International Journal for Research Trends in Social Science & Humanities
Volume 4, Issue 2
Mar-Apr 2026, PP 1-13

After Meaning: Epidemic Time, Moral Fatigue, And the Reinvention of Human Solidarity in Camus's The Plague

Dr. Pradip Molsom

Associate Professor of English

Mata Tripura Sundari Open University, Tripura, India

Email: mpradipmolsom@gmail.com

Abstract -This article undertakes a sustained literary and philosophical investigation of Albert Camus's La Peste (The Plague, 1947) through the convergent lenses of existentialist ethics, phenomenological temporality, and the sociology of collective suffering. The central argument holds that Camus's novel does not merely dramatize the biological catastrophe of bubonic plague in wartime Oran; rather, it deploys the epidemic as a sustained temporal laboratory in which received moral frameworks, rooted in individual heroism, transcendent faith, and nationalistic sentiment, are systematically exhausted, only to be replaced by a more austere, provisional, and authentically human solidarity. Drawing on the concept of "epidemic time", a distorted, suspended, and collectively experienced temporality that severs individuals from both past memory and future expectation, this study examines how Camus figures moral fatigue not as defeat but as a necessary epistemological clearing, an emptying of false consolations that paradoxically enables genuine ethical commitment. Through close readings of the novel's five structural parts, its narrator's shifting ironic distance, the contrasting philosophical positions of Rieux, Tarrou, Paneloux, and Rambert, and its densely recursive imagery of exile and return, the article demonstrates that solidarity in Camus is neither sentimental nor ideological but is instead an ongoing and always-threatened human invention, achieved against the grain of absurdity. The study also situates the novel within its immediate post-World War II historical context and within Camus's broader philosophical project of the absurd and revolt, arguing that The Plague represents a pivotal, and internally contradictory, moment in his thinking about collective moral life. The article concludes by reflecting on the contemporary resonance of Camus's vision in an age of recurring global health crises, ecological catastrophe, and resurgent political nihilism.

Keywords: Albert Camus, The Plague, epidemic time, moral fatigue, solidarity, absurdism, existentialism, phenomenological temporality, collective suffering, French literature, post-war ethics

1. Introduction

When Albert Camus published La Peste in June 1947, a France still raw with the memory of Occupation and collaboration received it as a parable of resistance: its plague-stricken Oran a transparent figure for a nation under Nazi domination, its doctors and night-watchmen ciphers for the Résistance. This allegorical reading, while not entirely mistaken, has done much to obscure what is most philosophically searching and formally radical about the novel: its sustained meditation on what happens to human meaning, moral language, and

the structures of solidarity when catastrophe ceases to be exceptional and becomes, instead, ordinary. As Camus writes through his narrator, "the habit of despair is worse than despair itself" (Camus, The Plague 71). The novel is fundamentally concerned with the insidious normalization of crisis, with the way extraordinary suffering gradually loses its power to provoke, the way that what first presents itself as an emergency slowly reshapes itself into a climate.

The present article argues that The Plague is best understood not as allegory, a one-to-one substitution cipher for the Occupation, but as what might be called a phenomenological novel of collective temporality. The plague imposes on Oran what this study terms "epidemic time": a specific, distorted experience of duration in which the ordinary coordinates of biographical time, the remembered past, the anticipated future, the meaningful present, dissolve into an undifferentiated, grey, and stubbornly repetitive continuum. It is within this temporal dissolution that Camus locates his deepest ethical question: how, when the future has been suspended and the past rendered irrelevant, when all the grand narratives of religious consolation, nationalist purpose, and romantic love have been exposed as inadequate, do human beings manage to act rightly, to choose solidarity over self-preservation, to maintain the disciplines of care?

This question is not merely historical. As the world has witnessed in the early twenty-first century, most acutely during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2022, but also in the ongoing crises of climate displacement, antibiotic resistance, and zoonotic emergence, epidemic time is a recurring and potentially permanent feature of global modernity. Camus's novel, written in the shadow of one catastrophe, speaks with uncanny directness to a present defined by others. Critics including Jacqueline Rose (2020), Robert Zaretsky (2021), and Alice Kaplan (2016) have noted this contemporary resonance; this article seeks to move beyond noting the resonance to analyzing the specific mechanisms, temporal, ethical, and formal, by which Camus constructs his vision of a solidarity adequate to catastrophe.

