



Review Essay

Plague's Preconditions and Literary Consequences

Preexisting Conditions: Recounting the Plague, by Samuel Weber. New York: Zone Books, 2022. 214 pages.

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Samuel Weber, professor of humanities at Northwestern and director of the Paris Program in Critical Theory, writes about writing about plague. Fatal pandemics are medical and social crises. But they are also crises of understanding. Incurable, unpreventable, such diseases challenge any society's philosophical, theological, and quotidian foundations and some of our profoundest literature has been written in response. Weber's new book, *Preexisting Conditions: Recounting the Plague*, immerses readers in this literature. As we emerge from the Covid pandemic—our emotional, economic, and ideological stability still badly damaged (and the future of our public health deeply uncertain)—this erudite, challenging book seems essential for our historical moment.

For most of human history—until the conception of germ theory in the late nineteenth-century and the subsequent development of antibiotics, antibacterial vaccines, and modern public health infrastructure in the early twentieth century—the primary cause of death among all human populations was infectious disease. People did not die, by and large, of heart disease, cancer, COPD, or diabetes complications. Whether young or old, strong or frail, at some point, some “influence” (cousin to the word *influenza*), some god or God or spirit or adverse, inexplicable condition swept them off into death.

There was nothing that could be done. That was part of the nature of human mortality. Covid gave us some reminder of this reality we had almost forgotten. As the environmental historian and classicist Kyle Harper informs us in his excellent and authoritative *Plagues Upon the Earth: Disease and the Course of Human History* (2021), neither we humans nor any other organism live alone on this planet. Our being and our history are entirely bound and conditioned by our relations with parasites and pathogens. All the forms and games of life and death and culture emerge from these relations.

To reach the beginnings of plague literature, one must reach, as Weber does, to the beginnings of literature—to the Hebrew Bible and to Homer. One could indeed look earlier. In the “Hymn to Inana” by Enheduana (ca. 2,300 BCE), we read that when the Goddess’s “fury makes people shake, the fever and panic they feel are like the fetters of a demon” (2023: 24), and that she “is the mistress of weeping—the food and drink of death; those who eat it do not last, those to whom she feeds it burn with bile” (27).

And there’s the rub, the rubber on the road, the friction that is the topic of Samuel Weber’s inquiry. The tradition of plague literature, as Weber understands it, stands in an odd position between fiction and fact. What we read in Exodus or *The Iliad* or in the later works he examines—by Thucydides, Boccaccio, Martin Luther, Defoe, Kleist, Hölderlin, Artaud, and Camus—contains elements both of real and invented events. Defoe’s *Journal* is not a real journal; yet many of its events and statistics are documented and accurate. Boccaccio’s account of plague in Florence is based on accounts of witnesses, but he was not there himself. And in all these accounts of real and imagined pandemic, there is an effort at finding some moral or divine sense in the seeming reversal of life processes, the relentless proliferation of death, breakdown of social order, and accompanying despair. Weber calls this epistemic, theological, ethical contact between disease and narrative “frictional.” In the “frictional” tale, there is no safe narrative perspective. Distance gives no safety, nor does retrospect. A new visitation of infection is not only possible, it is certain. The plague cannot be isolated or placed in narrative quarantine. “Frictional recounting,” Weber writes, seeks to portray “the encounter with a reality that is as physical as it is linguistic, as singular as it is general, as solitary as it is communal” (13). The encounter is the friction,

and the evidence of it, the consequence of the friction, emerges in the narrative and its language. One might argue that such processes of friction-laden encounters between symbolization and physical reality are what generate all literature, and Weber does not disagree with this assessment. Indeed, he avers that “something similar may apply to life in general . . . that the plague only intensifies” (37). The plague narrative cuts to the chase in examining our condition as finite, mortal, social, symbol-using beings for whom plague comes to embody all that we cannot understand about the world and our fragile place in it.

What plague narratives further reveal is the scope of the term Weber selected as the book’s title: the “preexisting condition.” We widely use this term today with reference to health insurance policies that either cover or do not cover illnesses that began before the policy was purchased. Before the reforms of the Obama administration, insurance companies typically would not provide coverage for medical conditions that were “preexisting.” Weber adapts and expands the term. Beyond the general condition of human finitude, plague narratives reveal the particular political, economic, philosophical, theological, medical, and scientific parameters of the social worlds they depict. The conditions—of class and political division, religious belief and conflict, war or peace, medical practice and understanding—that were in place before a pandemic will partly determine how the pandemic will proceed. Moreover, the plague will make those conditions more visible. Such rendering was evident during the Covid pandemic. We saw who were the “essential” workers in hospitals, nursing homes, and grocery stores, and we discovered that these essential workers were also the most poorly paid and most vulnerable to infection. Defoe made a similar observation in his *Journal of the Plague Year* (1722). There was always one job available to the poor—for whom otherwise the economy had shut down—and that was transporting corpses to their mass graves, a line of work whose duration tended to be brief, but that continued to attract needful applicants.

In Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1826), a book that Weber does not discuss, we see preexisting conditions of other sorts. In the inexorable deaths of all the major characters but one (as well as the entire population of the world), Shelley works through her emotional

responses to the tragic deaths of several of her children, her husband, and their friend, Byron. The vicious progress of plague reveals as well the failures of the revolutionary Romantic/Enlightenment ideals that Shelley and her friends shared and pursued. The Plague in this book causes the end of everything—of all human relations and achievements—so it is significant, and much in accord with Weber’s thesis, that Shelley establishes in such detail and with such love all those characters, relations, and achievements that then will be destroyed. The plague does not enter, is not even mentioned, in *The Last Man* until the book is halfway through. How a writer understands and represents plague depends on how they understand the world before the plague.

In the Hebrew Bible, there is, of necessity, only one way to understand plague. It is God’s will, God’s judgment. The Egyptian plagues, most of which are not infectious diseases, are all direct divine judgments. Weber argues that all the Egyptian plagues are instances of “life against life,” that is, of biological agents directed against living beings or against “the ecological conditions of life” (45). Thus, these plagues can be distinguished from other natural geological or climatological catastrophes. At the same time, however, the Hebrew word used for plague derives from a root denoting a blow or act of striking, and so, in a broad sense, all of God’s punishments constitute acts of plague. It is also noteworthy that there are, in the Bible, no accounts at all of symptoms of plague. Plague is inflicted, people die; and each person appears to be infected (struck) individually though all die together. There appears to be no sense yet of infection from person to person. Each separate case stems from God’s own agency.

Recipients of God’s judgment via plague can be both Israel’s enemies and the Israelites themselves. Weber discusses the events of 2 Samuel in which David undertakes a census of the people, and this action is punished by a plague. Is it wrong to take a population census? Weber suggests that the punishment is for the potential military use of the census, and only God should possess this knowledge. And yet, at numerous points in the Bible, God instructs the people to take a census. Just before the Golden Calf episode in Exodus, there is such a command (30:11). And we should note that shortly after that most famous transgression, and after several other lethal punishments, the chapter is brought to closure with a plague. “Then the Lord sent a

plague upon the people, for what they did with the calf that Aaron made” (32:35). After Korah’s rebellion, even after Korah and his immediate followers were swallowed in the earth, people continued to complain about Moses’s authority, and then a plague began that killed 14,700 Israelites (Numbers 17:14). Moses’s sister, Miriam, is afflicted with a skin disease after she and Aaron criticize Moses for marrying a non-Israelite woman (Numbers 12:10). And Job, of course, who is in no way culpable, is afflicted with boils and his livestock are killed by “God’s fire” (Job 2:7; 1:16). This in turn is prelude to the most powerful and subversive presentation in the Bible of God’s justice and authority.

Job, in this as in many ways, is anomalous. The Biblical plague is not, aside from Job’s case, a test; it is a judgment that seems consistently to emerge at moments of dangerous social division. In particular, plague is inflicted on those Israelites who contest God’s will and authority as exercised by God’s earthly political agents. Plague is a direct response to rebellion. As there can be no questioning or resisting God, there is no questioning or resisting plague. And there is no question as to what should be the human social and personal response. One must obey God’s commands, no more, no less. In a sense, then, the story of Job is not anomalous at all. Theodicy is always tautological. God is God.

These questions regarding the relationships between plague and the divine, plague and social division or breakdown, and the question of human individual and social response to plague will recur again and again in subsequent plague narratives.

