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Vol. 42 No. 9 · 7 May 2020

# Pointing the Finger

## Jacqueline Rose on 'The Plague'

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**E**VER SINCE the arrival of Covid-19 – in Western Europe, roughly at the end of January – sales of Albert Camus's *The Plague*, first published in 1947, have increased exponentially, an upsurge strangely in line with the graphs that daily chart the toll of the sick and the dead. By the end of March, monthly sales of the UK Penguin Classics edition had grown from the low hundreds to the mid-thousands and were rising (they are now up 1000 per cent). When trying to track the spread of a virus, tallies like these are always approximate and imperfect, but knowing this appears to make no difference to their quasi-sacred status. It is as if intoning numbers according to the same recognisable formula, however scary, allows us somehow to feel on top of a situation which everyone knows – and not just because of government incompetence – is out of our control. One of the things *The Plague* conveys is that, at the very moment we appear to be taking the grimmest reality on board, we might also be deluding ourselves. Counting is at once a scientific endeavour and a form of magical thinking. It can be a way of bracing ourselves for and confronting an onslaught, and at the same time a doomed attempt at omnipotence, a system for classifying the horror and bundling it away. What exactly are we being told each time the latest figures are announced, rising consistently, dropping slightly, increasing again? Other than that we cannot get a grip on what is happening. We take all the measures there are to be taken, adequate and inadequate according to where and who we are. And we wait.

In Camus's novel, it is only when men start dying, as opposed to hundreds of rats, that the public begins to understand. And even then, only slowly. The announcement of 302 dead citizens in the third week of the epidemic does not speak to the public imagination: 'The plague was unimaginable, or rather it was being imagined in the wrong way.' As Camus had put it in his composition notebook of 1938, the people are 'lacking in imagination ... They don't think on the right scale for plagues. And the remedies they think up are barely

suitable for a cold in the nose. They will die (develop).' Perhaps, some people in the novel suggest, not all these deaths are attributable to the plague. What would be the average number of deaths in a week, they ask, for a city of this size in the normal run of things? These are the formulae, almost exactly, that were reached for by Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro in their earliest denial mode (from which Bolsonaro remains unbudged). To Camus, such thinking shouldn't be dismissed as the ranting of dangerous fools, even when it is that. He is interested in how human subjects deal with disaster. Denial, or defence, is integral to how the mind behaves under pressure. Wars and plagues are met with disbelief. It is inconceivable that they are happening at all, or that, given their affront to human dignity – their 'stupidity', to use Camus's word – they will endure: 'There have been as many plagues as wars in history, yet always wars and plagues take people equally by surprise'; 'It was only as time passed, and the steady rise in the death rate could not be ignored, that public opinion came alive to the truth.'

And yet, for Camus, refusing to submit to indiscriminate numerical calculations also represents a form of creativity, a decision to imagine the world beyond the agonies of the hour. Doing otherwise risks replicating the merciless logic of the plague itself. The first real sign in the novel that the disease might be nearing its end comes when the numbers no longer add up or make sense: rising deaths on Mondays, while on Wednesdays, for some reason, hardly any at all; hundreds still dying in one district, other places where the plague seems to have quietly slipped away. The plague, Camus's narrator remarks, was losing 'its self-command, the ruthless almost mathematical efficiency that had been its trump card hitherto'. Mathematics flattens. It is a killing art. Counting humans, alive or dead, means you have entered a world of abstraction, the first sign that things have taken a desperate turn. Of course counting can also mean the exact opposite. If someone counts, they matter, with the further implication that they can be held answerable for their own deeds. Not to count, on the other hand, is to be overlooked or invisible, like the Arabs of Oran, whose virtual absence from Camus's portrayal of the French Algerian town where the novel is set seems now to be its most significant failing; more than a hundred thousand were living in Oran at the time.

'Counting' might, then, be an example of what Freud called the 'antithetical meaning of primal words' characteristic of the most ancient Egyptian languages: words which simultaneously denote one thing and its opposite, and which also possess a kind of magic, since they release you into a world of contradiction and mystery. To use such words is always to take a risk. The meaning you least intend lies just below the surface, like the plague which, even after it has abated, Camus insists, has never gone away. Instead, it patiently bides its time in 'bedrooms, cellars, trunks, handkerchiefs and old papers, until the day comes when, for the misery and edification of mankind, it awakens its rats and sends them forth to die in a happy city' (the last lines of the novel). In *The Plague*, the

pestilence is at once blight and revelation. It brings the hidden truth of a corrupt world to the surface. This is hinted at very early on, when the soft corpses of dead rats are felt underfoot in the night, but before any humans have died:

It was as if the earth on which our houses were planted was being purged of its secreted humours, thrusting up to the surface the abscesses and pus-clots that, up till then, had been doing their work internally. Imagine the amazement of our little city, hitherto so tranquil and now shaken to its core in a matter of days, like a healthy man who all of a sudden feels a revolutionary surge in his thick blood.

