion a process designed to end or avert more disaster, more *loimos* and *loigos*. The agency of God or the gods has been invoked, since only divine power can deploy destructive resources on this scale, 'striking from afar' in the Homeric epithet for Apollo.¹ And this has been connected to the sinful or sacrilegious agency of human beings. Now is the time, once this connection has been clarified, to undertake the next stage of action and put into place sanctions against the person or persons whose agency triggered the disaster. Talking about plague thus becomes a way of identifying what needs to be purged or expelled from the suffering community; it is a metaphor in the service of a threatened social identity. It is not difficult to provide examples of this in recent times as much as in antiquity: you have only to think of the prevalence of language about a 'gay plague' that accompanied the first reported cases of HIV/AIDS, a language that still finds echoes in an uncomfortable number of cultures around the world today. That the plague metaphor is an image to think with is clear; that it is both a powerful and ambiguous image is equally clear. And without endorsing the toxic mechanisms of scapegoating that the language encourages, it is still worth wondering why the experience of lethal epidemic or pandemic sickness seems to resist a purely 'secular' account, and what might be learned from this in thinking about human freedom and human limitation. This brief and sketchy survey of some of the ways in which the metaphor has been deployed, in ancient and modern times, is meant both to alert us to the seductive appeals of a moralised account of sickness and to suggest some of the questions about responsibility and complicity that the metaphor opens up.

Although the *Iliad* is one of the first great literary narratives to give us a story of guilty agency punished by divine aggression in the form of plague, it is Sophocles who provides what most would regard as the paradigm narrative in his Theban trilogy. The Oedipus story is, of course, a cultural resource of unusual generativity; in addition to the way in which it has shaped a whole swathe of modern consciousness by way of Freud's interpretation, there is a further dimension, more to do with issues around the intersections of individual and corporate action or inaction. *Oedipus Rex* opens – like the *Iliad* – with the evocation of devastating shared suffering and the insistent, bewildered prayer for it to be removed; Oedipus, who has already shown his quasi-divine power in his rule over Thebes, is implored to act so as to save his people's lives. He has already, he tells the people, sent to the Delphic Oracle for counsel. And what comes back from the Oracle is, untypically, a clear statement that the plague is the outward correlate of inner corruption: the murder of the old king, Laius, has never been avenged, and this is what festers and infects the city's life. So 'Banish the man, or pay back blood with blood./Murder sets the plague-storm on the city.'² In response, Oedipus vows to be the agent of divine healing, the agent of a divine answer to prayer: he will find and expel the criminal. 'You pray to the gods? Let me grant your prayers.'² The murderer is the plague personified,² and the king's curse is pronounced against him, even if he should turn out to be one of the royal household.

The plague here is very clearly an embodied metaphor for a diseased common conscience, a shared collusion in Laius's murder; activate that conscience by identifying the murderer and the city's infection is healed as the infecting agent is cast out. But of course the piled-up ironies of Oedipus's speeches are soon to be shown for what they are; his promise to be the agent of divine healing is indeed honoured, but not as he had expected. He is the killer, he is the poison; when he identifies himself as the source of infection, and is accordingly expelled, peace and wholeness are restored (at least for the moment). The plague is dealt with when it is seen at the heart of the self. Oedipus is – borrowing a familiar trope from Derrida – the *pharmakon*, poison and antidote together. And he is able to answer the prayers of the people in the name of the gods only when he is wholly identified not with divine sovereignty but with poisonous guilt.

His overweening assumption that he can in effect do what the gods cannot do in bringing healing is turned upside down: he will do what the gods cannot when he has no claim left to godlike freedom. Or, to put the stress somewhat differently, he is unable to heal so long as he fails to know what his complicity is in the suffering of the people – which is his complicity in the long-distant murder of the old king. Plague as metaphor for social corruption begins to be healed when those most reluctant to acknowledge their complicity are forced to see themselves clearly at last.