The issue of God’s or some god’s will arises in Weber’s discussions of ancient Greek texts, and again in Boccaccio, Luther, Defoe, and even in Camus. The Greek texts are conflicted. The literary texts of Homer and Sophocles clearly speak of divine agency for plague: Apollo shoots his arrows into the Greek army as a consequence of Agamemnon’s disrespect for the priest, Chryses, in the opening book of the *Iliad*; Apollo again issues a plague at the start of *Oedipus Tyrannus* as punishment for the impurity caused by Oedipus’s earlier actions of patricide and incest. In both cases, the plague ceases when the god is placated. Such a theocentric view, however, is not in evidence in Thucydides’s description of the actual plague that struck Athens in 430 BCE. According to Thucydides, neither medical

practice nor divine supplication did any good against the disease. Nor did individual behavior—whether selfish or compassionate—make any difference in the disease’s outcome. “If people were afraid and unwilling to go near to others, they died in isolation,” Thucydides (1989: 117) wrote. But those who stayed to tend to the sick died, too, “especially those with any claim to virtue, who from a sense of honor did not spare themselves.” The plague struck too at the social fabric as a whole, marking “the beginning of a decline to greater lawlessness . . . No fear of the gods or law of men had any restraining power, since it was judged to make no difference whether one was pious or not as all alike could be seen dying.”

No god appears to have any part in the plague, as Thucydides describes it. His account of the disease is entirely secular and medical. In fact, part of his motive for describing the plague’s symptoms with such care comes from his wish to help doctors who encounter the disease in the future. And we should observe that these detailed descriptions of symptoms are in sharp contrast with the theocentric accounts in the Bible, Homer, and Sophocles. Nowhere in those texts is attention given to what exactly infectious disease does to the body. It simply kills, and the will of the deity is accomplished. Nor are these texts concerned with human ethical response to plague. The only human obligation is to obey whatever divine command had previously been violated.

It is in Thucydides’s brief narrative of plague that we find the best model for subsequent accounts. Even when the author—like Boccaccio, Luther, or Defoe—is a believing Christian, disease itself is difficult to understand from purely theological perspectives. If there is a religious antecedent, it can only be in Job, where divine judgment is overwhelming and irrefutable, and yet utterly incomprehensible. Plague becomes a figure for all in the universe that enforces human vulnerability and finitude. It is no longer judgment or even meaning of any kind, but simply fact. And at this point, ethical questions become as important as theological ones. Given the terrible calamity of human life under conditions of plague, what is any person’s obligation? God’s actions and judgments may be whatever they may be. What matters more is how each person responds to shared conditions of illness, suffering, and death.

Boccaccio's account of the plague in Florence of 1348 (in the Introduction to the first day of tales in the *Decameron*) in many ways echoes that of Thucydides. He too details the symptoms of the disease, the destructive effects on the social fabric, and the range of individual moral responses. "In the face of so much affliction and misery," Boccaccio (2003: 7) wrote, "all respect for the laws of God and man had virtually broken down and been extinguished in our city." And in the midst of this context of fact, we are introduced to the ten fictional narrators and then receive the hundred stories they tell—mostly old tales from European, Middle Eastern, and even Indian sources. The wonder and mystery of this strange book is the act of storytelling and the relation of fiction to the lived world. And thus, Weber's theory of fiction as friction is especially valuable, for the rubbing together of world and story is very much the issue. It is generally understood that the *Decameron* is Boccaccio's response—both homage and divergence—to Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The *Decameron* is the human comedy and seems to preclude any role for the divine. The group of narrators leaves the city to escape the plague. At a country estate, they engage in storytelling—telling many absurdly ribald tales along with some more morally edifying. The tale, here as in other narrative sequences, suspends and defers mortality. But death can be deferred only temporarily. Weber elaborates on an early reference to Proverbs on the continual alternations of joy and sorrow. In Boccaccio, we read, "Just as happiness at its limit turns into sadness, so misery is ended by the joy that follows it" (quoted in Weber 75). But this points to a passage in Proverbs that reads, "There is a way which seemeth right unto a man but the end thereof are the ways of death. Even in laughter the heart is sorrowful, and the end of that mirth is heaviness" (14:12). The difference between the biblical source and Boccaccio's revision enacts a fascinating tension or friction. Does the persistent and persuasive comedy of Boccaccio's text indicate a continual rebounding of comedy and tragedy, death and rebirth (and salvation?) or, as the Proverb insists, must the comedy lead only to death?