The novel's first English translator, Stuart Gilbert, translated 'doing their work internally' – the French is 'travaillaient intérieurement' – as 'that had been forming in its entrails'. This is more visceral but it loses the ambiguity of the French 'intérieurement', which could refer equally well to the restless innards of the body or to the ructions of the unconscious mind.

In a recent interview, Julia Kristeva noted that the telephone analysis sessions enforced by the pandemic, which hold the voice at a new distance, have been helping reticent patients speak of deep forms of memory and distress – the early death of a mother from cancer; abuse or abandonment as a child – which they had not previously been able to access or articulate. Places too have their secrets, which, like the plague, can seem to erupt out of nowhere. In the piece she was working on when she was shot and killed in Derry in April 2019, the Northern Irish journalist Lyra McKee described how the peace process had enforced a collective amnesia about the violence of the Troubles, which was now haunting the present 'like a ghost that refused to depart for the other world'. The greatest betrayal was the promise made by politicians that 'the days of young people disappearing and dying young would be gone'. The article was published in the *Guardian* on 28 March, in the first week of the lockdown, which added to its strange aura of foreboding, as if McKee had been warning us that we were about to enter, or re-enter, a state of war.

**I**N his translation of *The Plague*, Gilbert drops the reference to revolution in 'revolutionary surge' ('comme un homme bien-portant dont le sang épais se mettrait tout d'un coup en révolution'), which he renders more poetically as 'the blood seething like wildfire in his veins'. This is a real loss. 'Revolution' points towards Camus's *L'Homme révolté*, the book that followed *The Plague* in 1951 and whose English title – *The Rebel* – again sidesteps the key element of revolution, as well as that of disgust. 'In every act of rebellion [révolte],' Camus writes in the opening chapter, 'the man concerned experiences . . . a feeling of revulsion at the infringement of his rights.' In *The Plague* the inseparability of these two feelings is captured most succinctly in an exchange between the physician Bernard Rieux, the central character who reveals himself at the end of the novel as its narrator, and Father Paneloux, who preaches acquiescence and divine love to packed congregations of the fearful while also joining the fight against the plague (to which he finally succumbs). The two men have just witnessed the drawn-out death of a young child whom they believed they could save:

'There are times when the only feeling I have is one of mad revolt.'

'I understand,' Paneloux said in a low voice. 'That kind of thing is revolting because it passes human understanding. But perhaps we should love what we cannot understand.'

'No, Father. I've a very different idea of love. And until my dying day I shall refuse to love a scheme of things in which children are put to torture.'

The plague sparks a revolution in the blood. It erupts like a protest or insurrection, a fleeting moment of lucidity. Seen in this light, the novel could be issuing a warning, or asking a question that is driving many responses to the world laid bare by Covid-19. Under what conditions can the truth of social deprivation be seen? 'The lockdown worked like a chemical experiment that suddenly illuminated things,' Arundhati Roy observed recently as India's working-class citizens and migrant workers were spewed out of the rich towns and megacities 'like so much unwanted accrual'. In the UK, the unravelling of austerity began more or less the morning after Boris Johnson's election victory – though everyone understood that the initial shift was intended as a way of keeping on board the Red Wall voters who had merely 'lent' him their votes. No one could have predicted that the policy was about to be magnified a thousandfold by the present crisis, with ministers tripping over themselves to declare an end to Thatcherite shibboleths, nationalising and bailing out industries, flooding the NHS with billions of pounds and inscribing worker protections into law, as if the wool had been lifted from their eyes and a whole order of exploitation and inequality might just be about to end.

This brings us perilously close to the idea that a miracle can come out of a curse and that all the suffering will be proved to have been worthwhile (Camus is unequivocal that nothing can justify the suffering caused by the plague). But something is being registered which many people had turned a blind eye to before. Shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, a friend in New York said to me that the poor had suddenly become visible on the city's streets: before 1989, just to mention them was to be tarred straightaway with the brush of communism. Camus was tormented by the question of what humans are capable of doing, or permitting, with open eyes. *L'Homme révolté* was written in the 1940s when he 'could not understand how men could torture others while continuing to look at them'.

