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IMPRISONED SPACE, FROZEN TIME, AND “ABSURD WALLS” THE METAMORPHOSIS OF ORAN IN CAMUS’ *THE PLAGUE*

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*In one of the most successful novels of Albert Camus, *The Plague*, the normal life of Oran is interrupted by the arrival of a disease that imprisons all the residents. By taking the spatial imprisonment and, consequently, the temporal suspension as the main elements of the structure of the novel, this article addresses Camus’ reflection on the absurd through three different aspects of the plot, intrinsically related to the development of the main topic. The spatio-temporal dynamics of *The Plague* are tackled by the examination of the fictional city before the arrival of the plague, by the role of the “absurd walls” of Oran during its closure, and, finally, through the moment of liberation which concludes the long struggle of Oran’s citizens and the novel itself. This article aims to analyse the spatio-temporal metamorphosis of the main setting of the novel, to reflect upon Camus’ philosophy on the absurd, as well as to relate to the challenges we have been facing with the actual pandemic, mainly translatable into a modified perception of time and space.*

INTRODUCTION

As can already be perceived in one of the authors’ earlier characters, Caligula, whose desire to reach the moon leads him to a negative revolt, any human hope of overcoming “the divorce between man and life, between the actor and the decoration”¹ in Camus’ imaginary is doomed to fail. The metaphor

1 Albert Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (Paris : Gallimard, Folio essais, 1992), 14.

of the limit, portrayed as a human barrier that forbids man to fulfil his desire for unity and clear vision is frequently used by the author to construct and stage some of the most poignant episodes of his work: Mersault in *The Happy Death* decides to isolate himself in attempting to finally achieve inner peace, Meursault in *The Stranger* expounds in the prison cell the most remarkable meditations on life, whereas Clamence, the protagonist of *The Fall*, is presented as the victim of an outdoor prison, the Amsterdam sky. In this regard, it is worth underlining that *The Plague*, published for the first time in 1947, was initially entitled *The Prisoners*. In his *Carnets*, Camus explains that the intention of giving this title to his novel came to mind as a tribute to the victims of the Second World War, thus marking a passage from the first cycle of his absurdist novels, situated outside of any socio-historical frame, to one including all humanity affected by the same issues and, consequently, tackling the question of revolt as one no longer dissociated from political commitment. In this context, the story of the plague that descends as a punishment on the citizens of Oran relates to the most significant moral problems of Camus' present: the struggle during the war and the dream of rebuilding the collective world, the reality of the French exploitation in Algeria and the author's harsh criticism of imperialist capitalism. Consequently, the insistence on the spatio-temporal imprisonment of the fictional representation of Oran paves the way for a rich and extensive interpretation of the setting that can be interpreted both as a reflection of a precise historical moment, as well as a representation of the human condition, denounced in its most tragic aspects.

THE PLAGUE-STRICKEN ORAN

The propensity for a realist narration in *The Plague* is primarily reflected in its narrative homogeneity. The chronicle narration guarantees a logical development of the narrated events which is particularly enhanced by the authors' choice to entrust the role of the main narrator to Dr Rieux, the only character able to represent the plague-related events almost plastically. The year 194°

2 “Les curieux événements qui font le sujet de cette chronique se sont produits en 194., à Oran. ”, in Albert Camus, *La Peste* (Paris : Gallimard, Folio essais, 2007), 6.

3 In the essay *Le Minotaure ou la halte d’Oran*, Oran is presented as a large circular and yellow wall covered by a hard sky where the Oranians wander turning in circles and looking for the sea through the wild and oppressive streets before being devoured by the Minotaure: “On ne peut pas savoir ce qu’est la pierre sans venir à Oran. Dans cette ville poussiéreuse entre toutes, le caillou est roi. [...] Ce qui, ailleurs, tire sa poésie du végétal, prend ici un visage de pierre. [...] La ville entière s’est figée dans une gangue pierreuse. Vue des Planteurs, l’épaisseur des falaises qui l’enserrent est telle que le paysage devient irréel à force d’être minéral.” in Albert Camus, *Œuvres, L’ÉTÉ, Le Minotaure ou la halte d’Oran* (Paris : Quarto Gallimard, 2013) 1104-1105.