The sin of the monarch as the cause of plague for the people is also, of course, a biblical theme, not only in the Exodus story of the plagues of Egypt, where Pharaoh's hard-heartedness is in a very straightforward way the cause of the ten disasters that overtake his country, but, rather more subtly, in the less well-known story, in the last chapter of II Samuel, of how King David brings plague on the people of Israel. He has ordered a census of the fighting men of Israel and Judah, but this is counted an offence by God and he is given a choice of punishments: three years of famine, three months of military defeat or three days of plague (II Samuel 24.13). He opts for three days of plague, because, he says, it is better to be at God's mercy than man's; and, rather as he expected, it turns out to be possible to 'negotiate' with God's agency for a reduction in the punishment – on the grounds (interestingly, in the light of Oedipus) that the guilt is exclusively his (24.17). It is almost as though the end of the plague comes when, as in Thebes, the ruler takes full responsibility for the disaster that has arrived. And the plagues of Egypt unfold relentlessly because Pharaoh constantly denies this responsibility: he continues to oppress and murder God's children until God kills *his* child (Exodus 4.22–23), and he does not identify himself as the source of the devastation inflicted, so that it continues to affect all in Egypt.

God's agency in bringing plague is thus seen both as terrible and in one sense irresistible, but in another as 'negotiable': if we are able to sort out our responsibility, God will distinguish between innocent and guilty. Plague is associated frequently with God's action in other parts of the Exodus and desert wanderings story, and the recollection of these traditions is strong in the Psalms as well as the Pentateuch (e.g. Pss.78, 106); in the archaic hymn preserved in chapter 3 of Habakkuk, God's manifestation in the flames of lightning is accompanied also by plague and

pestilence. And the same narratives are referred to or evoked in Christian Scripture to make the same dual point that God is responsible for plague and that he can be negotiated with and persuaded to be merciful (I Corinthians 10.1–13, 11.30); and the Revelation to John is perhaps the most dramatic example of the full-blown ancient tradition in Christian shape. It is perhaps worth noting in passing that the two recorded remarks of Jesus that have any bearing on the question of correlating sin and disease or disaster are entirely sceptical about such a correlation; it is notable how rapidly and comprehensively this seems to have been forgotten. But that is another story.

Thus we have, in both biblical and classical sources, a strongly defined template for reading plague as a matter of divine agency, normally punishment; and for seeing the possibilities of healing or averting disease as bound in with identifying where responsibility primarily lies, so that the innocent and the guilty can be properly distinguished. Response is not invariably expulsion (this is not implied in the case of King David), but there is a *prima facie* appropriateness about this which makes it a sort of default position in religious responses: the Girardian³ mechanism is pervasive, even in the religious tradition in which arbitrary victimisation is most unambiguously challenged. But in the Middle Ages, we see not only crude victimage mechanisms – regularly directed at Jewish populations in times of intensified anxiety – but also, and increasingly in the later mediaeval period, corporate self-chastisement in response above all to the crisis generated by the Black Death. The creation of guilds of penitents, dedicated to public and shared acts of reparation (self-flagellation and so on), reflects a sense that no-one really knows where primary guilt lies in the face of universal and devastating disease: whatever degree of personal guilt you might acknowledge, there is a guilt that is common to all and must be expiated by all. To undertake this sort of penitential discipline is, in effect, to expel *yourself* from the society of the virtuous rather than to look for scapegoats elsewhere. And even when this communal self-punishment did not take such extreme forms, the regular use of processional litanies at penitential seasons and in times of crisis had always expressed the need for corporate acknowledgement of guilt (and also, in its processional forms, reflected the archaic sense that a whole territory needed purifying). The spread of print and the

intensifying of state control over all local calendars led to a growing use in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century societies of national days of 'fasting and humiliation' imposed by law. Their language points in the same direction: everyone needs to be involved in the negotiations with God, because we cannot be clear just where the blame lies. Thus the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* includes a prayer to be used 'in the time of any common plague or sickness' (along with prayers for 'Time of dearth or famine'), which refers to the rebellions of God's people in the desert and pleads 'that like as thou didst then accept of an atonement, and didst command the destroying Angel to cease from punishing, so it may please thee to withdraw from us this plague and grievous sickness'. It is not stated explicitly here what 'atonement' is now being offered, though we can assume that it is primarily the appeal to Christ's sacrifice, embodied in the penitential activities of the faithful. The same identification with the rebellious Israelites can be seen also in the service approved for use after the Great Fire and Great Plague of London: 'we are that incorrigible nation who have resisted thy judgments, and abused thy mercies.'⁴ In other words, whatever people believed about the precise origins of a disastrous epidemic, the remedy was for all to accept their complicity and show this through shared penitence. The stroke or blow delivered by God in the shape of plague is thus a metaphor that can serve both exclusion – the search for the culprit to be expelled – and also, paradoxically, a kind of inclusion – an unqualified solidarity in guilt. But on both counts, it has become intertwined with the belief that external crisis requires internal examination; it is embedded in a systematically moralised picture of the natural world.