Today, the insistence is that 'we' are all in this together, even as social disparity – the frailty of that 'we' – has never been so obvious: in the gulf that exists between families with gardens and those housed in airless, clad tower blocks, a distinction disregarded by police rounding on people in parks; between the jogging culture of North London and the slums of Bangladesh, where the idea of social distancing, let alone of soap and hand sanitisers in abundance, is a sick joke; between the medical care given to the prime minister, assigned an ICU bed at a time of acute shortage while still fit enough – or so we were initially told – to govern, and the negligence suffered by Thomas Harvey, a nurse from East London who had worked in the NHS for twenty years, whose family were advised he didn't need to go to a hospital (they called four times) before he died gasping for air in his bathroom.

Oddly, the panic-buying provoked by Covid-19 has served to detract attention from the more basic problem of maintaining the food supply in times of pestilence and war. Focusing on individual greed, which has been the response in the UK ('Buy less!' or 'Only take your fair share!'), implies that, if only people restrained themselves, everyone would still be living in a world of plenty. Stories of robberies and attacks on supermarkets in the poorest areas of Southern Italy – where people face a real risk of starvation – barely make it into the news in the UK, suggesting that the only deaths worth reporting are those that are a direct result of the pandemic. As if nobody was dying before. This isn't unusual. Writing in the middle of the First World War, Freud noted the tendency to treat all deaths as woeful exceptions rather than something we all get round to in time. When the issue of supply is raised, it tends to be part of a discussion – a necessary one – about the possibly irreparable damage done to the food chain by globalisation. No one yet knows whether the world after Covid-19 will be more attuned to climate change, and will take the appropriate measures to respond to it, or if the exploitation of natural resources will accelerate to make up for lost time.

In Camus's novel, people starve. As the profiteers move in to take advantage of the shortages, the gulf between rich and poor widens: 'Profiteers were taking a hand and purveying at enormous prices essential foodstuffs not available in the shops. The result was that poor families were in great straits, while the rich went short of practically nothing.' It is a delusion to suggest that death is the great equaliser: 'Thus whereas plague through its impartial ministrations should have promoted equality among our city's folk, it now had the opposite effect and, thanks to the normal play of different forms of selfishness, it sharpened the sense of injustice in the hearts of mankind.' When the poor of Oran take to the streets under the banner 'Bread or air', their demonstrations are met with instant and brutal suppression. Camus is crying injustice. The plague is, or should be, an opportunity for a fairer world. He is calling for an insurrection, but he is in no doubt about what would be most likely to happen should the poor take matters – bread, air, life – into their own hands.

And not only the poor. In April, doctors who peacefully protested against the shortage of PPE equipment in hospitals in Pakistan were attacked by police with AK47 rifles, dragged through the streets, thrown into trucks and held in detention overnight. 'I thought, how could the police use violence against the frontline fighters against Covid-19 when some days ago the same officers had saluted us for leading during the pandemic,' one doctor said. 'I was wrong.' Another doctor, who had already had to refuse patients because of a lack of equipment (there were only 19 ventilators in his province), remarked simply: 'I think this pandemic is untreatable in Balochistan.'

**F**OR MANY contemporary critics, Camus's cry for justice, and even insurrection, did not go far enough. By the time *The Plague* was published, he had moved a long way from the 1930s, when he was expelled from the French Communist Party over his support for the founder of the Algerian Popular Party, Messali Hadj. Hadj had struggled for national liberation – though not immediate independence – and was deported from Algeria as a dangerous agitator following nationwide labour strikes and demonstrations. At that point, the PCF saw Camus as privileging the anti-colonial struggle over the class war. It is ironic (Jeremy Harding discussed the irony in the LRB of 4 December 2014 ()) that Camus should now be seen as letting down the Arab cause, having been such an astute critic of colonialism and in terms ahead of his time: he saw the 'institutional' injustice; the repeated 'lie' of assimilation; the manifest unfairness of land and income distribution; the 'psychological suffering' and damage caused by the 'contempt' of the coloniser towards the colonised. But, in the end, Camus would not be forgiven for failing to back full Algerian independence. From Sartre's point of view, in their famous falling-out, Camus's later turn against Soviet Communism was also a fatal error, a gift to the wrong side in the Cold War and a betrayal of the struggle against US imperialism in Vietnam.