The stories delineate the processes and the triumphs of human desire and ingenuity. The oppressive and stultifying forces of conventions and institutions are continually defeated, much to the delight of tellers and listeners. In a temporary enclave from death, the young people contemplate narratives of liberation. There is a strange

but revealing aside at the end of the tale of the Princess Alatiel (seventh story, second day). This unfortunate woman is kidnapped, raped, then married numerous times (as each successive husband murders his predecessor). She finally returns home, successfully claims to have been entirely chaste through all her travels, marries one last time and enters a life of noble and contented domesticity. We read then that the ladies hearing the story “heaved many a sigh over the fair lady’s several adventures; but who knows what their motives may have been? Perhaps some of them were sighing, not so much because they felt sorry for Alatiel, but because they longed to be married no less often than she was” (147). Yet, as Weber emphasizes, the book ends with the story of Griselda, who is subjected to unspeakable abuse from her husband, told falsely that her children are dead, then herself abandoned and cast penniless from her house. Through all this, Griselda never complains. As Weber observes, Griselda is a figure for Job. Her husband, however, is not God but only a minor nobleman who is abusing his authority. Were Griselda a character in one of the other stories, no doubt she would find some way to trick and pay back her domineering husband. Weber makes the case that part of this book’s goal is to put all authority in doubt—indeed, just as the plague has done. It is unclear whether Griselda’s patience is a virtue.

The question remains, then, what does or what should a person do during an event of plague? Both Thucydides and Boccaccio suggest that it doesn’t matter what you do. Disease, in their narratives, carries no moral weight. If you stay in the city and behave honorably, you die; if you flee, you probably die also though you stand a better chance. The protagonists in *Decameron* flee, with their servants, to a convenient rural estate, and live, like Scheherazade, to tell their tales. But the question is real. The storytellers must return to the city. The plague is real and its rough surface erodes our ability to speak it. In his chapter on Martin Luther, Weber turns to both a theological and practical perspective. Luther was asked by a fellow clergyman during a plague in Germany in 1525 “whether it is seemly for a Christian to flee the general dying?” (quoted in Weber 93). The short answer is no; but therein lies a tale or, rather, an analysis by both Luther and Weber. For Luther, the problem is not just the plague, for plague is merely a local, temporal instance of human mortality and therefore also of immortality. Can a Christian flee “dying”? Clearly not. Moreover, a

Christian has an obligation to his neighbor. Here, Weber distinguishes between the common German word for neighbor—*nachbar*—and the related word that Luther uses, which is *Nachste*. *Nachste*, Weber explains, denotes a deeper proximity, not just geographical but spiritual and moral. All of mankind, or at least the Christian portion, is taken to be *Nachste* even if it is not *Nachbar*. It implies community. Luther goes on to argue that the plague is caused by Satan himself and its intention is precisely to damage the Christian community. Therefore, it is imperative that the Christian not abandon it. And after all, the plague is nothing more than death—as Weber puts it, “a special case of the more general situation of human beings as mortal” (99).

Some version of this ethical questioning and reasoning recurs in later texts. Defoe’s *Journal of the Plague Year* presents the question of whether or not to flee from the plague very much as a question of economic status. Those with houses in the country go to them, or those able to stock their houses with provisions seal themselves off. Only the poor must stay in the city and work, and this is made more difficult in that the plague shuts down nearly all sectors of the economy. Defoe (1992: 183), like Luther, is critical of clergy who abandon their flock, and yet, with great compassion, he acknowledges that “all Men have not the same Faith, and the same Courage, and the Scripture commands us to judge the most favourably, and according to Charity. . . . A Plague is a formidable Enemy, and is arm’d with Terrors that every Man is not sufficiently fortified to resist.” Like Thucydides and Boccaccio, Defoe records that neither doctors nor ministers provided any remedy, and that confronting the plague was like “charging Death itself on its pale horse” (184).

Defoe also considers the essential religious question. Was God responsible for the plague? If so, what was God’s motive? As a believing Christian, Defoe can only reach the conclusion that “Nothing, but the immediate Finger of God, nothing, but omnipotent Power could have done it; the Contagion despised all Medicine” (190). At the same time—and here he markedly differs from previous accounts of plague—Defoe is intensely concerned with public health measures taken by the government of London. Defoe describes and evaluates methods of quarantine, distribution of food, burial of the dead, attempts at restarting the economy, and, as Weber points out, he provides extensive statistical data (taken from city and church

sources) of cases and deaths throughout the city over the course of the pandemic. The plague is, and can only be, the will and judgment of God. And yet, Defoe insists, people are obligated to save themselves and each other and to maintain some social and ethical order as well as they can.