4 Albert Camus, *La Peste* (Paris : Gallimard, Folio essais, 2007), 4.

5 Ibid. 5.

that appears in the opening line² of the novel, although imperfectly, situates the narration in a precise historical context, while the space of the novel, the city of Oran, throughout the entire narration maintains a high degree of referentiality, allowing for the characters to easily map their movements inside the walls of the fictional city. Regarding Camus’ choice to set the plot of the novel in Oran, it is also worth remembering that this city in the author’s literary geography appears primarily charged with negative valences³. It is mainly the mineral landscape and the circular structure that endow the city with aspects of a dark and suffocating place, as is obvious from its initial descriptions in the novel:

À première vue, Oran est, en effet, une ville ordinaire et rien de plus qu’une préfecture française de la côté algérienne. La cité elle-même, on doit l’avouer, est laide. D’aspect tranquille, il faut quelque temps pour apercevoir ce qui la rend différente de tant d’autres villes commerçantes, sous toutes les latitudes. Comment faire imaginer, par exemple, une ville sans pigeons, sans arbres et sans jardins, où l’on ne rencontre ni battements d’ailes ni froissements de feuilles, un lieu neutre pour tout dire? ⁴

In this regard, it is interesting to underline Camus’ decision to intentionally remove the *Boulevard Front de Mer* that exists in Oran, and, thus, deprive the characters of the view of the sea, the only spatial element symbolizing freedom and joy:

Cette cité sans pittoresque, sans végétation et sans âme finit par sembler reposante, on s’y endort enfin. Mais il est juste d’ajouter qu’elle s’est greffée sur un paysage sans égal, au milieu d’un plateau nu, entouré de collines lumineuses devant une baie au dessin parfait. On peut seulement regretter qu’elle soit construite en tournant le dos à cette baie et que, pourtant, il soit impossible d’apercevoir la mer qu’il faut toujours aller chercher.⁵

Regarding the timeline of the plot, the disease manifests itself for the first time on the morning of 16 April with the appearance of a dead rat noticed by Dr Rieux as he leaves his flat. As Valensi emphasises ⁶, this is a moment of fracture of the plot, where the whole decor of the monotonous and ordinary life in Oran starts to collapse and where the exceptional state of the city is being introduced. It is precisely from this moment when the appearance of the rats, nocturnal animals, begin to follow an upward movement (from underground to the streets and into the houses of the Oranians) marking the beginning of their long journey through the plague. The death of the caretaker signifies the precise moment when the city steps from the epoch of freedom to the stage where the official decision of the closure is announced:

Le jour où le chiffre des morts atteignit de nouveau la trentaine, Rieux regardait la dépêche officielle que le préfet lui avait tendue en disant: Ils ont eu peur. La dépêche portait : “Déclarez l’état de peste. Fermez le ville.” ⁷

Once the epidemic is declared official, the signs of an imminent catastrophe and imprisonment begin to be inscribed in the overall setting, and nature seems to participate in the Oranians’ tragedy as the days go by and the situation worsens:

De grandes brumes couvrirent le ciel. Des pluies diluviennes et brèves s’abattirent sur la ville, une chaleur orageuse suivait ces brusques ondées. La mer elle-même avait perdu son bleu profond et sous le ciel brumeux, elle prenait des éclats d’argent ou de fer, douloureux pour la vue. La chaleur humide de ce printemps faisait souhaiter les ardeurs de l’été. Dans la ville, [...] une torpeur morne régnait. Au milieu de ses longs murs crépis, parmi les rues aux vitrines poudreuses, dans les tramways d’un jeune sale, on se sentait un peu prisonnier du ciel. ⁸

6 Jacqueline Lévi-Valensi, *La Peste d’Albert Camus* (Paris : Gallimard, 1991), 115.

7 Camus, *La Peste*, 58.

8 Ibid. 29.

The end of the first part of the novel, marking the decision to close the gates of Oran, is essential since it is precisely at this point in the novel that Camus' request for reflection begins to unfold. A phenomenon that is beyond human control is manifested, confronting the citizens to face reality as it presents itself, rendering them almost ridiculous at the very moment when a plague proves to be unavoidable.

9 “Un chemin qui a toujours l'air guidé par des parois strictes, mais qui, néanmoins, à chaque instant conduit à des impasses et oblige à revenir en arrière, à repasser plusieurs fois aux mêmes endroits sur des parcours plus ou moins longs, à explorer une nouvelle direction et à retomber sur une nouvelle impossibilité.” in Georges Matoré, *L'espace humain: l'expression de l'espace dans la vie, la pensée et l'art contemporains* (Paris: La Colombe, 1962), 168.