Before that turn, Camus was best known in France for his role in the Resistance. He was editor of the underground French journal *Combat* from 1943 (a long extract from *The Plague* appeared clandestinely in a collection of Resistance publications). When it appeared in full, the novel was an instant bestseller. It was reprinted ten days after publication and within a few months had sold more than fifty thousand copies. That it was perceived as an allegory of the Resistance was, for a people trying to bury national shame, at once its strongest suit and the prompt for fierce critique. For Simone de Beauvoir, to write the story of France as allegory in 1947 was an evasion since it allowed the reader to avoid reckoning with the stain of Vichy. The two central characters, Rieux and Jean Tarrou, whose private chronicles of the plague Rieux draws on to tell the tale, become allies in the fight against the disease, and could fairly be described as heroes, though neither would accept the term. That epithet is reserved for the character of Joseph Grand for his acts of kindness and his dedication to an ideal (a temporary assistant municipal clerk on the 'derisory' salary of 62 francs and 30 centimes a day, he spends all his spare time writing and rewriting the first sentence of his novel). To its critics, *The Plague* was a whitewash of the inglorious part played by so many French citizens during the war. Only one character, Cottard, is recognisable as a collaborator.

At the same time, by casting the novel as a chapter in the eternal moral struggle against evil, Camus laid himself open to the charge of lifting the story out of history altogether. If fascism was a scourge of nature, then no one was to blame. 'Evil sometimes has a human face,' Roland Barthes wrote in the second of two articles about the novel in 1955, 'and about this *The Plague* says nothing.' The Nazis were agents of history and not some microbe (to redirect one of the favourite Nazi metaphors for their Jewish victims). It wasn't enough that the allusions to the Holocaust in the novel are, as Shoshana Felman has pointed out, unmistakable: in the hundreds of thousands of past plague victims existing in the contemporary imagination as 'no more than a puff of smoke'; or the daily toll of ten thousand dead which, Rieux calculates, would be the equivalent of all the people crowding the exits of five crammed cinemas being led to a city square 'to die in heaps'. Nor did it make any difference that the two charges seem to cancel each other out – rewritten history, no history at all. Camus felt he was being misread. The novel, he suggested, could be interpreted in three ways: as a tale about an epidemic; as a symbol of Nazi occupation (and of any totalitarian regime 'no matter where'); or as an exploration of the metaphysical problem of evil, of the sort Melville had attempted in *Moby-Dick*, 'with genius added'. It isn't clear that any one of these options would have satisfied the critics.

When Conor Cruise O'Brien noted the absence of Arabs from *The Plague*, he was joining a long trail of critique. Feminists would add their objection to the novel's representation of women. It opens with Rieux's wife in search of a cure for her tuberculosis; she leaves for a sanatorium in the surrounding mountains, where she will die. Rieux's mother arrives on

the day of his wife's departure, and stays with her son as a mostly silent companion to support him in a struggle in which she herself has no role to play. In Tarrou's journals, she is praised for her *effacement* and stillness, 'a motionless black figure which gradually merged into the invading darkness'. Tarrou describes the death of his own mother eight years before as her 'only effacing herself a trifle more than usual'. The women in the novel are either patient sufferers, or occasional prophets who are allowed to cry out their agony into the night sky. Not one of them ever attains the pitch of reflection gifted to the male characters, a way of being which, the novel suggests more than once, is the only true solace and ethical value to hold on to in times of plague. Rieux's mother, Tarrou tells us, 'knew everything without ever thinking'. Gilbert tries to save the day by translating this as 'the gift she had of knowing everything without (apparently) taking thought' but neither 'gift' nor 'apparently' are in the original. The women are extras, orbiting the male mind.

Today, as the daily bombardment of numbers continues, one chilling statistic is beginning to receive some attention: the rising number of women who, as a consequence of the lockdown, are suffering domestic violence with no exit. On 6 April, Refuge reported a 25 per cent increase in calls to its National Domestic Abuse helpline since the beginning of lockdown. Between 23 March and 12 April the project Counting Dead Women identified 16 domestic abuse killings (the average for the same period over the last ten years is five). Imagine a scenario where your only option as a woman is to stay silently locked in a home where your life might be at risk, or travel to a place where you do not know if you will survive. The women in *The Plague*, we might say, have been in lockdown for a long time when the story begins. Rereading the novel as the increase in violence against women began to be registered, I began to see that 'lockdown' is a pretty good way of describing not only their lives, but also the lives of so many women in the 1940s and 1950s. At the time when Camus was writing, stifling domesticity, plague or no plague, was the norm. Certainly that was true for my mother, whose first two daughters, my sister Gillian and myself, were born in 1947, the year *The Plague* was published, and 1949; her third daughter, Alison, was born in 1956. The copy I have been reading, underlined and covered with my markings, is the one I studied for French A level, when I was 17.