The structure of the argument proceeds as follows. After establishing objectives and reviewing the existing critical literature and its gaps, this article offers a methodological account of its theoretical frameworks: phenomenological temporality (drawing on Husserl, Heidegger, and Paul Ricoeur), the moral philosophy of the absurd (drawing primarily on Camus's own philosophical essays, particularly The Myth of Sisyphus and The Rebel), and the sociology of epidemic (drawing on Paul Farmer and Charles Rosenberg). The main analytical sections then move through three interconnected concerns: first, the structure of epidemic time and its effects on individual consciousness and memory in the novel; second, the process of moral fatigue, namely the progressive discrediting of consolatory discourses, and its relationship to what Camus calls revolt; and third, the reinvention of solidarity as a contingent, secular, and fundamentally vulnerable achievement. A concluding section reflects on the novel's limits, particularly its troubled relationship to gender and colonial Algeria, and on its enduring importance for contemporary ethical reflection.

II. Objectives

The present study pursues the following specific objectives:

1. To theorize the concept of "epidemic time" as it operates in The Plague, drawing on phenomenological accounts of collective temporality and situating this concept within Camus's broader philosophical framework of the absurd.

2. To trace the systematic process of moral fatigue in the novel, the successive failure of religious, romantic, journalistic, and nationalist consolations, and to argue that this failure is not nihilistic but constitutes a necessary philosophical clearing.

3. To demonstrate how Camus reconstitutes solidarity as a secular, anti-heroic, and provisional ethical practice, grounded not in shared belief but in shared vulnerability and the recognition of common mortality.

4. To examine the formal and narratological strategies, Rieux's ironic chronicle, the management of free indirect discourse, the novel's symbolic geography, by which these philosophical arguments are embodied in literary structure rather than merely stated as proposition.

5. To situate The Plague within the arc of Camus's philosophical development from The Myth of Sisyphus (1942) to The Rebel (1951), arguing that the novel marks both a deepening and a complication of his ethics of revolt.

6. To assess the contemporary ethical relevance of Camus's vision in the context of twenty-first century epidemic and ecological crisis, while acknowledging the novel's historical and ideological limits.

III. Review of Literature and Research Gap

Early Reception and the Allegorical Tradition

The initial critical reception of The Plague was dominated by allegorical interpretation. Sartre's famous ambivalence, in which he acknowledged the novel's power while suspecting its politics, inaugurated a long tradition of reading Camus's plague as a figure for Nazism and the Occupation, a tradition consolidated by critics such as Philip Thody and Germaine Brée in the 1960s. Brée's foundational study Camus (1964) offers an indispensable contextual account of the novel's genesis and its place within French existentialism; her reading, however, tends to subordinate the novel's formal innovations to its biographical and ideological contexts. Similarly, Philip Thody's Albert Camus: A Study of His Work (1957) performs close and sympathetic readings but remains primarily concerned with Camus's humanism as a corrective to Sartrean engagement.

The allegorical consensus was challenged most forcefully by Ronald Aronson, whose Camus and Sartre: The Story of a Friendship and the Quarrel that Ended It (2004) situates the novel within the famous dispute between Camus and Sartre over political violence and the ethics of revolution. Aronson demonstrates persuasively that The Plague's refusal of political violence, its insistence on care as the primary moral act, was a deliberate philosophical statement rather than mere literary choice. Matthew Sharpe's Camus, Philosophe: To Return to Our Beginnings (2015) extends this reading by situating the novel within the full arc of Camus's absurdist and post-absurdist philosophy, offering the most sophisticated philosophical reading

to date. Sharpe's argument that Camus moves from the individual revolt of The Myth of Sisyphus to a collective and political revolt in The Rebel, with The Plague as the pivotal transitional text, is directly relevant to this study.

