

Nature Imagery and Human Suffering in Albert Camus's *The Plague*

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Abstract: In *The Plague*, to describe the physical damage that infectious disease inflicts on the sick at Oran, Camus's narrator uses lyrical images that identify the disease with natural phenomena and catastrophic natural events. This paper first examines the formal literary dimension of nature description and deadly infection in *The Plague*. The narrative device is especially abundant in describing several characters' final moments: heat and flames; atmospheric elements, particularly those related to the wind and air currents; and maritime imagery all combine to communicate the tragic end of the infected and the destruction of their bodies. In addition, the narrator associates the heat/wind imagery with anatomical references to the chest or the lungs to typify the advancement of the disease and the loss of life. This mechanism alludes to the health and the destruction of both the physical and the social bodies. Finally, Camus's use of nature imagery results in highly lyrical descriptions; such passages encapsulate Camus's own identification with nature and his ability to deal with landscape narrative in an intense and moving poetic style. Such lyrical undertones in nature imagery are an important stylistic feature of Camus's prose technique, both in his early essays and imaginative writing. The narrative device also speaks to the allegorical nature of *The Plague*, adding layers of meaning to the literal description of physical destruction that epidemics bring about. Thus catastrophic nature imagery in *The Plague* relates to Camus's personal experience with tuberculosis, to the historical context of France under Nazi occupation in WWII, and may equally be considered a literary expression of Camus's deep-felt humanism.

Keywords: Pandemic Literature, Albert Camus, *The Plague*, Nature Imagery, Human Suffering, Death and Epidemics, Landscape Description, Allegory

1. Introduction

A description of the physical damage infectious diseases cause on the body of the sick is a common trope in the pandemic literature. The first historiographical narrative of a pandemic contains such a detailed description. In the account of the so-called plague that devastated classical Athens in 430-427 BCE, the Greek historian Thucydides carefully describes the trials the infected went through [1]. (Thucydides himself fell ill but survived; his account bears witness to the physical ordeal the disease brought on in Athens.) Since Thucydides, the literature has recorded the horrible suffering pandemics have caused across time.

In Albert Camus's *The Plague*, to describe the physical and metaphysical damage the outbreak causes, the narrator blends the use of lyrical images that identify the plague with natural phenomena or catastrophic natural events. The following

passage, for example, combines the images of wind and fire and the anatomical reference to the sick's chest: "The pneumonic type of infection ... was now spreading all over the town; one could almost believe that the high winds were kindling and fanning its flames in people's chests" [2]. Another passage describes the culminating effects of the disease just moments before doctor Rieux's friend and collaborator, Tarrou, dies: "The storm, lashing his body into convulsive movement, lit it up with ever rarer flashes, and in the heart of the tempest he was slowly drifting, derelict" [2].

Thus, in Camus's narrative technique, images of disastrous natural phenomena are associated with the plague's final, mortal stages. With a high dose of dramatism, this combination communicates the tragic end of the infected and the destruction of their body. As we shall see, it also results in highly lyrical descriptions that encapsulate Camus's ability to deal with nature and landscape in an intense and moving

poetic style. Such narrative device also relates to the allegorical nature of *The Plague*. On a literal level, the novel is a tale about an epidemic. However, the pestilence represents metaphorically evil, death, and suffering. An atmosphere of threat and exile that extends to the universal notion of existence dominates the narrative and reflects on the nature of the Nazi occupation of France during World War II.

2. Mortal Infection and Nature Description in *The Plague*

Albert Camus's *The Plague* was published in 1947 and instantly became a classic of pandemic literature. The novel has two fundamental levels of interpretation, the allegorical and the literal. Allegorically, *The Plague* is a representation of Nazi occupation and war. By extension, the novel speaks to the inevitable fight against everything that represents totalitarianism and authoritarianism. Camus never hid the metaphorical character of the novel—"Like rats!" he wrote in his *Carnets* on November 11, 1942, commenting on the entering of German forces into France [3]. From its publication, Camus insisted that the book could be read with different meanings—"in three different ways," precisely, according to a personal letter he wrote in January 1948 [4]. On a philosophical level, for Camus, *The Plague* is "the concrete illustration of a metaphysical problem, that of evil" [4]. A commentary dated from December 1942 in his *Carnets*, when he was writing *The Plague*, combines both the political and the metaphysical interpretations of his novel:

I want to express by means of the plague the stifling air from which we all suffered and the atmosphere of threat and exile in which we lived. I want at the same time to extend that interpretation to the notion of existence in general. The plague will give the image of those who in this war were limited to reflection, to silence—and to moral anguish [3].