Much has changed since then – I have led a life my mother could only dream of (French A level was in many ways where it began). But then again, perhaps not so very much. I find myself asking whether women are now in double jeopardy, subject to a form of violence which, before the crisis, they at least had some chance to escape; but perhaps also the targets of something else, a type of revenge or punishment – 'backlash' as it is called – for the fact that, for most if not all women, in today's 'normal' (non-virus) run of things, being locked down, shut in, isolated in the home is no longer the norm. These women are first and foremost scapegoats for the awfulness of the hour, but they are also being murdered for their barely won freedom. In the course of a public conversation with me ten

years ago, Juliet Mitchell stated, to my complete surprise and that of our discussant, Jean Radford, that modern-day feminism, despite its setbacks and failings, had been an unqualified success. Because, she explained, feminism will always be 'the longest revolution', the one you never give up on even in the knowledge that it is unlikely ever to come to an end. When I read about the women whose only option today is to be trapped in their homes with an abusive partner, I find it hard to share Juliet's spirit. Except in so far as this virus, like Camus's plague, is making us newly alert to and responsible for the worst of what we see.

**W**HO IS ACCOUNTABLE for the plague? At a pivotal moment in the novel, the reader is offered one possible answer to this question by Tarrou, the chronicler on whom Rieux increasingly comes, both practically and psychologically, to rely. In the most intimate of several conversations between them, Tarrou recounts his personal history. Afterwards, to mark their new friendship, the two men go for a night-time swim, using their passes as 'frontline' workers to get out onto the pier. It is the novel's unique moment of shared pleasure. 'Of course a man should fight for the victims,' Rieux says as they set off, 'but if that stops him from loving anything else, then what's the use of fighting?' They are about to undress and dive into the moonlit sea:

Before them the darkness stretched out into infinity. Rieux, who could feel under his hand the gnarled, weather-worn visage of the rocks, felt a strange happiness. Turning to Tarrou, he caught a glimpse on his friend's calm and serious face of the same happiness, a happiness that forgets nothing, not even murder.

In the French, the final word is 'assassinat', which can translate as 'murder' or 'killing'. The word comes close to the idea of calculated crime and from there to mass murder, something the world had just witnessed, which had not yet been named either as 'genocide' or as a 'crime against humanity' but soon would be.

For Tarrou, murder is state murder. His most disturbing childhood memory is of watching in a courtroom as his father, a prosecuting attorney, condemned a man to death ('His head must fall'). The convict was clearly guilty and horrified at what he had done. He looked like a 'yellow owl blinded by too much light', tie awry, head swivelling in despair. Up to that moment Tarrou had believed in his own innocence as a man, but he realised then that to be a citizen subject is to be involved in sanctioned murder every day. No one is exempt or indemnified ('indemne'). Even those who are better than the rest, he explains, cannot prevent themselves from killing or letting others kill: 'Such is the logic by which they live and we can't stir a finger in this world without bringing the risk of death to somebody.' Alienated from his father – without telling him why – he becomes an activist for the abolition of the death penalty, but this fails to assuage his guilt. The plague comes as no

surprise: 'I had plague already,' he opens his monologue, 'long before I knew this town and this epidemic.' He is a carrier ('un pestiféré'), liable to infect others at every turn: 'Each of us has the plague within him; no one, no one on earth is free from it. And I know too that we must keep endless watch on ourselves lest in a careless moment we breathe in somebody's face and fasten the infection on him.' Tarrou has taken the principle of social distancing and run it into the epicentre of state power.

The proposition that we are all killers collides with 'Thou Shalt Not Kill,' perhaps the fiercest of the commandments. Tarrou is therefore very far from intoning that 'we are all miserable sinners,' the soft, handwringing lament he has already dispatched in his exchange with Father Paneloux. Nor is he scrambling key distinctions, in the way the novel as a whole was accused of doing. He is not conflating resisters and collaborators – Cottard is 'an accomplice' who is also in flight from some hidden past crime; Grand is a hero – or the powerful and destitute: all his sympathies are with the 'owl' in the dock, whatever his crime may have been. Rather he is pointing the finger at the modern state, which forbids violence to its citizens, not because, as Freud puts it, 'it desires to abolish it, but because it desires to monopolise it, like salt and tobacco'. For Tarrou, the responsibility of the citizen for his own violence is not diminished by such fraudulence but intensified, since it confronts him with what the state enacts in his name. The plague will continue to crawl out of the woodwork – out of bedrooms, cellars, trunks, handkerchiefs and old papers – as long as human subjects do not question the cruelty and injustice of their social arrangements. We are all accountable for the ills of the world. Tarrou aspires to be an 'innocent murderer' (even at one point to be a saint), by which he means one who recognises the plague as his problem and fights against it with every breath he takes. On the last page, the narrator tells his readers that he wrote the story so as to leave behind a memory of the injustice and violence undergone, and in order to state 'quite simply what we learn in a time of pestilence: that there are more things to admire in men than to despise'. There is still everything to play for. A thought for the aftermath, when there will be so much to be done.