Weber observes rightly that “numbers are everywhere” in the *Journal*. It is as if the numerical accounting is another character in the book, constantly growing in volume and force. It reminded me much of the increasing toll of the Covid virus, how each day I looked online to see how many had died the day, week, and month before, and were things getting worse or finally better. The tallying, Weber argues, is closely connected to the “telling.” This is an important reflection, for Defoe’s narrative flies in many directions. It is not a *Decameron*, but it has resemblances, a similar narrative expansiveness. The *Journal* is a tale of horror and suffering, to be sure. Some of this horror is presented in a highly sentimental manner, such as the story of the boatman trying to keep his wife and child alive. But there is also comedy: the drunken piper who awakens in the dead cart and asks if he is dead; or the extended picaresque of the three tradesmen who try to make their way out of London. Story follows story, and the narrator remarks, “I could give a great many Stories such as these” (46). The book is a compendium of proliferating narrative, moral and religious reflection, and practical counsel. The relation between the stories, the reflections and questions, the advice, and the data remains, to me, mysterious. The book lacks “form,” as the term would be understood by a “formalist.” It unfolds and digresses. Its linear, chronological progression is the movement of the plague, but this is one of several textual movements. Weber is helpful on this point: “The plague thus becomes, in the *Journal*, the tale of a tale in the different senses of that word: a story that cannot be tallied, and a tally that cannot be told. This is why the *Journal* will be filled not just with tallies, but with tales reflecting uniquely singular experiences of uniquely singular persons” (119).

It is never made clear to the narrator or to us what God’s intentions might be or the true objects of his wrath. The wicked at times are spared and the good and pious perish. The more pressing questions seem to be those of individual and civic action and obligation. These are the same questions and concerns that still dominate the narrative

two hundred years later in Camus's *The Plague* (1947). A priest, Father Paneloux, takes a vehemently Biblical position, telling his congregants that if the plague is afflicting the city, "you have deserved it. . . . Think on this and fall to your knees" (Camus [1947] 2001: 73–74). Later, after witnessing the agonizing death of a small boy, the priest adjusts his thinking toward a mysticism of the unknowable. The suffering of the child can only be regarded as an evil, but it is at precisely that moment that one's faith in God must be affirmed. "My brethren," the priest tells his congregants, "the moment has come. One must believe everything or deny everything" (173). If the suffering of children was unacceptable, "one had to leap to the heart of this unacceptable which was offered to us precisely so that we could make our choice" (174).

The novel's narrator and protagonist, Dr. Rieux (as well as most modern readers) rejects both of these views. He tells Father Paneloux, "to the day I die I shall refuse to love this creation in which children are tortured." Theology doesn't matter, Rieux continues. "What I hate is death and evil, as you know. And whether you accept this or not, we are together in enduring them and fighting against them" (169–70). One's obligation is to do what one can. If you are a doctor, you perform your medical duties according to your training and responsibility. Further, it did not matter if there was meaning in any of it. What mattered was one's "response . . . to the hopes of mankind" (231). Rieux's position, which appears to be the position of the novel, is akin to Emerson's (2003: 125) injunction, "Do your work and I shall know you." And this attitude will apply not only to the crisis of the plague, but to all of life. As in Luther's letter, plague for Camus is a specific instance of the general condition of human mortality, finitude, and ethical obligation: obligation in a condition of biological and epistemological finitude. "What does it mean, the plague?" an old man asks near the end of the book. "It's life, that's all" (236), and Rieux does not quarrel with this assessment. But then the consequence and second part of one's obligation, Rieux concludes, is to bear witness, "to leave at least a memory of the violence and injustice" that people have suffered (237). This seems plausible, I think, even if the witnessing is such an elaborate and uncertain allegory as is this novel.

I say uncertain. The plague is life . . . the plague is death . . . the plague is the fundamental cruelty and senselessness of the cosmos . . . the plague reveals the ethical obligations placed on every human being

at all times. At the same time, most readers are aware of the more specific historical context of the novel—that Camus wrote *The Plague* while in France during WWII and that “plague” serves a more specific allegorical function as standing for the Nazi occupation of France and the search for how people living under such occupation might fulfill their ethical and political obligations. This level of allegory is powerful but, as Weber points out, incomplete and perhaps unsatisfactory. The Nazis’ actions were intentional; infectious disease has no intention. This in itself is a crucial difference and threatens to render the whole allegory as empty. Biological plague cannot be held morally culpable; Nazis were, and must be judged and held accountable for their actions. For my part, I believe the allegory survives insofar as the demands placed on those who resist the plague and those who resisted the Nazis are similar. In both cases, one’s own life and the life of one’s community are at stake. One is obligated to resist, but the cost of resistance may well be death. Further, Camus makes clear in the novel’s opening chapter that Oran, the city where the novel takes place, is a town whose empty commercial and impersonal values make it open to “plagues” of all kinds, biological and political.