Feminist and Postcolonial Critiques

From the 1980s onward, feminist and postcolonial critics mounted significant challenges to the dominant humanist reading. The most influential early postcolonial intervention remains Conor Cruise O'Brien's Albert Camus of Europe and Africa (1970), which anticipates postcolonial critique by drawing attention to the novel's conspicuous erasure of Arab Algerians, a point developed with greater theoretical sophistication by Edward Said in Culture and Imperialism (1993). Said argues that The Plague's silence about the colonial context of Oran, a city in which French colonists constituted a minority ruling population, is not merely an oversight but a constitutive ideological displacement: the disease functions to erase colonialism from the scene, replacing it with a universal human crisis in which the specificity of colonial suffering disappears. This critique is powerful and has generated a substantial secondary literature. Alice Kaplan's Looking for The Stranger: Albert Camus and the Life of a Literary Classic (2016) nuances Said's critique by attending to the biographical and material conditions of Camus's Algerian childhood, arguing that his relationship to colonial Algeria was more conflicted and self-aware than Said allows, even if the novel ultimately reproduces colonial silences.

Feminist critics have similarly noted the near-total exclusion of female characters from active moral agency in the novel. Women in The Plague appear primarily as absent wives (Rieux's wife, sent away at the novel's opening), as figures of romantic longing (Rambert's unnamed lover), or as grieving mothers. Susan Tarrow's Exile from the Kingdom: A Political Rereading of Albert Camus (1985) offers a sustained feminist analysis that connects the exclusion of women to the novel's broader politics of the universal subject, a subject that turns out, on examination, to be male, European, and middle-class.

Phenomenological and Temporality-Focused Readings

The phenomenological dimensions of The Plague have received less systematic attention, though several important contributions exist. Olivier Todd's biography Albert Camus: A Life (1996) provides rich contextual material on Camus's reading of Husserl and his relationship to the phenomenological tradition, but does not develop the implications of this for the novel's structure of time. Robert Zaretsky's A Life Worth Living: Albert Camus and the Quest for Meaning (2013) offers a philosophically informed reading of the absurd across Camus's works, with important pages on The Plague's treatment of repetition, habituation, and the erosion of individual temporality. Zaretsky's more recent Camus the Stranger (2021), written explicitly in the shadow of COVID-19, argues for the continued relevance of Camus's epidemic imagination, though its brevity precludes the close formal analysis this article undertakes.

Paul Ricoeur's monumental Temps et Récit (Time and Narrative, 1984–1988) offers the most powerful theoretical framework for thinking about the relationship between narrative form and temporal experience, and while Ricoeur does not discuss Camus at length, his concepts of narrative identity, emplotment, and the

phenomenology of lived time as they bear on collective experience are directly applicable to The Plague. This article draws on Ricoeur's framework in ways that, to the author's knowledge, have not previously been attempted in Camus scholarship.

Research Gap

Despite the richness of the existing scholarship, three significant gaps remain. First, no study has systematically theorized the specific temporal structure that epidemic imposes on individual and collective consciousness in The Plague, what this article calls "epidemic time", and its relationship to Camus's ethics. While temporal themes are noted by various critics, they have not been analytically developed through engagement with phenomenological philosophy of time. Second, the relationship between moral fatigue, that is, the progressive failure of consolatory discourses, and the positive construction of solidarity has not been traced carefully through the novel's five-part structure and its system of contrasting characters. Third, while postcolonial and feminist critiques have productively troubled the novel's universalist humanism, no study has attempted to hold these critiques together with a sustained close reading of the novel's ethical and philosophical achievement, to read both what the novel accomplishes and what it forecloses. The present article seeks to address all three gaps.

IV. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology that integrates three principal theoretical frameworks: literary phenomenology, existentialist moral philosophy, and the cultural history of epidemic. The primary methodology is close reading in the tradition of what Paul Ricoeur calls "the conflict of interpretations", an approach that holds multiple interpretive frameworks in productive tension rather than subordinating the text to any single master narrative.