This could be chronicled in great detail; but, rather than pursue this exhaustively, I want to turn to a modern and rather different development out of this tradition, a development that uses the language and imagery of plague to make sense not so much of literal pestilence as of crisis in the moral world itself, both political and individual. Camus's *The Plague* (Figure 9.1) and Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera* (Figure 9.2) both, in dramatically diverse registers, 'use plague to think with'. Like their classical and biblical precursors, they assume that disastrous infection cannot be met by passivity; but they are working with questions about the 'infection' of political will or social and

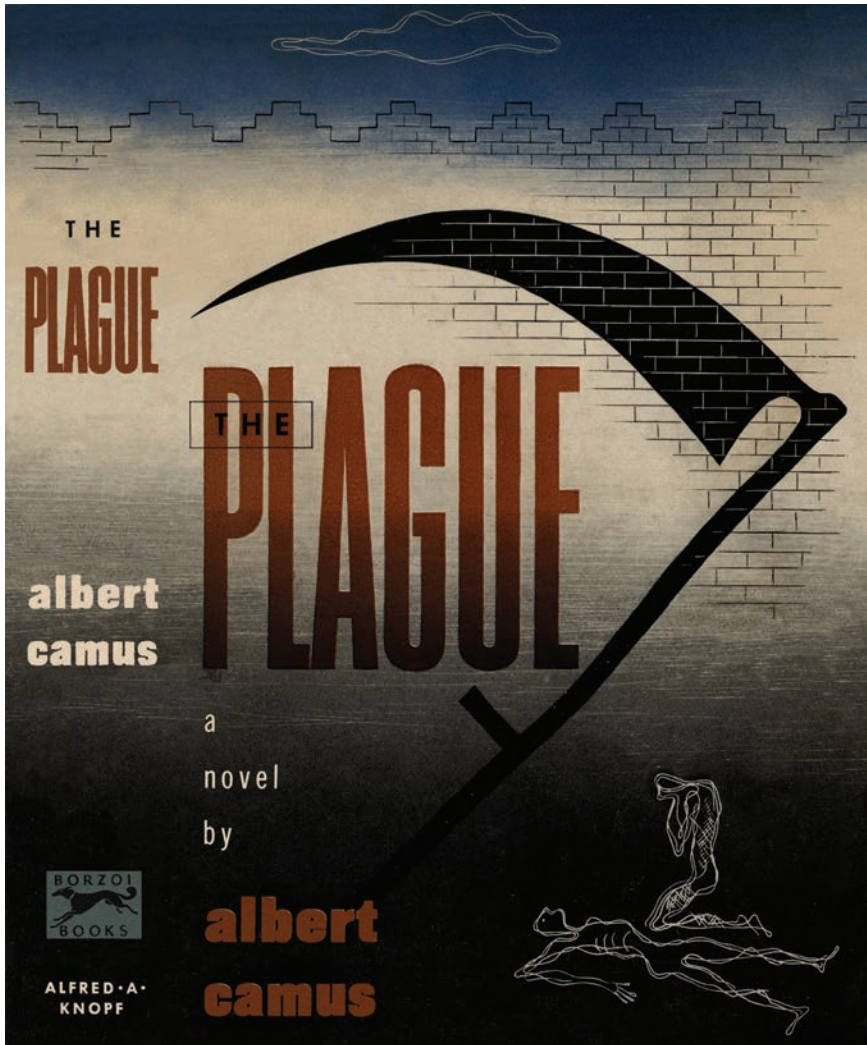


FIGURE 9.1 *The Plague*: a novel by Albert Camus

individual honesty rather than literal disease. Plague is a metaphor not for divine agency but for the unintended consequences of human agency (or indeed, *lack* of agency): it is a matter of grasping the ways in which we 'naturalize' circumstances: that in fact we have in some sense created, and finding strategies for imagining those circumstances afresh. So, while

Camus in particular is overtly critical of the traditional rhetoric about suffering and punishment, he is also building on one strand in the traditional symbolic approach to plague: there is something to negotiate, and that negotiation can only happen when we have begun to ask difficult questions of ourselves.