Weber’s analysis, however, takes another and very important turn. *The Plague* takes place in Algeria, at that time a colony of France. The populations of Algeria and of the city of Oran were, of course, overwhelmingly Arab. And yet all the characters of the novel are French. The world of the novel is French. We are to understand that, naturally, Arabs live in the city, but they dwell in other locations. We do not encounter them. We might also assume—since we have read Defoe and lived through Covid—that the mortality rates in the poorer Arab neighborhoods were far higher than for the more affluent French neighborhoods. But this information is not revealed. It is known, as Weber informs us, that roughly a quarter of the population of Algeria were killed during the French conquest of Algeria “due to war, massacres, disease and famine” (Guenoun quoted in Weber 175). We might conjecture that the true plague—the true *political* plague—in this novel was brought by the French colonial forces, not by the Nazis. Or at least we should say that both forces are present—one as allegory, one as sub-allegory; one elephant in the room, the other absent from it. Weber makes two salient points in this regard. He notes that the narrator frequently refers

to people in Oran as *mes concitoyens*, “my fellow citizens.” Colonial Muslim Algerians, however, were not French citizens. Thus, Weber argues, Camus has from the start linguistically excluded Arabs from his story. The “fellow citizens” are only the French residents of the town. Second, Weber recalls the peculiar narrative of the journalist Rambert. Shortly before the plague’s outbreak, Rambert has arrived in Oran from Paris, on an assignment to write about the health conditions in Arab neighborhoods. He speaks with Dr. Rieux and they have an odd conversation in which Rieux asks if Rambert will be free to write a report that contained an “unqualified indictment” (Camus quoted in Weber 157). Rambert answers that “surely there wouldn’t be any grounds for unqualified criticism.” Rieux replies ambiguously but concludes that he can “only countenance a report without reservations” (Camus [1947] 2001: 11–12) and therefore will not cooperate with Rambert’s reporting.

Rambert never writes his article. In fact, he never writes anything—about Arab health conditions, about the plague, about his efforts to escape from the quarantined city. This is odd insofar as he is the only professional writer in a book that is full of authors: Rieux (whose narrative is the book’s frame), Paneloux with his sermons, Tarrou who tells stories of his life and family, and the failed author, Grand, who can only write one sentence over and over. Everything is written except the story of Arabs. As Weber points out, this omission is strange. It would be strange if it were unconscious—but then one could say, well, there it is, Camus’s colonial political unconscious; there is a category we can understand. But it is stranger still in that Camus appears to be entirely conscious and intentional in his omission, even providing for a clear opportunity to include Arabs in his narrative and then foreclosing it. Weber argues that the separation and quarantine of residents (again note the incongruous use of the term “citizens”) can be seen as parallel to the separation, exclusion, and suppression of native Algerians under French rule. How do we explain this parallel and the intentional omission of Arabs from the story of plague in a politically and ethnically divided city?

Weber again cites Denis Guenoun who argues that “‘the absence of Arabs is not an error at the margins of the work,’ but rather ‘constitutes the subject of the novel,’” and Weber extends this observation to conclude that “the plague and mortality may be

universal to all living beings; the ‘tyranny’ of colonial exclusion is not. It is the unelaborated articulation of these two factors that both drives and unsettles Camus’s narrative” (183–84). Weber’s thinking seems correct here. Camus’s articulation of the parallel between colonial oppression (or infection?!) and biological plague is “unelaborated.” The virus or bacteria of pandemic lacks intention—though it does not lack objective or method—and yet writers since Thucydides have known that the spread of disease has decidedly social and political factors. And out of the sociobiology of the experience of plague has come a proliferation of narratives: and thus, of meanings, allegories, metaphors, and conjunctions and tangents of all kinds. And plague narratives on the whole can be described, as Weber describes Camus’s novel, as both driven and unsettled.