10 “(...) par une seule lampe au-dessus du comptoir, et les gens parlent à voix basse, sans raison apparente, dans l'air épais et rougeâtre.”, in Albert Camus, *La Peste* (Paris : Gallimard, Folio essais, 2007), 90.

11 “Oran, plongée dans la nuit complète, [...] était de pierre.”, in Albert Camus, *La Peste* (Paris : Gallimard, Folio essais, 2007), 154.

12 “(...) entre le ciel et les murs de la ville”, in Albert Camus, *La Peste* (Paris : Gallimard, Folio essais, 2007), 173.

ORAN'S “ABSURD WALLS”

Matoré uses a quote by Robbe-Grillet to describe the image of the labyrinth in literature: “a path which always seems to be guided by strict walls, but which, nevertheless, at every moment leads to dead ends and obliges one to go back, to pass several times over the same places on more or less long routes, to explore new directions and to fall back on a new impossibility”⁹. The labyrinthine structure that is introduced into the city after its closure corresponds exactly to Matoré's definition: completely separated from the rest of the world, Oran becomes a microcosm within which a progressive multiplication of closed spaces takes place. The long and detailed representation of the main setting is essential to the plot since the spatial closure follows the development of the disease, progressively preventing any hope of a possible escape and introducing the novel's fundamental motif of separation.

As the plague takes hold of the city, the condition of exile begins to be reflected everywhere: the streets become empty, the cafés are lit by “a single lamp over the counter, and people talk in low voices, for no apparent reason, in the thick, reddish air”¹⁰. Oran, plunged into complete darkness, seems “made of stone”¹¹, while the Oranians, grappling with the disruption in their ordinary lives, find themselves imprisoned “between the sky and the city walls”¹². The usual bustle of the port is replaced by silence, the ships that were on their way to Oran turn away, access to the quays is forbidden by large gates and the movement of cars and people becomes circular. References to the outside

world are rare and the physical reclusion of the city is especially suffered by the foreigners who become victims of the plague by accident and who are not able to return to their countries: in the general exile, “they were the most exiled, (...) and constantly came up against the walls that separated their stinking refuge from their lost part”¹³. The unexpected arrival of the plague introduces a significant change in the use of Oran’s public spaces, as their initial function is completely modified and subordinated to the fight against the disease. In particular, Oran’s city stadium becomes the main quarantine zone, as well as the setting where the sense of loneliness and the inability to communicate with each other is best portrayed:

Il est entouré ordinairement de hauts murs de ciment et il avait suffi de placer des sentinelles aux quatre portes d’entrée pour rendre l’évasion difficile. De même, les murs empêchaient les gens de l’extérieur d’importuner de leur curiosité les malheureux qui étaient placés en quarantaine. En revanche, ceux-ci, à longueur de journée, entendaient, sans les voir, les tramways qui passaient, et devinaient, à la rumeur plus grande que ces derniers traînaient avec eux, les heures de rentrée et de sortie des bureaux. Ils savaient ainsi que la vie dont ils étaient exclus continuait à quelques mètres d’eux, et que les murs de ciment séparaient deux univers plus étrangers l’un à l’autre que s’ils avaient été dans des planètes différentes.¹⁴

While the reclusion and the separation of Oran from the rest of the world is mainly associated with the enclosed public and private spaces, it is interesting to notice that the prison-like atmosphere in the fictional setting of *The Plague* is equally present in the outdoor environment. Even nature seems to contribute to the siege of Oran, given that the prevalence of the sun and the heat present themselves as the main threat during the summer, when the disease reaches its peak. This is the moment when silence, dust, sun, and plague blend on the streets of Oran:

13 “dans l’exil général, ils étaient les plus exilés, car si le temps suscitait chez eux, comme chez tous, l’angoisse qui lui est propre, ils étaient attachés aussi à l’espace et se heurtaient sans cesse aux murs qui séparaient leur refuge empesté de leur partie perdue.”, in Albert Camus, *La Peste* (Paris : Gallimard, Folio essais, 2007), 65.