Camus's notebooks make it very clear that his narrative is a coded account of what happened in Nazi-occupied France. 'I want to express by means of the plague', he writes, 'the suffocation from which we all suffered.'⁵ In a letter to Roland Barthes,⁵ he spiritedly denies that the novel represents any kind of withdrawal from history and politics (as some readers, including Barthes, had charged): in approaching the resistance to the Third Reich by way of this particular symbolism, Camus is seeking not to reduce human oppression to natural or irresistible processes, but to generalise as far as possible the experience of confronting without despair what *seems* to be irresistible. And to do this, he analyses closely the various aspects of life under tyranny. One of the most abidingly powerful aspects of the novel is its characterisations of the effects of totalitarian control. The theme of *exile* recurs,⁶ the sense of being shut out from one's real home; as does the theme of how memory becomes empty or futile,⁶ and the ways in which language itself is eroded or corrupted and narrowed in capacity.⁶ But there is also an acknowledgment of an element of nemesis in the plague: people have taught themselves to believe that a plague-free existence is natural, and so that all things are possible. Human limitation, both in the plainest sense of mortality and in the more tangled and troubling sense of radical moral fallibility, is never absent from our world (which perhaps explains why readers like Barthes mistakenly thought Camus was some sort of fatalist). 'No-one will ever be free as long as there is plague, pestilence and famine'⁶: which means that at one level, absolute freedom is as a matter of fact impossible, and at another that it is only in the struggle against pestilence that we acquire such freedom as we have. And part of the novel's purpose is to show what such freedom might look like, in a mode drastically different from the Sartrean affirmation of pure radical liberty in human existence.

The arrival of plague reacquaints us with the truth that our fundamental condition is *danger*. And this danger can be identified at two opposite

poles of moral response: we can deny the ever-present possibility of plague, or we can normalise it, pretending that the state of exile and privation of freedom and memory ('giving up what was most personal to them'⁶) is simply a fixed destiny. We can assume that plague is either impossible or normal.⁶ But the hard human task is to see it as both possible and terrible, even pervasive and unavoidable, yet terrible. So, to recognise perpetual danger is to become aware that it is possible to say yes or no to the plague; we can decide to cooperate with it or to resist, to refuse to join forces with death: 'We must constantly keep a watch on ourselves to avoid being distracted and find ourselves breathing in another person's face and infecting him.'⁶ Camus's ethic is one in which the inescapability of moral risk, the possibility of human corruption, is the strongest incentive to action, not an excuse for passivity. Thus he writes in his notebook for the novel, 'We should serve justice because our condition is unjust, increase happiness and joy because this world is unhappy. Similarly we should sentence no one to death, since we have been sentenced ourselves.'⁵ And to fight the plague is – as Rieux, the physician in the novel, shows – to fight God: battling against the force of resignation to death is the essence of the secular holiness that belongs to Rieux as he argues with the Jesuit Fr Paneloux. The two sermons of Paneloux in the novel represent two kinds of religious response to the plague, both of which are to be resisted in Camus's eyes. Paneloux initially recommends moving 'towards the silence of God' in an acceptance born of the recognition that the plague is a divine chastisement⁶; but in his second sermon,⁶ this is reduced to a sheer Pascalian clinging to faith, believing everything or denying everything, amid the wreckage of all explanations. For Camus, both explanation and the refusal of explanation have to be abandoned: the almost invisibly fine line between them is where the human conscience has to live, refusing illusion and resignation alike.

And this is, Camus surprisingly says,⁵ an answer to the question of how we live 'without grace'. It is an ambiguous phrase: does it mean, 'How can we live when grace is not given in any recognizable form?' (how do we live in an irreversibly secular frame?) or 'How can we possibly live unless we have a register that allows us to speak of grace?' (even in an irreversibly secular frame). The second seems to be closer to what the