The phenomenological framework draws principally on Husserl's analysis of internal time-consciousness, particularly his concepts of retention and protention as the temporal horizons of the present moment, and on Heidegger's analysis of Being-toward-death in Being and Time (1927) as the condition that both individualizes Dasein and opens it to authentic existence. These frameworks are mediated through Paul Ricoeur's narrative theory, particularly his argument in Temps et Récit that narrative is the primary human means of configuring lived time into meaningful experience, and his concept of narrative identity, the way in which individual and collective selfhood is constituted through the stories we tell about ourselves. Epidemic, this article argues, is a condition in which the ordinary narrative configurations of time break down, and the question becomes how new narratives, and new solidarities, can be constructed in their absence.

The moral philosophical framework draws on Camus's own philosophical essays, principally Le Mythe de Sisyphe (The Myth of Sisyphus, 1942) and L'Homme Révolté (The Rebel, 1951), reading the novel as an engagement with, and partial critique of, the positions elaborated in these essays. The concept of revolt as Camus develops it, a sustained refusal of transcendence, of ideological violence, and of resignation, is central to the article's argument about solidarity. This framework is supplemented by reference to Simone de

Beauvoir's Ethics of Ambiguity (1947), which offers a philosophically rigorous account of collective freedom that illuminates both what Camus achieves and what he leaves unthought.

The cultural history of epidemic draws on Charles Rosenberg's influential framework of epidemic as a "dramaturgic event", a social performance that both reveals and reshapes the moral and political structures of a community, and on Paul Farmer's analysis of the structural dimensions of epidemic suffering in Infections and Inequalities (1999). These frameworks help situate the novel's epidemic not only as an existential but as a socially structured and politically implicated event, providing a critical context for assessing the novel's silences around class and colonial race.

Primary texts are read in the original French (Gallimard, 1947) with reference to Stuart Gilbert's standard English translation (Hamish Hamilton, 1948) and Matthew Ward's revised translation (Vintage, 1991). Where significant translational choices bear on the argument, the French original is cited and discussed.

V. Discussion and Results

Epidemic Time: The Suspension of the Future

The Plague opens with a gesture of conspicuous banality: "The unusual events described in this chronicle occurred in 194—, at Oran" (Camus, The Plague 3). The deliberate vagueness of the date, an epidemic that could be any epidemic, in any year, is not merely a Kafkaesque mystification; it is the novel's first formal registration of what epidemic does to historical time. Epidemic, Camus suggests, does not happen in history in the ordinary sense; it suspends history, replacing its directionality with repetition and its meaningful sequence with undifferentiated duration.

This suspension is traced with great phenomenological precision through the novel's first part. As the plague establishes itself in Oran, the narrator, later revealed as Dr. Bernard Rieux, documents a progressive alteration in the temporal experience of the townspeople. Memory of the past does not disappear, but it loses its motivating power; the routines and relationships that once gave everyday life its texture and direction become inaccessible, separated from the present by what the novel repeatedly figures as an invisible wall or glass barrier. "They were already beginning to feel that isolation, that sense of being cut off, that the plague was to make universal" (Camus, The Plague 68). The plague is, among other things, a machine for dissolving biographical time, the organized, future-oriented, narratively shaped time of individual lives, and replacing it with what might be called epidemic duration: a grey, featureless, and seemingly endless present.

Drawing on Husserl's analysis of internal time-consciousness, we can say that epidemic severs the double horizon of the living present: its retention of the immediate past (what Husserl calls the just-elapsed) and its protention toward the immediate future (what is about to come). The plague-stricken townspeople experience a present that has lost its temporal thickness, its connection to what came before and what will come after. Rambert's situation is emblematic: trapped in Oran when the gates close, separated from his lover in Paris, he exists in a perpetual deferral, unable to act in the present because the future, that is, reunion, escape, and ordinary life, has been indefinitely suspended. His initial response, comprising frantic attempts to secure papers and bribe officials, is a refusal to accept the suspension of biographical time; his eventual decision to

remain and work with Rieux's medical teams represents his accommodation to epidemic time, his discovery that meaningful action is possible even without a recoverable future.