Weber’s chapter on Antonin Artaud’s essay, “The Theater and the Plague” (1958) does not conclude the book, but it raises, I believe, some concluding, unsettling questions. In any society that lacks an understanding of microbes and their mechanisms of infection, what is plague? Plague is the worst thing that can befall. Whether its visitations are only occasional or are frequent, plague devastates populations, ruins social orders, and presents in plain view all that is incomprehensible and unopposable. We saw a mild instance of this experience with Covid before adequate vaccines were developed. And we have known for some time that our new human age, the Anthropocene—which has brought changes of climate; the elimination of natural habitats and increased proximity of humans to other species; and the capacity for rapid global travel—has created the conditions for far more lethal pandemics. Infectious disease will be part of our new medical reality as well as part of our new social imaginary. It seems to me that the proliferation of zombie narratives—from the George Romero films to the long-running series *The Walking Dead* to the film *World War Z* to the recent HBO series *The Last of Us*, among others—is a sign of this pandemic anxiety, a pandemic of anxieties, an anxiety about pandemics. There is some infectious force against which we have no defenses or understanding, a force that reverses all the known tendencies of life, a procreative energy of sheer death. It is somewhere incubating, mutating, and eventually it will find and overwhelm us. It is our absolute antithesis; and yet, perhaps, we already carry it within us.

And of course we do.

Artaud seeks to understand plague less as a physical and more as a psychic event. He dismisses Alexandre Yersin's discovery in 1894 of the bacillus that causes bubonic plague. This biological perspective, for Artaud (1958: 23), ignores the plague's "spiritual physiognomy . . . whose laws cannot be precisely defined." Artaud argues that the plague is "a psychic entity" (18) and is not spread by physical contact at all. It most affects those parts of the body "where human will, consciousness, and thought are imminent" (21). As a primarily mental phenomenon, plague acts as a form of communication. And thus we reach the essay's central analogy: theater is (like) plague; plague is (like) theater. The physicality of theater makes the similitude complete. The actor must physically embody his role. If a role calls for an actor to die, he must enact that dying physically. (The actor does not die, of course; Artaud does allow for that difference.) And the audience is, in ways that after all these millennia we do not understand (even since the discovery of mirror-neurons and other advances in neuroscience), also moved compulsively and viscerally. The analogy of emotional infection can be extended to all forms of art—think of Keats's famous hand held toward the reader—and perhaps the analogy works even better with arts that depend less on physical presence. What if in the theater, the infection is spread partly by inhaling dispersed particles of the actors' sweat?! What if masks could lessen the emotional contagion?

For Artaud, however, the physical confrontation that theater provides is the best likeness to the condition of plague. The decisive fact, he writes, is "that the theater, like the plague, is a delirium and is communicative" (27). Weber, once more in his capacity as translator, notes that in a passage depicting a demoralized populace in an infected city, "apparently immunized by their frenzied greed," they are looting houses even though they realize that their new acquisitions "will serve no purpose or profit" (Artaud quoted in Weber 157). The standard translation continues, "And at that moment the theater is born." (Artaud 1958: 24; quoted in Weber 157). But Weber observes that in Artaud's text, there is no mention of birth. The French reads, "*Et c'est alors que le theater s'installe.*" The theater "installs itself," "sets itself up"; or, as Weber prefers, the theater "takes over" (157). This is a significant difference, for it implies that theater—and plague—already existed, and that as the plague moves through the city, an unborn theater does

not need to suddenly come into existence, but that theater and plague are always, have always been, contiguous in their energies, delirium, and lack of external purpose. The plague, in Weber's version, provides the occasion for theater to assume its proper function.

And what then *is* the proper function of plague and theater—theater as plague—in Artaud? Weber cites Artaud's references to the "Absolute"—to "absolute freedom" and "absolute danger" (160). These suggest the human need, in Weber's gloss, "to destroy what is constrained and limited [in people] by the social and by the organic order." I would add that its purpose is also, perhaps, to act out, to perform—but in a way that is not a "representation," which is, on the contrary, absolutely real—the fundamentally inhuman character at the core of being human. Artaud doesn't mention Freud in his essay, but Eros and Thanatos would seem to be prominent actors backstage waiting for their cues, or perhaps busy elsewhere and missing them. Theater as plague communicates the impossible, which is the conceptual zone where existing symbols, terminologies, paradigms, myths no longer have currency. "There can be theater," Artaud (1958: 27–28) writes, "only from the moment when the impossible really begins and when the poetry which occurs on the stage sustains and superheats the realized symbols."

How do we conceptualize what we are, and the lives and fates we are granted? All the writers Weber surveys are desperately preoccupied with this question as, I would venture, is Weber. The inhuman contagion that Artaud tried to articulate much resembles the objects of his contemporary George Bataille's (1985) thinking—his idea of "expenditure" as labor that is unproductive, gratuitous, perverse, fatal, and yet central to all human activity. Expenditure and plague are kindred. Closer to the present, Jean Baudrillard's (1983) "ecstasy of communication" propounds modes of contact similar to those imagined by Artaud. So does some of the antisocial queer theory of Leo Bersani (1987) and Lee Edelman (2005). These all are versions of *jouissance*, the erotic commitment to the violent tearing apart of coherent selfhood and openness to the nonself, to death, to plague. Julia Kristeva's (1982) work on "abjection" would have a place here as well. And the grandfather of all of these is Nietzsche, especially the ancient opposition between Apollo and Dionysius (though we must remember that it is Apollo, not Dionysius, who shoots the invisible arrows of plague).