14 Camus, *La Peste*, 211.

Le soleil se fixa. Des flots ininterrompus de chaleur et de lumière inondèrent la ville à longueur de journée. En dehors des rues à arcades et des appartements, il semblait qu’il n’était pas un point de la ville qui ne fût placé dans la réverbération la plus aveuglante. Le soleil poursuivait nos concitoyens dans tous les coins de rue et, s’ils s’arrêtaient, il les frappait alors. Comme ces premières chaleurs coïncidèrent avec un accroissement en flèche du nombre des victimes, qui se chiffra à près de sept cents par semaine, une sorte d’abattement s’empara de la ville.¹⁵

As observed by Fortier, “the sun takes on the appearance of a cosmic plague hunter, thereby establishing an equivalence with the disease”¹⁶ and “Oran, surrounded by cliffs, with long plastered walls among streets with abandoned shop windows, transforms its inhabitants into prisoners of the sky”¹⁷. The synthesis of the enclosed space and the negative use of light is especially functional to the representation of one of the most ferocious deaths: that of Mr Othon’s son. It is in this episode that the ferocity of the sun is revealed as the climax of the suffering, underlined in all the spatial elements that contribute to the creation of the oppressive atmosphere of the hospital room, the barred windows, the unbearable screams of the patients, and the excessive heat:

La lumière s’enflait dans la salle. Sur les cinq autres lits, des formes remuaient et gémissaient, mais avec une discrétion qui semblait concertée. Le seul qui criât, à l’autre bout de la salle, poussait à intervalles réguliers de petites exclamations qui paraissaient traduire plus d’étonnement que de douleur. Il semblait que, même pour les malades, ce ne fût pas l’effroi du début. Il y avait même, maintenant, une sorte de consentement dans leur manière de prendre la maladie. Seul, l’enfant se débattait de toutes ses forces. [...] Le long des murs peints à la chaux, la lumière passait du rose au jaune. Derrière la vitre, une matinée de chaleur commençait à crépiter.¹⁸

15 Ibid. 9.

16 “Le soleil l’apparence d’un chasseur cosmique de la peste, établissant de cette manière une équivalence avec la maladie”, in Paul Fortier, *Une lecture de Camus: la valeur des éléments descriptifs dans l’oeuvre romanesque* (Paris : Klincksieck, 1977) 145.

17 “Oran cerné par des falaises, avec de longs murs crépis, parmi les rues aux vitrines poudreuses, transforme ses habitants en prisonniers du ciel.”, in Albert Camus, *La Peste* (Paris : Gallimard, Folio essais, 2007), 30.

18 Camus, *La Peste*, 191.

If the sky and the sun are charged with negative valences, the sole remaining positive space in the fictional setting of the novel is the sea. The Oranian's marine landscape assumes all the positive qualifications of liberation: as in the rest of Camus' fictional landscapes, it stands as the symbol of timelessness that unifies the knowledge and truth towards which man tends, or as an emblem of authentic life, of freedom, and of the union between man and nature, presented as "the only force capable of justifying existence and excusing death"¹⁹. The importance of this setting is especially underlined in the semantic charge of the sea in the novel's central episode where the two protagonists, Rieux and Tarrou, stand as symbols of respite and freedom from the plague while the fight against it is still ongoing, giving rise to the unification between human and superhuman time, nature and man, life and death, suffering and fraternal love:

Ils s'installèrent sur les rochers tournés vers le large. Les eaux se gonflaient et redescendaient lentement. Cette respiration calme de la mer faisait naître et disparaître des reflets huileux à la surface des eaux. [...] Rieux, qui sentait sous ses doigts le visage grêlé des rochers, était plein d'un étrange bonheur. Tourné vers Tarrou, il devina, sur le visage calme et grave de son ami, ce même bonheur qui n'oubliait rien, pas même l'assassinat. [...] Rieux se mit sur le dos et se tint immobile, face au ciel renversé, plein de lune et d'étoiles. Il respira longuement. Puis il perçut de plus en plus distinctement un bruit d'eau battue, étrangement clair dans le silence et la solitude de la nuit. Tarrou se rapprochait, on entendit bientôt sa respiration. [...] Pendant quelques minutes, ils avancèrent avec la même cadence et la même vigueur solitaires, loin du monde, libérés enfin de la ville et de la peste.²⁰

THE FROZEN TIME

The plague, beyond being a question of space, also becomes a question of time. The suffering of the Oranians caused by its long duration is seen first in the change of the narrator's exposition of the facts: from the moment of the