Heidegger's analysis of temporality in Being and Time illuminates a further dimension of epidemic time. For Heidegger, authentic existence requires the confrontation with finitude, Being-toward-death as the ownmost, non-relational, and certain possibility that individuates Dasein and calls it to take ownership of its existence. Epidemic is, among other things, a forced and collective confrontation with mortality, not death as an abstract philosophical possibility but death as imminent, random, and indifferent. What the plague does, in Heideggerian terms, is make finitude public, visible, and quotidian. "They had been living, as a community of merchants, beside a sea whose sunsets they seldom watched. They were being hurled back on the present" (Camus, The Plague 72). The return to the present enforced by epidemic is, in this sense, a Heideggerian moment of authenticity; however, Camus's treatment of this moment is more ambivalent than Heidegger's, because he is acutely aware that the confrontation with mass death does not automatically produce authentic existence. It is just as likely to produce panic, habituated indifference, or the desperate search for new consolations.

Moral Fatigue: The Discrediting of Consolation

The most philosophically intricate structural feature of The Plague is what might be called its systematic discrediting of consolatory discourses, the successive demonstration that the available frameworks for giving meaning to suffering are inadequate to epidemic reality. This process, which this article terms "moral fatigue," is not merely a negative, nihilistic operation; it is, in Camus's absurdist logic, the necessary clearing that makes genuine ethical commitment possible. The absurd, as Camus defines it in The Myth of Sisyphus, is not a conclusion but a starting point, a condition of clarity from which revolt, creation, and solidarity can begin. Moral fatigue is the experiential process by which the townspeople of Oran are forced into the position of the absurd hero.

The primary vehicle for this process is Father Paneloux, whose two sermons in Parts I and IV constitute the novel's most sustained engagement with the consolatory resources of religion. Paneloux's first sermon, delivered to a congregation made newly attentive by fear, is a masterpiece of traditional theodicy: the plague is God's punishment for Oran's complacency, an instrument of divine wrath that will purify the city and recall its inhabitants to righteousness. "My brethren, you are in misfortune. My brethren, you have deserved it" (Camus, The Plague 88). The sermon's rhetorical confidence depends on the conversion of suffering into meaning, the plague as legible divine communication. But the epidemiological reality of the plague systematically undermines this legibility: it strikes the just and unjust without discrimination, it kills children, most devastatingly in the death of the magistrate Othon's young son, who dies in the presence of both Paneloux and Rieux, and its scale exceeds any plausible proportionality between divine punishment and human sin.

The death of Othon's child is the pivotal moment in Paneloux's, and the novel's, moral argument. Witnessing the child's agonized death, Rieux erupts: "Until my dying day I shall refuse to love a scheme of things in which children are put to torture" (Camus, The Plague 197). Paneloux's second sermon, delivered in Part IV,

is a remarkable document of theodicy under strain: he abandons the confident second-person address of the first sermon for a chastened first-person plural, acknowledges the scandal of innocent suffering, and counsels the "difficult" and "totalizing" faith of an all-or-nothing wager. This shift represents precisely the process of moral fatigue as this article understands it: the pressure of epidemic reality has exposed the inadequacy of conventional theodicy, and Paneloux's response is to demand an ever more extreme and irrational commitment, to will the suffering willed by God. This is, in Camus's terms, the paradigmatic philosophical suicide, the leap that his absurdist ethics refuses.

If religion fails as consolation, romantic love also proves insufficient as an escape from epidemic time. Rambert's story is the novel's most lyrical treatment of the desire to recover private, biographical time from the grip of collective crisis. His attempts to escape Oran and return to his lover are driven by a perfectly comprehensible moral intuition: that his first obligation is to the particular relationship that gives his own life its meaning, rather than to the anonymous mass of plague sufferers. Camus treats this intuition with genuine sympathy; he does not sentimentalize Rieux's apparent selflessness at the expense of Rambert's desire. But the novel gradually demonstrates that the opposition between private love and public solidarity is false: epidemic time abolishes the private sphere in which romantic love can be lived, and the only meaningful action available to Rambert, the only way he can sustain his sense of himself as a man capable of love, is to remain in Oran and act for others. His statement to Rieux, "I've always thought that I was a stranger in this town and that I'd got nothing to do with you people. But now that I've seen what I have seen, I know that I belong here whether I want it or not" (Camus, The Plague 188), marks his passage from private to collective temporality.