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## Letters

Vol. 42 No. 10 · 21 May 2020

In responding to Jacqueline Rose's piece about Albert Camus's *The Plague* I have to declare an interest (LRB, 7 May). A little over twenty years ago, deeply dissatisfied with Stuart Gilbert's rendering from 1948, I laboriously completed a new translation. Although my proposal was rejected by Penguin, it did at least spur them into commissioning a new version by the late Robin Buss.

Rose makes no reference to Buss's translation, taking issue with Gilbert's instead. She says, for instance, that his rendering of the phrase 'travaillaient intérieurement' loses the ambiguity of the French 'intérieurement' ('internally'). This, she claims, 'could refer equally well to the restless innards of the body or to the ructions of the unconscious mind' – a fanciful piece of over-interpretation obviously inspired by Rose's interest in psychoanalysis. She herself, however, renders 'un rhume de cerveau' (a head cold) as a 'cold in the nose', and translates 'indemne' – 'free from', as Gilbert correctly puts it; Buss has 'immune' – as 'indemnified' ('indemnisé' in French). In Rose's reading, the anonymous character described as 'hibou rouge' – he has red hair – inexplicably becomes a 'yellow owl'.

In a similar vein, Rose sees Gilbert's failure to translate a metaphorical use of 'révolution' literally as 'a real loss', because she thinks it points towards *L'Homme révolté*, the translation of which as *The Rebel* she also deplores, because it 'again sidesteps the key element of revolution, as well as that of disgust'. (The almost unrecognisable quotation that follows is drawn from Anthony Bower's seriously defective 1951 translation.) But one of Camus's central arguments in *L'Homme révolté* – literally 'Man in Revolt' – is that killing in the name of revolution betrays the rebellion in which revolution has its roots.

In *The Plague*, the same argument is embodied in the experience of Tarrou, who tells Rieux that (metaphorically speaking) he had the plague long before he came to Oran. According to Rose, 'murder is state murder' for Tarrou, who, she says, becomes an activist for the abolition of the death penalty. What Rose neglects to add is that Tarrou's youthful activism took the form of revolutionary politics, believing that 'the society in which I lived was based on the death penalty and that, by fighting against it, I would be fighting against killing.' As he tells Rieux, he knew that, on occasion, his comrades would pronounce death sentences too, but he was told that these were necessary to bring about a world in which nobody would be killed. But then he witnessed a political execution – in Hungary – and realised that he had continued to be a plague-carrier ('pestiféré' – Buss has the misleading 'plague victim') throughout all the years that he thought he had been fighting against it. This can only be interpreted as a thinly veiled critique of the justification of killing – Auden's 'conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder' – used by the revolutionary left, a critique that Camus develops at length in *L'Homme révolté*. Camus/Tarrou isn't 'pointing the finger at the modern state' here, but at communism.

Following Conor Cruise O'Brien and later postcolonialist critics, meanwhile, Rose sees the virtual absence of 'Arabs' – Algeria's Muslim majority – from *The Plague* as the novel's most significant failing. In a letter of 1951 to the Kabyle writer Mouloud Feraoun, however, Camus explained: 'Don't think that if I didn't speak of the Arabs of Oran, it is because I feel separate from them. It's because, in order to present them, you have to speak of the problem that is poisoning the lives of all of us in Algeria: you would have had to write a different book from the one that I wanted to write.'

Neil Foxlee  
Lancaster

**Jacqueline Rose writes:** Neil Foxlee takes issue with my use of Stuart Gilbert's 1948 translation of Camus's *The Plague*, which for half a century was the only version of the novel available in English. Like him, I criticise this version at several points but missed, as he points out, the mistranslation of the man in the dock in Tarrou's monologue as a 'yellow owl' (he is indeed red-headed).

Mostly, however, his letter seems to turn on matters of interpretation on which we disagree. As I mention in the piece, Camus's eventual critique of communism made him many enemies on the left, including Sartre. Foxlee is right that Tarrou bemoans the justification for killing given by some who were in revolt against state power. But he unequivocally traces the origins of that revolt to the moment his father, as prosecuting attorney, condemned a criminal to death. It does no service to Camus to suggest that he is only targeting communism: it robs him, and indeed communism itself, of their indictment of a corrupt world order and the state violence that sustains it.