novel and the notes imply: we have to 'do what Christianity has never done: concern ourselves with the damned'.⁵ The damned are, presumably, human beings who are inescapably infected with the seeds of corruption and death but are constantly and compulsively forgetful of their state. Like Oedipus, they cannot see that the infection lies in their own pretence to be godlike, invulnerable to these things. But the non-Oedipodean response of Camus is that neither prayer nor purifying expulsion can be an adequate answer, only the mixture of struggle and self-knowledge. To know one's liability to plague is a condition of adequate struggle against it. Only when we know the inevitability of plague are we free to act as we ought. It is a starkly tragic framework for ethics, and it is not difficult to see why other French radicals found it unpalatable. Ethics, for Camus, is what happens in the face of an irresistible fate that must be resisted; because, paradoxical as it seems, *not* resisting death is a more deeply untruthful mode of human living. Not resisting is not noticing, and so living in that wholly illusory freedom which Camus describes at the beginning of the novel and which returns inexorably at the end. 'They calmly denied that we had ever known this senseless world in which the murder of a man was a happening as banal as the death of a fly.'⁶ It is as though 'grace' could only be conceived in such a context as honesty, as the arrival of the unwelcome truth that we must both accept the world as it is and that 'we must . . . be mad, criminal or cowardly to accept the plague.'⁵

Camus's metaphorical plague is involved in complex conversation with the classical and biblical framework. The notebooks show that he had collected biblical passages presenting plague as judgement,⁵ and he treats Paneloux as a serious interlocutor in the narrative, not as an easy target. For him, plague is, just as it was for Sophocles or the Psalmist, an event that imposes radical self-questioning and restores the possibility of human agency. But it does so not by imagining a negotiation with impersonal processes but by presenting a deceptively simple choice: are you on the side of the plague or not? Is your will ultimately a will for death or life? The inevitability of death is neither here nor there: to accept it at one level as universal and unavoidable is perfectly compatible with saying at another level that the essence of human identity is not to *desire* death. Religious and political totalitarianisms are, for Camus, an

expression of the desire for death, the desire to stop desiring and to stop acting, resigning agency to others. And the crucial question is not, as in Homer or Sophocles, where blame lies for incurring divine wrath, but what can be done to stem the spread of infection: what can be done for the sake of honesty. This is all the grace we can envisage; but without this we cease to live humanly.

Despite its title, Marquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera* is not – on the surface – organised around the theme of plague in the way that Camus's novel is; but close reading reveals a pervasive metaphorical theme, brought into strong focus in the last episodes of the book, a focus that is easy to ignore given the sentimental readings of the novel that have been so popular (encouraged by the 2007 film version). It is not a consoling narrative; the repeated association of intense erotic passion with disease should warn us against the romantic reading. In both the main characters, the signs of passion are initially confused with the symptoms of cholera⁷; and Florentino is 'desperate to *infect* Fermina with his own obsessiveness.⁷ It is when Fermina is suspected of having cholera that her future husband, Dr Juvenal Urbino, first meets her: the doctor has lost his father, also a doctor, to cholera, and is determined to fight it wherever he can.⁷ And the concluding ironic image is of the 'love boat' in which the aged Florentino and Fermina are at last united travelling under the plague flag, so as not to have to put into port.⁷ Alongside these passages there are repeated references to the signs of mass death when the characters undertake long journeys: they repeatedly see corpses in the river and on the marshflats, corpses sometimes said to be of cholera victims but, we are given to understand, frequently victims of massacres in the endemic civil wars of the country ("It must be a very special form of cholera," he said, "because every corpse has received the coup de grace through the back of the neck"⁷). Even on the last, 'romantic' journey, 'there were no more wars or epidemics, but the swollen bodies still floated by'⁷; nothing has in fact changed, but, like Camus's citizens, people have allowed themselves to be persuaded that everything is possible and that pestilence belongs to the past.

That pestilence, the corruption of the moral world, is evoked in the way in which the frustrated Florentino, denied the possibility of marrying Fermina, replaces his obsession with her by an obsessive pursuit of sexual