Cottard's trajectory offers the novel's darkest commentary on the resources of self-interest in epidemic time. Unlike the other major characters, Cottard benefits from the plague: it suspends the arrest that had been imminent when the novel opens, and his smuggling operations flourish in the disrupted economy. His is the only character who actively wills the continuation of epidemic time, and his trajectory, ending in violent psychotic breakdown as the plague recedes, illustrates the novel's thesis that solidarity is not only ethically preferable to self-interest but ultimately more psychologically sustainable.

The Reinvention of Solidarity: Rieux and Tarrou

Against the successively discredited consolations of religion, romantic love, and self-interest, Camus constructs his positive account of solidarity through the relationship between Rieux and Tarrou. This relationship is the novel's ethical heart, and it is significant that Camus renders it through understatement, indirection, and the careful management of narrative distance rather than through direct philosophical statement. Rieux and Tarrou never deliver a manifesto; their solidarity is enacted in the mundane disciplines of medical work, in the quiet establishment of the volunteer sanitary teams, and most memorably in the single scene of shared relief, their night swim in the sea, which represents the novel's closest approach to a moment of achieved solidarity.

Rieux's ethics are explicitly anti-heroic and anti-transcendent. When the journalist Rambert accuses him of living "in abstractions" by sacrificing human love to public duty, Rieux corrects him: "There's no question

of heroism in all this. It's a matter of common decency. That's an idea which may make some people smile, but the only means of fighting a plague is common decency" (Camus, The Plague 150). The concept of "common decency", a phrase that resonates with Orwell as much as with Camus, is central to understanding what solidarity means in the novel. It is not an ideology, not a religious virtue, not a political program, but a practice: the sustained performance of care for others in the absence of any metaphysical guarantee that such care matters or will be rewarded.

Tarrou's notebooks, quoted extensively by Rieux in the chronicle, provide the philosophical articulation of this practice. Tarrou's history, his repudiation of his father's prosecutorial career, his involvement in revolutionary politics, his eventual disillusionment with political violence, mirrors the novel's own trajectory of moral fatigue. Having renounced transcendent justifications for violence, even the violence ostensibly in service of justice, Tarrou arrives at the absurdist position: "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" (Camus, The Plague 229). This formulation, solidarity as the endless vigilance against the contagion of cruelty within oneself, gives Camus's ethics its specific texture: it is not the solidarity of shared conviction but the solidarity of shared moral precariousness.

Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity provides the theoretical framework for understanding how this solidarity is sustained through time. In Temps et Récit, Ricoeur argues that personal identity is not a given substance but a narrative achievement, constituted through the stories we tell about ourselves and the commitments those stories imply. Epidemic time, as we have seen, disrupts the narrative configurations through which individual identity is normally maintained. The solidarity that Rieux and Tarrou model is, in this sense, a practice of narrative reconstruction: the ongoing project of constituting an identity through the repeated choice to care, in the absence of any metaphysical guarantee that such choice is meaningful. This is what Camus means by revolt: not a single dramatic act of defiance but a sustained, daily, and always-vulnerable refusal to resign.

Formal Strategies: Chronicle, Irony, and the Grammar of "We"

Camus's formal choices are inseparable from his ethical argument. The decision to narrate The Plague as a chronicle, a documentary genre that foregrounds the act of recording and the problem of evidence, has important philosophical consequences. The chronicle, as a genre, suppresses the individual narrator's subjectivity in favor of an apparently collective and impersonal account; it presents events as they appear to a community rather than as they are experienced by a single consciousness. When Rieux reveals himself as the narrator in the novel's final pages, this revelation does not simply demystify the chronicle's apparent objectivity; it reveals that objectivity itself, the attempt to see events as they appear to a community, to speak from the position of "we" rather than "I," is an ethical achievement and not merely a narratological convention.