On a literal, hyper-realistic level, the novel narrates the ravages of a fictional plague outbreak in the Algerian city of Oran in the 1940s. Camus extensively studied the history of epidemics and the great plagues across time. His documentation included the study of classical sources such as the chronicle of Thucydides and, his favorite classical model, the Latin reworking of Thucydides that Lucretius incorporated at the end of his didactic poem *De Rerum Natura* (6.1138-1251) [5]. During the years of World War II, Algeria experienced three significant epidemics: one of malaria that killed almost 8,000 people in 1941, another of typhus that killed almost 13,000 people in 1942-44, and another of relapsing fever that killed about 2,000 people in 1943-46 [6]. In particular, Camus witnessed the ravages of the typhus epidemic. He listened carefully to the narration of witnesses affected by the disease. In addition, he took copious notes during conversations he had with his friend, the writer Emmanuel Robles, whose wife had fallen seriously ill with typhus and from whom Camus requested precise descriptions. Specifically, the provisions of a camp for the sick in Turenne guarded by a security cordon of Senegalese soldiers struck

Camus's imagination [4].

In the novel, Camus uses images that echo the destructive power of nature to magnify the devastating physical effects of the plague on those infected. These are apocalyptic descriptions in which three lexical fields fundamentally dominate: (1) heat and flames (*flamme*/flame, *incendies*/fires, *crépitements*/crackle, *brûlé*/burnt); (2) atmospheric elements, especially those relating to the wind and air currents (*orage*/storm, *éclairs*/lightning, *vents*/winds, *souffle*/breath, *l'air*/air, *bourrasque*/squall); and (3) maritime imagery (*tempête*/storm, *eaux*/waters, *nauffrage*/shipwreck, *refluer*/to ebb, *digue*/dyke, *flots*/waves, *marée*/tide, *désastre*/disaster or calamity, *rivage*/shore). Often, Camus opts for a combination of images that refer to the course of the disease and belong to opposite fields. Thus, contrasts and combinations of water and fire, cold and heat, appear in images like *flôt brulant*, "a burning stream," or *vent [qui] allumait des incendies*, "a wind that lit fires." Such combinations recall the procedure of the *Amour Courtois* in medieval and Renaissance poetry, a literary and conceptual code of opposites widely used to express the deadly suffering of the passion of love.

We can inscribe Camus's appeal to images that amplify the destructive power of nature to describe human suffering within a long literary tradition that goes back to classical literature. The power of nature unleashed is a recurring motif in the epic poetry of Homer and Virgil. Homer resorts to nature imagery to describe processes that entail destruction and death. Especially striking in the *Iliad* are the similes in which Achilles, berserk and thirsty for revenge, annihilates the Trojans one after another like how the blaze of a forest fire utterly destroys the top of a mountain (Book 20, verses 490-4) [7]. The *Aeneid* opens with the terrible sea storm that destroys Aeneas's fleet when Aeolus releases the four winds in the Mediterranean (Book 1, verses 34-123). Neptune calms the storm and rescues the surviving ships in the subsequent narrative. The poem's first extended simile develops the motif—a long comparison in which Neptune acts as a brilliant orator who is able to control an excited and rowdy mob (Book 1, verses 142-156) [8].