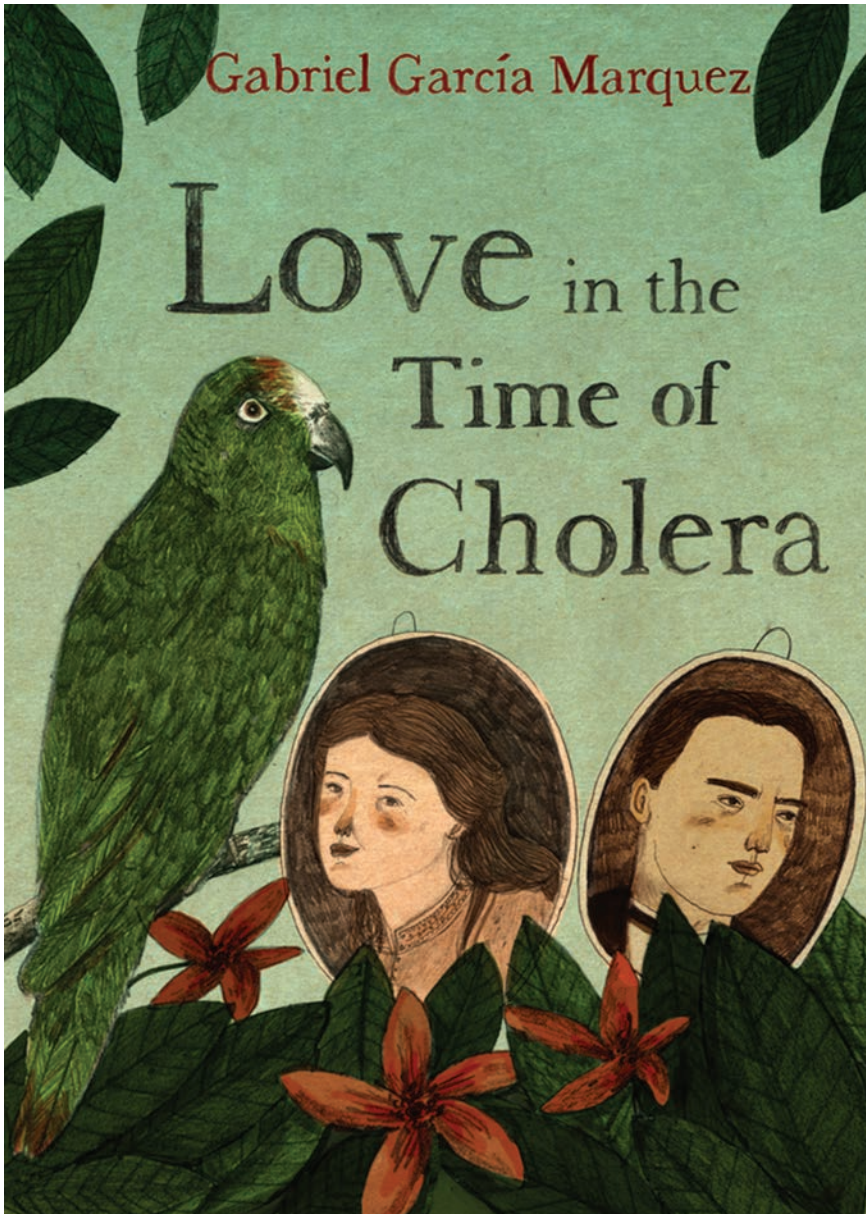


FIGURE 9.2 *Love in the time of Cholera* by Gabriel García Márquez

activity, which Marquez clearly depicts as abusive and predatory, regularly involving rape. His last mistress is a schoolgirl, who commits suicide when she realises that Florentino has been reunited with Fermina, and this grim sequence of events casts a shadow over the apparent idyll of the lovers' reunion. The story ends with the lovers permanently 'quarantined' in their boat – captained by a man named 'Samaritano'; we should not miss the irony. Florentino has succeeded in 'infecting' Fermina, it seems, and they are now dangerous to others and need a Good Samaritan to lodge them and isolate them from a vulnerable population. Fermina has earlier been pronounced clear of cholera by her future husband; and it is clear that their marriage, while not a romantic ideal, is surprisingly erotically happy and satisfying. But with her husband's death she is drawn back into the potentially life-threatening ambit of Florentino's obsessions and ends up, if not exactly sharing his condition, resigned to her bondage to it.