Similarly, Foxlee appears to dismiss the critique of the novel for its exclusion of the Arab population of Oran as 'postcolonialist', citing Camus's own explanation, which surely makes matters worse. To include them, he said, he would have had to speak of the problem 'poisoning the lives of everyone in Algeria' – a reference to the French occupation. But this is to gloss over the racialised disparity between coloniser and colonised on which he himself had been so eloquent. And why, we might ask, does the depiction of one occupation, the Nazi occupation of France, have to blind us to the barbarity of another? Especially now, when our willingness, or refusal, to acknowledge the greater vulnerability of the destitute and powerless in this pandemic will determine the kind of world we will be living in once it is over.

The journalist Lyra McKee was killed last year not in Belfast, as stated in Jacqueline Rose's piece on Camus's *The Plague*, but in the Creggan area of Derry (LRB, 7 May).

Editor, 'London Review'

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Vol. 42 No. 11 · 4 June 2020

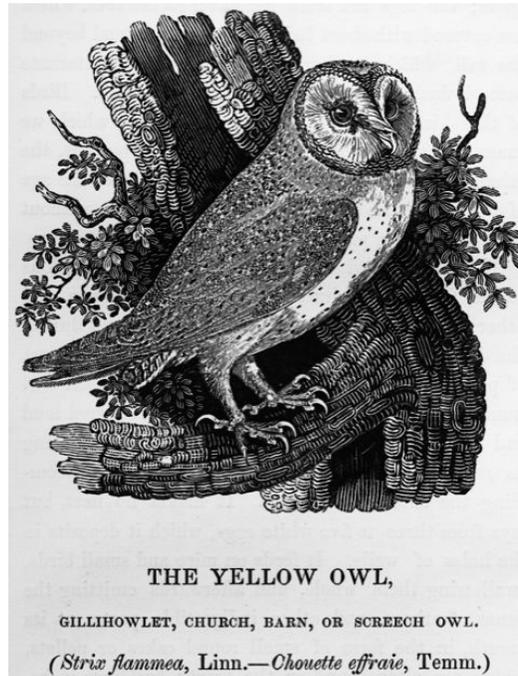
Jacqueline Rose writes that when Camus was working on *The Plague*, 'mass murder, something the world had just witnessed ... had not yet been named either as "genocide" or as a "crime against humanity" but soon would be' (LRB, 7 May). By the time it was published in 1947, the Nuremberg Trials had brought these terms to the fore. 'Crimes against Humanity', used by the Allied Powers as far back as 1915, was the fourth count of the indictment, levelled at all 24 defendants. The Polish lawyer Raphael Lemkin coined the term 'genocide' in his book *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, published in 1944. It was widely used at Nuremberg, and UN Resolution 96 defined genocide as a crime shortly afterwards, in December 1946.

**Matthew Barr**  
Belfast

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Vol. 42 No. 12 · 18 June 2020

Neil Foxlee reproaches Jacqueline Rose for turning Camus's 'hibou rouge' into a 'yellow owl' in her reading of *La Peste* (Letters, 21 May). But this is Stuart Gilbert's translation, published in 1948, not Rose's. In the novel, Tarrou refers to the figure in the dock as an owl four times, as 'hibou', 'hibou roux', 'hibou' and again 'hibou roux'. Gilbert translates the first, not the second, as 'yellow owl'. Foxlee misremembers 'hibou roux' – *roux* meaning 'russet', 'ginger' or 'redhead' – as 'hibou rouge', and there is such a creature: the red owl, or Soumagne's owl, named for the French honorary consul in Madagascar who sent a specimen to Paris in the 1870s. But is Gilbert's 'yellow owl' as inexplicable as Foxlee thinks it is? The man in the dock is 'un hibou effarouché par une lumière trop vive'; in Gilbert, 'a yellow owl scared blind by too much light'. 'Effarouché' may have led Gilbert by association to the yellow owl, one of many English names for what's sometimes known in French as the 'chouette effraie'. In the 1972 edition of *Le Petit Robert*, 'effaroucher' is glossed as 'effrayer' (to scare, or frighten).



Is there a flickering allusion in 'hibou roux' to Soumagne's owl? If Gilbert knew of the bird's existence, he might have reckoned a) that any attempt to render it in English should be used for Tarrou's first reference to an owl to avoid a surprise in the second and fourth; but b) that this bird was unknown in the northern hemisphere and the British colonies. Was there a comparable species that English readers would have recognised? The 'yellow owl' is the subject of a wood engraving by Thomas Bewick in Vol. 1 of *A History of British Birds* (1797). Bewick's illustration also carries the subheading 'chouette effraie'.