19 Roger Grenier, *Albert Camus : soleil et ombre : une biographie intellectuelle* (Paris : Gallimard, 1999), 192.

20 Camus, *La Peste*, 227.

city’s reclusion, the chronicle becomes deprived of a well-defined structure, given that the plague becomes the only temporal unit, as well as the only reference point from which its victims can count the passage of months and the change of seasons. For this reason, even if the long wait is the only possible present to live in, the frozen temporality has a profound role within the narration, aiming to wake the inhabitants of Oran out of their previous lives and cause a profound personal and collective metamorphosis. To achieve this goal, the duration of the plague is presented in all its length, while the attitude to such a temporal experience is essential for understanding Camus’ philosophy. From the moment that in Oran “time becomes fixed”²¹, the city with all its citizens is condemned to a rupture and a crisis: the arrival of the disease presupposes a change in those who lived and survived the plague, highlighting their strong regeneration made possible mainly thanks to their transformed relationship with time. The enclosed space corresponds to a temporal perception that no longer coincides with the linear course of time, since it becomes substituted by a collective period of waiting.

21 “(...) le temps parut se fixer”, in Albert Camus, *La Peste* (Paris : Gallimard, Folio essais, 2007), 57.

22 The importance of the future, strongly linked to the author’s reflections on the absurd, is already present in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: “Demain, il souhaitait demain, quand tout lui-même devrait s’y refuser – cette révolte de la chair, c’est l’absurde.”, in Albert Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (Paris : Gallimard, Folio essais, 1992), 20.

23 Mikhaïl Bakhtine, *Esthétique et théorie du roman* (Paris : Gallimard, 1978) 295.

The first and major change in terms of experiencing time in Oran is caused in relation to the concept of *tomorrow*. The plague takes away the greatest joy of its victims, i.e., their eagerness to think about the future²². From this point of view, in the Camusian process of constructing the absurd atmosphere in Oran, the question of the future stands out as the most pressing one. The importance of this temporal dimension, in relation to which “it does not matter whether the end is envisaged as a catastrophe, pure destruction, new chaos, the twilight of the gods, or the advent of the kingdom of God, what matters is that the end is promised to everything that exists, and moreover, that it is a relatively near end”²³ being strongly linked to the author’s reflections on the absurd, becomes the main punishment for the Oranians in the initial phase of the plague:

Cette séparation brutale, sans bavures, sans avenir prévisible, nous laissait décontenancés, incapables de réagir contre le souvenir de cette présence, encore si proche et déjà si lointaine, qui occupait maintenant nos journées.²⁴

The anguish of the events that the future holds is replaced by an even more serious sensation: the lack of hope, the impossibility of dreaming and of feeding on illusions. Therefore, the more time passes, the more unbearable the fear and expectation in the plague-stricken universe. The “abstraction” begins to take hold in Oran, rendering the characters disoriented. Finding it impossible to think about the present, let alone hope for the future, the first main temporal refuge for the characters is offered by looking back at their past that, from a formal viewpoint, introduces continuous shifts from the present moment of the narration to recalling episodes from the characters’ past. Nostalgia is, thus, the emotion that dominates the first stage of the experience of the plague in the exiled city:

Car c’était bien le sentiment de l’exil que ce creux que nous portions constamment en nous, cette émotion précise, le désir déraisonnable de revenir en arrière ou au contraire de presser la marche du temps, ces flèches brûlantes de la mémoire. [...] Dès lors, nous réintégrions en somme notre condition de prisonniers, nous étions réduits à notre passé, et si même quelques-uns d’entre nous avaient la tentation de vivre dans l’avenir, ils y renonçaient rapidement, autant du moins qu’il leur était possible, en éprouvant les blessures que finalement l’imagination inflige à ceux qui lui font confiance.²⁵

Nevertheless, recalling past events fails to offer long moments of consolation and happiness, since the suffering caused by the separation from the loved ones prevails over any other feeling. Since the loneliness experienced because of this imaginary life in a non-existent time does not offer any comfort, the Oranians quickly come to realize that forgetting is preferable to remembering

²⁴ Camus, *La Peste*, 63.