All these inconceivables, these catachreses, tend to merge, and discourses of plague may partake of all of them: the sacred, the sublime, the traumatic, the apocalyptic, the material, the ecstatic, the obscene. Plague is the obviation of the future, of any future. As Mary Shelley (2008: 230) wrote in *The Last Man*, “We glory in the continuity of our species, and learn to regard death without terror. But when any whole nation becomes the victim of the destructive powers of exterior agents . . . [its] inheritance on earth [is] cut off.” In the face of plague, “posterity is no more” (322). The future can be forgotten because the future is always the field of one’s projections. The future is not empty or blank; it is always full of what one has thrown there. In the event of plague, all that is forgotten. The emptiness is then filled by the unthinkable.

But, having gone this far afield, what does all this negative philosophy have to do with infectious disease? Weber ends his book with a comfortingly liberal encounter with Hölderlin’s reading of Sophocles’s *Oedipus* and brings us somewhat back to our solid and somewhat knowable planet, back from the distortions of horror’s strange merger with ecstasy. He writes that “Holderlin’s attempt to warn of the danger of responding to catastrophes by confounding the finite with the infinite, the individual with the general, the human with the divine” (195) anticipates lessons that we might well learn today about maintaining just civic order during pandemics. We must recognize and foster our genuine human interdependence and respond to medical crisis with care and solidarity. And, perhaps to extend his argument, we would do well to establish institutions and practices that will make such responses possible; to create “preexisting conditions” before the crisis will make the crisis more manageable.

A couple of final points. Weber’s expertise is in European literatures, and there is plenty of plague literature to read and think about in these collections. But it seems to me that a book on these European texts must also look at the transatlantic transmission of disease and at the immense consequences among Amerindian populations in North and Central America and the Caribbean. A chapter by Weber on the writing of Bartolomé de las Casas would be fascinating and welcome.

In another novel that Weber does not write about (I mentioned before the absence of Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man*), Philip Roth’s

Nemesis (2011), a powerful story about a polio epidemic in Newark in 1944, the protagonist, Bucky Cantor, is another Job-like figure. He is a young, athletic man whose poor eyesight has kept him out of the army. Trained as a physical education teacher, he supervises a playground sports program for boys in the neighborhood. As the polio spreads—as yet there was no vaccine or cure—Bucky is forced to make several decisions—some he makes well, some poorly. Ultimately, he is struck by the disease, and it is apparent that he must also have spread the disease to some of the boys he worked with. Later in life, he is filled with nothing but anger and remorse. He is not an observant Jew, but he is obsessed by the justice or injustice of God. How could God have done this to so many good and innocent people? His fiancé—whom he turns away—tells him stop being childish. No one can understand God, so stop trying. No one knows why innocent people are tortured and killed, she tells him. In this deeply Jewish book taking place in 1944, it is notable that no mention is made of Jews being murdered in Europe—and that certainly is part of the context or preexisting condition of our reading even if it is not on the minds of the characters. But Bucky will not and will never stop his questioning.

The narrator, whom we learn late in the book is one of Bucky's former students at the playground who also survived polio, calls him "this maniac of the why" (Roth 2011: 265). And it would seem that all of us still share this mania, even in a secular, scientific age when so many causes and remedies for illness are known. Plagues and their metaphors come and go. The diseases with the most persistent metaphors, as Susan Sontag (1990) explained, are those we do not yet understand. Tuberculosis once was encrusted with metaphors, as was cancer, as was AIDS, as was bubonic plague. Now that we understand and have much advanced our abilities to prevent and cure them, their metaphors have mostly dropped off—have become parts of literary history. But we know also that contemporary pandemics are connected to climate change, habitat destruction, and other aspects of the Anthropocene. Our scientific knowledge, the economy and technologies we've made, the changing biosphere, how well or how poorly we prepare for the next pandemic: these are the (pre)existing conditions for whatever predictably unpredictable plague will jump species and find its way to us. And, of course, there is still death and all other instances of the general problem of life.

Samuel Weber's book helps us profoundly in this questioning.



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