This approach is also incredibly contemporary. For example, in the daily chronicle of our current coronavirus crisis, linguists have observed the substitution of a war analogy for others that incorporate the lexicon of maritime or other natural disasters [9]. Thus, the coronavirus is conceptualized as "a tsunami" or "a wave." In Spanish, for example, every new surge of the virus has been labeled as "una ola," *a wave* ("Los hospitales dejan atrás la sexta ola del covid," was the title of a March 9, 2022, article in the Spanish newspaper *El País*). The crisis has also been described as a collective challenge that requires that we all "row together" in the same direction, as we are "on the same boat" rocked by "a storm," according to the language Pope Francis used in his 2020 Urbi et Orbi address [10]. At other times, contemporary sources describe the coronavirus as a contagion that "spreads like wildfire" and cannot be extinguished [11]. Therefore, in our modern pandemic narrative, apocalyptic nature replaces war as a practical and functional allegory to express the

ravages of the coronavirus in the social body.

3. Dramatic Natural Images in the Characters' Final Moments

In the description of several characters' final moments (e.g., the death of Tarrou as mentioned above, Doctor Rieux's closest friend; the death of little Jacques, son of Judge Othon), the narrative voice reaches deeper dramatic levels and moments of intense *pathos*. These are the high points of Camus's prose, passages in which undertones of tragic helplessness and existential urgency dominate.

In the narrative of Tarrou's death, for instance, there are many references to the liquid element and the maritime metaphor: "Then suddenly, as if some inner dike had given way without warning, the [current of] fever surged back, dyeing his cheeks and forehead" [2]. (All quotes that refer to Tarrou's death are from p. 259-260.) Furthermore, the narrator describes Tarrou's death in terms of nautical disaster and natural processes, especially in this passage containing an astounding accumulation of figurative speech:

The storm, lashing his body into convulsive movement, lit it up with ever rare flashes, and in the heart of the tempest he was slowly drifting, derelict. And now Rieux had before him only a masklike face, inert, from which the smile has gone forever. This human form, his friend's, lacerated by the spear-thrusts of the plague, consumed by searing, superhuman fires, buffeted by all the raging winds of heaven, was foundering under his eyes in the dark flood of the pestilence [2].

During the description of Tarrou's struggle, the narrator's commentary refers to Tarrou's agony as war: "Rieux knew that this grim wrestling with the angel of the plague was to last until dawn"; "he [did not] counter the enemy's attacks ... he [did] carry on the fight"; "the silent turmoil of the unseen battle." To my taste, the English translation does not fully incorporate the diction of the original French; here, the metaphorical language of open war is much more direct and explicit¹ [12]. In the climax of Tarrou's passing, pitiful images and expressions denote the process of life abandoning the wrecked body of the dying person. These images communicate the dehumanizing dimension of death: "A masklike face"; a "human form ... lacerated by the spear-thrusts of the plague," an image with obvious, religious echoes of Jesus Christ's crucifixion; "and essential chord had snapped"; "the silence of defeat" [2].

At the end of this sequence, the narrator's nature imagery switches from the dying patient to the hopeless doctor. Rieux's emotions of helplessness are also described in the same natural terms and associated with the liquid quality of tears: "[Rieux] could do nothing to avert the wreck. He could only stand, unavailing, on the shore, empty-handed and sick at heart, unarmed and helpless yet again under the onset of

calamity. And thus, when the end came, the tears that blinded Rieux's eyes were tears of impotence" (italics are mine) [2]. Through the symbolic use of nature, the passage transmits the corporal penance of the sick and the anguish of those who have lost a loved one—their powerlessness and suffering.

The same semantic and narrative procedure appears in the pages that describe the death of little Jacques Othon: "For moments that seemed endless he stayed in a queer, contorted position, his body racked by convulsive tremors; it was as if his frail frame were bending before the fierce breath of the plague, breaking under the reiterated gusts of fever" [2]. (All quotes that refer to Jacques Othon's death are from p. 193.) In particular, the following passage presents a relevant distillation of nature imagery to describe the boy's calvary:

"Then the storm-wind passed, there came a lull, and he relaxed a little; the fever seemed to recede, leaving him gasping for breath on a dank, pestilential shore, lost in a languor that already looked like death. When for the third time the fiery wave broke on him, lifting him a little, the child curled himself up and shrank away to the edge of the bed, as if in terror of the flames advancing on him, licking his limbs" [2].