Marquez's ironies in this novel are densely multiplied. Cholera acts as an alibi for those guilty of mass murder; the bullet hole in the back of the neck may, as we have seen, be wryly described as denoting an unusual strain of the disease. Cholera is also a stand-in for the correct diagnosis of erotic obsession; and we are steered towards the conclusion that the latter must therefore be as lethal as the disease and the bullet. But whom or what does it kill? The death of Florentino's teenage lover offers one answer: obsession makes it impossible to register the needs of another (even the actual needs of the object of the obsession, of course). But it has also been lethal to Florentino himself, whose 'diseased' and sometimes violent promiscuity has reduced his sensibility to a mixture of calculation and sentimentality. It is no accident that when he and Fermina at last find themselves together in bed, 'She searched for him where he was not, she searched again without hope, and she found him, unarmed. "It's dead," he said.'⁷ The accounts of their lovemaking, when it finally happens, are fraught with ambiguities to do with death and emptiness. And Marquez leaves the reader with no very clear moral centre from which to make sense of all of this. Assuming that, very far from this being a simple tale of romantic love deferred, we have several possible moral readings. Is the disease a result of deferral or is there something intrinsically diseased about the initial obsession? Is the temptation we must confront the urge

to embrace infection as a way of giving depth to a mortal condition that is otherwise unbearable? But if this is so, the price is every bit as high as the embrace of plague would be in Camus's world, a 'yes' to death, one's own and that of others, a 'yes' to the illusion of unlimited possibility. Florentino's final words, 'For ever', may suggest to the unwary a happy ending of sorts, but in fact reflect an illusion only possible in the isolation of the boat perpetually repeating its journey without arrival/consummation/resolution. We have seen throughout the narrative that death is omnipresent, disguised in various ways. The most persuasive though the bleakest reading is that the aspirations of extreme erotic passion are among the most potent disguises of death: the refusal to accept mortality properly for what it is and thus to be deceived as to what is possible for human beings. The uneven, flawed but intermittently satisfying marriage of Fermina and Juvenal Urbino is proposed as a liveable alternative to possessive violence; without denying eros, this involves negotiating with limits and resisting the mythologising of relationships. And, connecting this with the corpses in the rivers, it seems to be the restless search for absolute political control or settlement, the endlessly revived civil war, that produces massacres; as in private, so in political terms, the denial of death and the refusal of limits become lethal.

Much more could be written about the use of plague in modern fiction (not least the significance of the cholera theme in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, where parallels with and differences from Marquez deserve exploring), but these discussions may serve to focus one or two themes. Since Susan Sontag's work on metaphorical characterisations of illness,⁸ we have become increasingly sensitive to the ways in which we can moralise and symbolise suffering, often in a mode that makes constructive response harder. Sontag herself initially wants to strip away metaphor from our discourse, to remove the elements of mythical destiny or individual blame from how we speak of sickness; and it is not difficult to see why. Yet, as this survey has attempted to show, it is hard to disentangle sickness from metaphor: metaphorical language persistently invades the description of disease, and disease is a potent metaphor for other kinds of disorder. The transfer of the language of infection from illness to the body politic is a familiar (and usually sinister) political trope. But what I have been seeking to suggest here is that this interweaving of

metaphor with how we speak of plague is not necessarily bound up only with problematic or paralysing perspectives. As we saw at the outset, the metaphor concealed in the very word 'plague' introduces the idea of agency: we are not faced with a process over which we have no control. If we can identify causal patterns, there is something we can begin to do about it. Initially, those causal patterns are to do with what has been done to provoke divine wrath, and the response is a mixture of expulsion and reformation. We have seen some reason not to take it for granted that the normative response is always scapegoating, though this is pretty pervasive: a community can represent itself as collectively alienated through rituals of collective reparation. This opens up a perspective in which plague allows us to think of a universally shared responsibility for a collective disaster; we are obliged to interrogate ourselves as well as looking for a culprit elsewhere (Oedipus's journey traces this with intense clarity).

The association of plague with divine agency thus triggers a process of recovering human agency in a situation where this initially seems impossible: if plague is the effect of divine decision, it is irresistible but not inevitable. It prompts self-questioning about how we have made it possible and how it can be averted in future or contained. The development of some kinds of religious discourse away from simple correlations of suffering and sin, the development implied at some points in the gospels, for example, 'releases' the metaphor for a wider application; it is no longer simply a matter of actual epidemic disease as an outward sign of our failure or rebellion (though as we shall see in a moment the way in which the correlation works in the case of Oedipus or David is in fact more subtle and suggestive than we might at first realise). Shared suffering or humiliation and helplessness must prompt us to ask what our complicity is in the situation – and to ask that is to step beyond being victims. This is what we have been examining in Camus and Marquez. The question of how we respond to crisis in ways that resist passivity and complicity comes to the fore, and Camus in particular sees plague – literal or metaphorical – as potentially awakening us to the ever-present risk of colluding with death. On Camus's analysis, we collude with death in two ways: by denying its omnipresence and by accepting its omnipresence as fate, as necessity. In Marquez's world – though this is far more fraught