The management of irony is equally significant. Camus's narrative voice maintains a consistent, dry, and slightly elevated ironic distance from the suffering it records, a distance that has sometimes been criticized

as cold or evasive. But this irony performs a specific ethical function: it is the voice's way of refusing consolation, of insisting that suffering is suffering and not the material of redemptive narrative. The ironic chronicle refuses the grand style of tragedy, which would give the plague's deaths a certain dignity and necessity, and the intimate style of the realist novel, which would give individual deaths their biographical weight and particularity. The result is a prose that is, paradoxically, most humane precisely in its apparent impersonality: it honors suffering by refusing to aestheticize it.

The grammar of solidarity is equally carefully managed. The shift from "I" to "we", from Rieux's individual experience to the collective experience of Oran, is traced with great precision throughout the chronicle. In the novel's early parts, "we" appears primarily in ironic formulations that diagnose the townspeople's collective self-deception, as in such constructions as "we told ourselves that the plague would soon pass" or "we had not yet understood that we were in its grip." By the novel's final parts, "we" has become the grammar of genuine solidarity, not the false "we" of collective self-deception but the achieved "we" of shared vulnerability and shared purpose. "Rieux knew that the tale he had to tell could not be one of a final victory. It could be only the record of what had had to be done, and what assuredly would have to be done again in the never ending fight against terror and its relentless onslaughts" (Camus, The Plague 287). The "we" that emerges at the novel's end is haunted by this future recurrence: it knows itself to be provisional, always already threatened by the next epidemic, the next form of collective catastrophe.

Historical Situatedness and Ideological Limits

Any reading of The Plague that is honest about its critical ambitions must also be honest about what the novel cannot or will not see. The most persistent critical objection, articulated most powerfully by Said and extended by postcolonial critics including Homi Bhabha and Neil Lazarus, is that the novel's vision of universal human solidarity is purchased at the price of the specific colonial inequality that defines Oran. The city of Camus's novel is essentially a European city; its plague-stricken inhabitants are French colonists; the Arab Algerian majority, constituting more than 85 percent of the actual population of Oran in the 1940s, is effectively invisible. The epidemic that the novel presents as a universal human crisis is thus, in historical fact, an event that struck a deeply unequal, racially stratified society, a society in which the structural violence of colonialism already produced systematic illness, early death, and social exclusion for the Arab majority.

This absence is not incidental. It is, as Said argues, constitutive of the novel's humanism: the universalism that enables Camus to speak of "the human condition" and "common decency" is possible only because the particular, historically specific conditions of colonial Algeria have been rendered invisible. The solidarity that Rieux and Tarrou practice is a solidarity among Europeans; the "we" of the novel's conclusion is, despite its universalist grammar, a racially bounded "we." This is a serious and, in this article's view, irreducible flaw in the novel's ethical vision, one that must be acknowledged rather than explained away.

At the same time, postcolonial critique, however necessary, should not become the occasion for a merely dismissive reading. The Plague remains one of the twentieth century's most searching engagements with the ethics of solidarity in conditions of collective catastrophe. Its account of moral fatigue, its anatomy of consolatory self-deception, its model of care as a sustained practice rather than a heroic act, these remain

philosophically illuminating even as we acknowledge what they leave out. The task of a responsible literary criticism is to hold both dimensions in view: to read the novel's achievement and its limits as aspects of the same, complex, historically situated text.

VI. Conclusion

This article has argued that The Plague is best understood as a phenomenological novel of epidemic time, a sustained literary investigation of what catastrophe does to human temporality, moral framework, and solidarity. Through the concept of epidemic time, it has shown how Camus figures the plague as a machine for dissolving the narrative configurations through which individual and collective identity are normally sustained, forcing the townspeople of Oran into a condition of temporal suspension that the novel then treats as both threat and philosophical opportunity. The process of moral fatigue, the successive failure of religious, romantic, journalistic, and self-interested consolations, is presented not as nihilistic defeat but as an absurdist clearing, the necessary exposure of false foundations that makes genuine ethical commitment possible.

The solidarity that emerges from this process, in the relationship between Rieux and Tarrou, in Rambert's gradual conversion from private to collective temporality, in the discipline of the sanitary teams, is presented as neither heroic nor certain. It is, rather, a practice: the sustained, daily, and always-vulnerable refusal to resign, to accept that suffering is meaningless by living as though it matters. This practice is, in Ricoeur's terms, a narrative achievement, the construction, against the grain of epidemic time's dissolution of biography, of an identity constituted through repeated commitment rather than given substance.