Images of natural destruction and devastating physical pain are thus combined. The dramatic, metaphorical symbolism of this excruciating process of destruction reaches its climax in the treatment of the death of little Jacques: "When the spam has passed, utterly exhausted, tensing his thin legs and arms, on which ... the flesh has wasted to the bone, the child lay flat, racked on the tumbled bed, in a grotesque parody of crucifixion." To this description, imbued with religious language, the narrator again adds the telling presence of tears and references to the wearing away of the body: "From between the inflamed eyelids big tears welled up and trickled down the sunken, leaden-hued cheeks" [2].

4. Fire, Destruction and the Breath of Life

In the description of both Jacques Othon's and Tarrou's agony, quoted above *in extenso*, a specific and meaningful aspect of Camus's symbolic narrative surfaces: the combination of "heat" and "wind/breath" lexicon to denote the mortal suffering that disease causes² [12]. The narrator associates this heat/wind imagery with anatomical references to the "chest" or the "lungs" to typify the advancement of the disease. The mechanism is applied to a particular patient of doctor Rieux, like Grand in this case: "A queer crackling sound came from his flame-seared lungs whenever he tried to speak" [2]. The device can also allude to the effects of the plague on the whole town of Oran: "The pneumonic type of infection ... was now spreading all over the town; one could almost believe that the high winds were kindling and fanning

¹ "This grim wrestling" is *ce dur combat* in the original, "a hard-fought battle"; "the enemy's attacks" correspond to *les phases du combat*; and "the unseen battle" translates more literally from *la guerre invisible*.

² "Searing, superhuman fires," *brûlée par un mal surhumain* – "raging winds of heaven," *tordue par tous les vents haineux du ciel* – "the fierce breath of the plague," *le vent furieux de la peste* – "reiterated gusts of fever," *les souffles répétés de la fièvre*.

its flames in people's chests." Later in the text, another description appears: "Throughout December [the plague] smoldered in the chests of our townsfolk ... In sort, it never ceased progressing with its characteristically jerky but unfaltering stride" [2].

In *The Plague*, Camus associates the "chest" with images of suffocation and asphyxia. This motif becomes an essential symptom of the suffering of patients and the whole city of Oran. Thus, breathing appears in *The Plague* as a dual image. On the one hand, it symbolizes the destruction of the sick when they cannot breathe. On the other, it becomes a symbol of the ability to live and to overcome the disease—of collective resistance to the plague and of when the patient improves and their breathing becomes easier [13]. Furthermore, *The Plague* has assumed new urgency with the coming of each new terrible global pandemic. It gained new meaning for the readers in the 1980s with the coming of AIDS [14]. Today, the irony of the images of suffocation cannot go unnoticed for us, as witnesses to the COVID-19 crisis; respiratory deficiency and the struggle of terminal patients hooked on artificial respirators in hospitals have become emblematic of the physical destruction brought about by the coronavirus. The most dramatic scenes of our pandemic have taken place in those ICU rooms in which patients have fought and still fight for their lives, gasping for air.

Therefore, the accumulation of these passages in *The Plague* suggests to the reader the connection between "breathing" and the fight for survival, between "respiration" and life. Such associations have a long pedigree. Ancient civilizations already acknowledged breathing as the utter manifestation of life. The connection of godly breathing to the creation of life is paramount in the biblical tradition. The beginning of Genesis clearly states the connection: "The earth then was welter and waste and darkness over the deep and God's breath hovering over the waters" in Genesis 1:2, and "Then the Lord God fashioned the human, humus from the soil, and blew into his nostrils the breath of life" in Genesis 2:7 [15]. For the early Greeks, the *thymos* (θυμός) or soul, which became the *pneuma* (πνεῦμα) for later writers, "was located in the chest, breathed in at the first breath and out at the last" [16]. In classical Greek thought, the cessation of breathing, *pneuma*, was linked to the cessation of life.