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Vol. 42 No. 13 · 2 July 2020

Jacqueline Rose and Neil Foxlee debate the significance of Tarrou's critique of violence in Camus's *The Plague* (Letters, 21 May). Rose rightly argues that Camus doesn't just have communist revolutionary violence in mind, but state violence altogether, for Tarrou's attitude can be traced to 'the moment his father, as prosecuting attorney, condemned a criminal to death'.

There is perhaps a further context for Camus's thinking in this respect. After the Liberation and before Gallimard published *La Peste* in 1947, the purges ('épuration') of collaborators began. Those who had committed treason by 'intelligence with the enemy' or who had perpetrated the new crime of bringing about 'national indignity' ('dégradation nationale') were prosecuted. Gisèle Sapiro, in *La Responsabilité de l'écrivain* (2011) records that 224 (3.5 per cent) of the accused

were writers and artists, twice their proportion (1.7 per cent) in the total population. In January 1945, Robert Brasillach, the editor of the fascist periodicals *Je suis partout* and *Révolution nationale*, was tried for intelligence with the enemy and sentenced to death. A petition was mounted asking for clemency. Writers were divided between those who asked for mercy, the 'indulgents' (usually from the older generation, with elite origins), and those, the 'intransigents', like Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, who refused to sign. Camus was in the former category. This wasn't because he was indulgent towards those writers who had 'erred': he fully accepted the severity of their crimes (Brasillach had denounced Jews, fully collaborated with the Nazis and issued incitements to the summary execution of Resistance fighters). Rather, Camus was opposed to capital punishment, which had been abolished in France between 1848 and 1939. In the event no grace was granted: Brasillach was executed on 6 February 1945.

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Vol. 42 No. 14 · 16 July 2020

Jeremy Harding raises the possibility that Stuart Gilbert had Thomas Bewick's 'yellow owl' in mind when mistranslating Camus's 'hibou roux' (Letters, 18 June). Conceivably. But could Camus, an unlikely ornithologist, really be alluding to the exotic Madagascar Red Owl, *Tyto soumagnei*? Robin Buss's admirably plain 2001 translation of *La Peste* for Penguin settles for 'red-headed owl', as the hapless guilty man in the dock is first described as having 'meagre red hair'. Camus's secondary narrator, Tarrou, unlike the dispassionate Dr Rieux, is given to fanciful reverse anthropomorphism, and there is an earlier 'hibou' in his narrative, a distantly cruel father who addresses his wife (a 'black mouse') and children ('poodles') as 'vous'. This first 'hibou' may have some kinship with the second, who is condemned to death by Tarrou's prosecutor father.

French owls are distinguished, according to *Le Petit Robert*, by their 'aigrettes' (ear tufts). Tufted 'hiboux' and round-headed 'chouettes' are also heavily gendered, grammatically and in figurative usage. It is unlikely that Camus or Tarrou would have confused a 'hibou' ('homme triste, solitaire') with the pejorative 'vieille chouette: vieille femme laide, acariâtre'. Since Bewick's day, the 'yellow owl' has been given its own genus, *Tyto* (including *T. soumagnei*), and family, *Tytonidae*, distinct from other owls grouped in Linnaeus's *Strigidae*, and in English we know it as the barn owl (*T. alba*). In French it is the 'effraie' or 'chouette effraie', whose name, Harding suggests, is perhaps evoked by Camus's 'hibou effarouché'. But the 'effraie' itself is frightening, as anyone who has heard its unearthly screech will testify. As it is a common enough bird of French villages (less common in Britain), Camus may have heard it in 1942, convalescing in the hamlet of Le Panelier (Haute-Loire) while working on a first draft of *La Peste*.

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Vol. 42 No. 15 · 30 July 2020

Bridget Fowler writes that 'la dégradation nationale' translates as 'national indignity' (Letters, 2 July). The new crime she refers to is in fact 'l'indignité nationale', the punishment for which was 'la dégradation nationale', which roughly translates as 'loss of civic rights'.

Fowler claims that capital punishment 'had been abolished in France between 1848 and 1939'. In 1848 the death penalty for political reasons was abolished. Victor Hugo, among others, hoped for total abolition and tried to get the words 'for political reasons' removed, but in vain. The last public execution in France was in 1939, but the guillotine remained in use until capital punishment was abolished by François Mitterrand and Robert Badinter in 1981.

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