with irony than Camus's – it seems that collusion with death is a matter of clinging to a seductive but finally lethal fantasy of a 'magical' dimension in our humanity that absolves us from specific, incarnate responsibility for others; isolating ourselves as if we were cholera victims, flying the plague flag and refusing to recognise that this isolation is deadly for others as well as ourselves. Cholera in Marquez's novel, we might recall, is used by some of the characters as an ironic euphemism for the political massacres that lie in the background of the narrative, as it is also used as metaphor for the obsession of desire.

The roads lead back to Oedipus sooner or later. Our aspiration, our fantasy, is to be godlike, but the shattering advent of collective suffering forces us to ask how our own mortal fragility and betrayal is bound up with this suffering. The mythical world picture of Sophocles or the writer of the first Book of Samuel connects sin and suffering, but not in the simple mode of an individual punishment for individual guilt. The plague brought on by the king's sin reveals how the destiny of king and people are intertwined. The king has to see how the effects of his actions are not under his 'sovereignty'; he and his people are bound together and he is not at a divine distance. Thus Oedipus initially believes he can solve a problem that the gods have failed to solve, that he can answer the prayers to which they are deaf. And Camus shows us, at the start and the close of his novel, how we are led repeatedly to forget the reality of 'plague' and imagine that all things are possible for us, as if we were not always already infected with the possibility of infecting and being infected and could be isolated from a human condition of vulnerability and damage. Likewise, Marquez leaves us with a shockingly ambiguous depiction of the 'for ever' of romantic myth, the dream of isolation from mortal responsibility in its diversity and uncontrollable demands. Plague as metaphor is a way of insisting that we see ourselves as agents as well as victims – and as agents of death to each other when we refuse to see this. And in dramatically diverse ways, Sophocles and Camus gesture towards what Camus calls 'grace': the conviction comes into focus that to recognise complicity in this way, to name the moral risk of our shared world and the blood that is on our hands, is the beginning of whatever redemption can be imagined. Camus is committed to fighting the God who offers a short cut away from the call to honesty and the

acknowledging of collusion; his enigmatic concern to speak a word to and for the 'damned' is in itself a curious piece of negative theology, worthy of longer exploration. Grace is encountered in the knowledge both that we are inextricably 'guilty' *together* and that there is an order of moral being (to put it rather awkwardly) in which death is not 'natural', not something we are bound to align ourselves with. We are guilty, we are under sentence, yet truthfulness about this points us to another frame of reference in which life has a last word. The metaphorisation of plague is about recovering the sense of agency, as we have seen, in the face of mythologies of fate and victimhood; and Camus's vision insists that this comes about when we neither normalise nor deny our condition. And that precarious balancing act between fatalism and hubris is precisely the point where human liberty and dignity belong, where grace is visible and 'plague' is seen clearly for what it is – the sheer fact of our capacity to injure and be injured, a capacity we must know if we are to live hopefully.

References and Further Reading

1. *Iliad* I.14 and passim; though the exact meaning of the epithet has been debated.
2. Sophocles (1982) *The Three Theban Plays*, translated by Robert Fagles. London:Allen Lane.
3. Girard René (1986) *The Scapegoat*. Baltimore:Johns Hopkins University Press, is the classic statement of his theory of how the spiral of 'mimetic' violence is controlled by the identifying and expelling of an arbitrarily selected victim.
4. Cummings Brian ed. (2011) *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559 and 1662*. Oxford University Press.
5. Camus Albert (1970) *Selected Essays and Notebooks*, tr. Philip Thody. Harmondsworth:Penguin.
6. Camus Albert (2001) *The Plague*, tr. Robin Buss. London:Allen Lane.
7. Marquez Gabriel Garcia (1989) *Love in the Time of Cholera*. London: Penguin Books.
8. Sontag Susan (1979) *Illness as Metaphor*. New York:Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, and (1989) *AIDS and Its Metaphors*. New York:Farrar, Strauss and Giroux. She has some specific observations about how and why cholera was seen as a particularly significant variety of plague, largely because of the dramatic and humiliating nature of its symptoms.