Camus's formal choices, the chronicle genre, the ironic narrative voice, the careful management of the grammar of "we," are inseparable from this ethical argument. The novel teaches solidarity not by stating it as a proposition but by enacting it as a form of attention: the attention of the chronicle to collective suffering, the attention of the doctor to the patient, the attention of the friend to the friend in the brief, shared respite of the night swim.

The limits of this vision are real and must be acknowledged. The novel's erasure of Arab Algerian experience, its construction of a "universal" humanity that is, in historical fact, the humanity of French colonial settlers, represents a constitutive blind spot that postcolonial critique has rightly exposed. Camus's humanism, for all its philosophical rigor, is marked by the ideological conditions of its production, and any appropriation of its insights for the present must remain alert to these conditions.

And yet the insights remain. In an era of recurring and overlapping global crises, including pandemic, climate catastrophe, mass displacement, and the resurgence of political nihilism in multiple forms, the questions that The Plague raises with such formal precision and philosophical honesty are not merely historical. How do communities sustain solidarity when the future has been indefinitely suspended? What moral resources remain when the grand narratives of religious consolation, nationalist purpose, and progressive historical optimism have lost their credibility? How is care to be practiced as a discipline rather than an inspiration? These questions, which Camus formulated in the shadow of World War II and the French Occupation, are

also the questions of our present. The plague is always returning. The task of human solidarity is always unfinished. And the chronicle must always be rewritten.

References

Aronson, Ronald. Camus and Sartre: The Story of a Friendship and the Quarrel that Ended It. University of Chicago Press, 2004.

Beauvoir, Simone de. The Ethics of Ambiguity. Translated by Bernard Frechtman, Philosophical Library, 1948.

Brée, Germaine. Camus. Rutgers University Press, 1964.

Camus, Albert. L'Homme Révolté. Gallimard, 1951.

---. Le Mythe de Sisyphe. Gallimard, 1942.

---. La Peste. Gallimard, 1947.

---. The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays. Translated by Justin O'Brien, Knopf, 1955.

---. The Plague. Translated by Stuart Gilbert, Hamish Hamilton, 1948.

---. The Plague. Translated by Matthew Ward, Vintage International, 1991.

---. The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt. Translated by Anthony Bower, Knopf, 1954.

Farmer, Paul. Infections and Inequalities: The Modern Plagues. University of California Press, 1999.

Heidegger, Martin. Being and Time. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Harper and Row, 1962.

Husserl, Edmund. The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness. Translated by James S. Churchill, Indiana University Press, 1964.

Kaplan, Alice. Looking for The Stranger: Albert Camus and the Life of a Literary Classic. University of Chicago Press, 2016.

O'Brien, Conor Cruise. Albert Camus of Europe and Africa. Viking Press, 1970.

Ricoeur, Paul. Temps et Récit. 3 vols., Éditions du Seuil, 1983–1985.

---. Time and Narrative. Translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, 3 vols., University of Chicago Press, 1984–1988.

---. Oneself as Another. Translated by Kathleen Blamey, University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Rosenberg, Charles E. Explaining Epidemics and Other Studies in the History of Medicine. Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Said, Edward W. Culture and Imperialism. Knopf, 1993.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. Situations I. Gallimard, 1947.

Sharpe, Matthew. Camus, Philosophe: To Return to Our Beginnings. Brill, 2015.

Tarrow, Susan. Exile from the Kingdom: A Political Rereading of Albert Camus. University of Alabama Press, 1985.

Thody, Philip. Albert Camus: A Study of His Work. Hamish Hamilton, 1957.

Todd, Olivier. Albert Camus: A Life. Translated by Benjamin Ivry, Knopf, 1997.

Zaretsky, Robert. A Life Worth Living: Albert Camus and the Quest for Meaning. Harvard University Press, 2013.

---. Camus the Stranger. University of Chicago Press, 2021.