In these critical passages describing shortness of breath and the plague's impact on the sick at Oran, the reader cannot avoid thinking of Albert Camus himself. Since his youth, Camus struggled with his health because of his chronic tuberculosis. With every new relapse, Camus's lungs deteriorated. Tuberculosis forced him to constantly experience life sick and tired, going for pneumothorax cures and in an emotional state of great fragility. In his letters and carnets, Camus mentions several times that he felt he was living in borrowed time: "From now on the feeling of death is familiar to me ... Death, foretold by the mere sight of a blood-covered handkerchief, without any other symptom, means being plunged back into time in a vertiginous way, which is the fear of becoming something else" [4]. While he was writing *The Plague*, at Le Panelier, he was "waiting for

this illness which is suffocating me to go away, and as for everything else, my only wish is to write" [4]. The feeling of constantly living with tuberculosis never left Camus's mind over the course of his life. He even thought of health and well-being in terms of landscape: "Sometimes I think of health as a great land full of sun and cicadas which I have lost through no fault of my own" [4].

The combination of "breath" and "heat" appears in *The Plague* in a final, additional layer of meaning associated with death and disease. In particular, the assimilation of "fire" and "air" to death and destruction intensifies when the narrative insinuates a symbolic analogy between the ravages of the epidemic in Oran and the extermination in the Nazi concentration camps during World War II. When the situation deteriorates at Oran, the local authorities decide to use a crematorium to the city's east to dispose of the corpses. At sunset, the townsfolk can watch the empty tram convoys traveling along the line across the coast, carrying the day's corpses to the old crematorium (as the tramways pass, the locals throw flowers in a fleeting sign of respect for the dead). The images of "wind" and "fire" intertwine with mass death in such a momentous episode: "Only when a *strong wind* was blowing did a faint, *sickly odor* coming from the east remind them that they *were living* under a new order and that *the plague fires* were taking their nightly *toll*" (italics are mine) [2]. The citizens of Oran, waking up the next day, could see a cloud of ashes floating in the morning air.

These passages relating to the activity in the crematorium associate foul air with death. This was the symbol of the human destruction the plague had brought the previous day: "During the first few days an oily, foul-smelling cloud of smoke hung low upon the eastern districts of the town. These effluvia, all the doctors agreed, though unpleasant, were not in the least harmful." The air and natural phenomena associated with it (smoke, rain) become a potential transmitter of contagion: the residents of this part of the town were "convinced that germs were raining down on them from the sky, with the result that an elaborate apparatus for diverting the smoke had to be installed to appease them" [2].

This happened at the climax of Oran's suffering, as the narrator confesses: "Such were the consequences of the epidemic at its culminating point" [2]. It is important to note once again the double dimension of the novel: *The Plague* is as much a literal as an allegorical tale. Daniel Defoe's epigraph at the beginning of *The Plague* is a clear statement of Camus's position regarding the novel's possible interpretations. The epigraph comes from the preface to Volume III of *Robinson Crusoe*: "It is as reasonable to represent one kind of imprisonment by another, as it is to represent anything that really exists by that which exists not." (However, it cannot escape the reader that Defoe was also the author of the 1722 classic of pandemic literature, *A Journal of the Plague Year*.) As a critic has pointed out, the epigraph is an evident "invitation to allegory" and "immediately raises questions of representation" [14]. The images of the flames and the smoke symbolically link the mortality in Oran with the suffering of WWII. They visually extend the allegory of

Oran's crematorium to the extermination in the concentration camps.

5. Camus's Lyricism and Landscape Description

For the celebrated 20th-century French literary critic Gaëtan Picon, in a famous review of *The Plague* that combines praise with merciless criticism, these agonizing descriptions of the sick studied in paragraphs 3 and 4 are some of the best examples in the novel of an "illusionistic power of realism" that causes an "immediate shock" to the reader. For Picon, these passages are not up to the standards of masters like Balzac or Tolstoy (not even Bernanos). However, the French critic is right to draw attention to the quality of the prose in *The Plague*: it is "a dramatic, fervent, austere prose" that supports the moral maxims and the philosophical or metaphysical disquisition that the novel proposes [17].

I judge these passages as examples of Camus's brilliant prose and powerful lyricism, a lyricism that Picon and other scholars astutely have pointed out. For S. Beynon John, Camus's prose technique in *The Plague*, but also *The Stranger*, creates "poetic overtones that derive partly from the richness of his imagery, partly from his feeling for the rhythm and music of the phrase." In both novels, "a distinct lyricism continues to vibrate below the surface," often "erupting in passages of genuine poetic force" [18]. According to Picon, Camus's prose combines a "classical sparseness" with "[a] full expression [of] an internal lyricism." When Camus "follows his bent and expresses himself in images," Picon argues, his lyricism "is surprisingly effective." Nevertheless, Picon laments that in *The Plague*, "This lyricism often seems ashamed to show itself, strangling itself with its own hands, so to speak, as soon as it becomes conscious. It is there nonetheless, but we feel an inner constraint and a tendency to replace images with an abstract rhetoric rather than a reaching toward the poetic" [17].

The poignancy of Camus's lyricism through these metaphors—the fictional echo of the terrible suffering brought about by epidemics—is amplified by the stylistic resource of a "remote" narrator. Camus's narrator maintains a spiritual and material distance from the narrated events. He impassively and relentlessly tells the tragedy of the epidemic at its two symbolic levels, that of the disease and that of the German occupation as mentioned above. In *The Plague*, "everything remains at a certain distance from us ... and the events [are a] hint of a reality merely suggested," notes Picon [17]. For Patrick McCarthy, this distant, anonymous narrator and the remote perspective he offers responds to the nature of the problem: the narrative must remain "remote" because it represents Rieux's and Oran's inability to explain the epidemic [19].

Lyricism has not been absent in pandemic literature's descriptions of the agonizing death infectious diseases cause. It is a common narrative technique to deal with the otherworldly destruction that epidemics generate. One can

compare the description of the disease in *The Plague* to the treatment of the subject in another classic of pandemic literature, Katherine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* [20]. In her short novel—perhaps the most famous fictional narrative classic to emerge from the 1918 influenza pandemic—Porter expresses lyricism through feverish images of confusion and the dreamlike quality describing the mental and physical state of patients on the threshold of death. Short but intense, with brilliant and diaphanous prose, Porter's novel shockingly and powerfully describes the *Via Crucis* of the terminal influenza patient, personified in the destiny of the young journalist Miranda, whose universe is populated by hallucinations, surreal and anguished visions experienced in an extended state of delirium. Every time Miranda closes her eyes, "the midnight of her internal torment closed around her." (All quotes of *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* in this section are from p. 308-312.) The hands of the nurse who takes care of her in the hospital take the shape of "two white tarantulas." The figures of two male nurses removing the body of a dead patient, seen through a screen, take on the aspect of ghosts. They become "a dance of tall, deliberate shadows moving behind a wide screen of sheets ... and it was so beautiful she had no curiosity as to its meaning."

Landscape and nature images also appear in Miranda's nightmarish visions: "a pallid white fog"; "a whirlpool of gray water"; "a narrow ledge over a pit"; the vision of an assuring and serene landscape that Miranda suddenly realizes "has no trees"; "a strange stony place of bitter cold ... [with] a steep path of slippery snow." The mind and body of the sick reach a pitiful state: the sick are "abused, outraged living things," with "confused pain" and "estranged hearts" going through "a horde of human torments." Against all odds, Miranda survives. Her ordeal leaves her scarred. She has experienced the hell of illness: "The road to death is a long march beset with all evils, and the heart fails little by little at each new terror, the bones rebel at each step, the mind sets up its own bitter resistance and to what end? The barriers sink one by one, and no covering of the eyes shuts out the landscape of disaster, not the sight of crimes committed there" [20].

Camus's lyricism is different; the narrative mechanisms used to attain such effects differ from the ones Porter used. The pain of the dying is an object of observation and cure; it is not disguised under the screen of feverish hallucinations. I would argue, against Picon's judgment, that there is no such "strangulation" of lyricism in Camus's descriptions combining catastrophic nature and bodily suffering. On the contrary, *The Plague*'s poetic vein is powerful and beautiful in such passages. It connects with the delicate and profound landscape descriptions that often surprises the reader of Camus's *Carnets*. Landscape and nature descriptions of unusual sensitivity and beauty suddenly appear. One could almost wonder whether they came from the same mind that produced *The Stranger*'s somewhat mechanical and minimalist prose or *The Plague*'s descriptive, informative, and objective chronicle. And yet landscape and nature play a fundamental role in Camus's writing. "Camus exploits his verbal resources in order to convey how powerful is the

impact of natural phenomena. This is no more than an accurate reflection of his own reactions, for he experiences a sort of vertiginous identification with nature,” S. Beynon John pointed out [18]. Camus’s delicate and heartfelt poeticism gushes out when it comes to the intense descriptions of the Algerian coast he loved so much:

“Evenings on the terrace of the Deux Merveilles. The moving breast of the sea that can be sensed in the hollowness of the night. The quivering olive trees and the smell of smoke rising from the earth. The rocks in the sea covered with white seagulls. With their gray mass, lit up by the whiteness of the birds’ wings, they look like luminous floating cemeteries” [21].

At other times, a deep lyricism appears in the meticulous observation of the mountainous forests of the *Vivarais* during Camus’s confinement at Le Panolier, in 1942-43 (this entry is from the same day of the German invasion of France, November 11, 1942):

“In the morning everything is covered with hoarfrost; the sky is shining behind the garlands and streamers of an immaculate village fair. At ten o’clock, when the sun begins to warm everything, the whole countryside is filled with the crystalline music of an aerial thaw: little cracklings as if the trees were sighing, fall of the frost in the ground like a sound of white insects dropped on one another, late leaves constantly under the weight of the ice and barely bouncing on the ground like weightless bones. All around, the hills and valleys vanish in wisps of smoke” [3].

Moreover, of course, there is Camus’s brutal evaluation of the aesthetic and inhuman qualities of cities, whether Oran, or Paris, a city that Camus had always hated:

“What is hateful in Paris: tenderness, feelings, a hideous sentimentality that sees everything beautiful as pretty and everything pretty as beautiful. The tenderness and despair that accompany the murky skies, the shining roofs and endless rain. What is inspiring: the terrible loneliness. As a remedy to life in society, I would suggest the big city. Nowadays, it is the only desert within our means. Here the body has lost its magic. It is covered over, and hidden under shapeless skins. The only thing left is the soul” [21].

6. Conclusion

Camus’s use of nature imagery in *The Plague* is a compelling narrative device to convey the physical agony of the sick. In particular, apocalyptic visual images symbolically communicate the horrible suffering of those dying by the effect of the pestilence in Oran. In these images, Camus’s prose reaches moments of intense lyricism. Camus attains “the full expressions of the poetic,” so to speak. Scholars have traditionally considered the narrator’s tone and perspective in *The Plague* as “cold,” “dry,” or “distant.” However, these passages contain strong *pathos*, powerful poeticism, and a high dose of emotion in the face of the loss of life. Camus’s writing in these passages confirms S. Beynon John’s

observation: “Camus’s normal mode of feeling ... is impassioned and intensely subjective”; his most natural manner of expression, already evident in his early essays, “is lyrical, by which I mean highly personal and emotive” [18]. The device also speaks to the allegorical dimension of *The Plague*. It is clear that the epidemic is not uniquely a medical phenomenon, but rather “something more metaphysical than physical,” as one interpreter of the novel puts it [14]. The technique may well be interpreted as the literary manifestation of Camus’s deep humanism, a humanism that Sartre defined in Camus’s obituary as being “obstinate, narrow, and pure” [22]. Camus was always a humanist, always ready to express solidarity and support for those in distress. He revolted against injustice and the unjustified suffering of the innocent. Storms and waves ravaging sick bodies, destructive winds burning the lungs of pestilence victims, their cremated corpses flying up in smoke—these images in *The Plague* may well be the lyric transliteration of Camus’s personal experience with tuberculosis, on the one hand, and his empathy for the suffering of his fellow human beings, trapped in a historical context of intolerable violence and political crises, on the other.

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