²⁵ Ibid. 63.

and being deprived of both the past and the future, the absurd men of Oran, before embracing their new reality, rather than conduct their lives normally, are forced to float as “wandering shadows”:

À ce moment, l’effondrement de leur courage, de leur volonté et de leur patience était si brusque qu’il leur semblait qu’ils ne pourraient plus jamais remonter de ce trou. Ils s’astreignaient par conséquent à ne penser jamais au terme de leur délivrance, à ne plus se tourner vers l’avenir et à toujours garder, pour ainsi dire, les yeux baissés. Mais, naturellement, cette prudence, cette façon de ruser avec la douleur, de fermer leur garde pour refuser le combat étaient mal récompensées. En même temps qu’ils évitaient cet effondrement dont ils ne voulaient à aucun prix, ils se privaient en effet de ces moments, en somme assez fréquents, où ils pouvaient oublier la peste dans les images de leur réunion à venir. Et par là, échoués à mi-distance de ces abîmes et de ces sommets, ils flottaient plutôt qu’ils ne vivaient, abandonnés à des jours sans direction et à des souvenirs stériles, ombres errantes qui n’auraient pu prendre force qu’en acceptant de s’enraciner dans la terre de leur douleur.²⁶

As the sense of exile takes hold of the residents of Oran, time and plague unite in the same devouring presence: “the man deprived of choice is forced to situate himself in relation to time. He takes his place in it. He admits that he stands at a certain point on a curve that he acknowledges having to travel to its end. He belongs to time, and by the horror that seizes him, he recognizes his worst enemy.”²⁷ The question of how to experience the length of time is raised and answered by Tarrou in his carefully detailed notebooks: by following the struggle against death moment by moment. In this sense, the suspense inherent in the city’s atmosphere opens the way to another wait, that of the plague’s precise time course. One of the main characteristics of the plague itself is depicted especially through its own specific timeline: at dawn it seems to stop with the first remission, announcing a brief pause for the victims, or a temporal limit

26 Ibid. 65.

27 “L’homme privé de choix est contraint à se situer par rapport au temps. Il y prend sa place. Il reconnaît qu’il est à un certain moment d’une courbe qu’il confesse devoir parcourir. Il appartient au temps et, à cette horreur qui le saisit, il reconnaît son pire ennemi.”, in Albert Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (Paris : Gallimard, Folio essais, 1992), 20.

that separates the dead of the night and the survivors of the day. Again, the function of space is interrelated with the representation of time: the rise of the sun becomes the antithesis of death, while the continuation of the struggle occurs at dawn:

(...) au petit matin, des souffles légers parcourent la ville encore déserte. A cette heure, qui est entre les morts de la nuit et les agonies de la journée, il semble que la peste suspende un instant son effort et reprenne son souffle.²⁸

In this sense, the plague in every house and hospital follows the same path, making its victims wait for the announcement of their fate at noon. The first time such uncertainty in the face of the plague is witnessed appears at the very beginning of the plot, when it is offered a detailed representation of the caretaker's experience of the disease:

Après de longs efforts, hors d'haleine, le concierge se recoucha. La température était à trente-neuf cinq, les ganglions du cou et les membres avaient gonflé, deux taches noirâtres s'élargissaient à son flanc. Il se plaignait maintenant d'une douleur intérieure. "Ça brûle", disait-il, "ce cochon-là me brûle". [...] Le soir, dans tous les cas, le concierge délirait et, à quarante degrés, se plaignait des rats. Rieux tenta un abcès de fixation. Sous la brûlure de la térébenthine, le concierge hurla : "Ah ! les cochons!" Les ganglions avaient encore grossi, durs et ligneux au toucher. La femme du concierge s'affolait : "Veillez sur lui" dit le docteur, "et appelez-moi s'il y a lieu". [...] Et en effet, au matin, la fièvre était tombée à trente-huit degrés. Affaibli, le malade souriait dans son lit. "Cela va mieux, n'est-ce pas, docteur?" dit sa femme. "Attendons encore". Mais, à midi, la fièvre était montée d'un seul coup à quarante degrés, le malade délirait sans arrêt et les vomissements avaient repris. [...] Deux heures après, dans l'ambulance, le docteur et la femme se penchaient sur le malade. La femme pleurait. "N'y a-t-il donc plus d'espoir, docteur ?" "Il est mort", dit Rieux.²⁹

28 Camus, *La Peste*, 105.

29 Ibid. 19.

Being employed as a function element for the growing awareness of a prison of unpredictable duration, the temporal suspension, along with the imminent death, cancels all attempts to escape and gives rise to the tangible reality of the plague which, consequently, results in the urge to live in the present moment. The collective destiny, instead, leads to the feeling of revolt:

En fait on pouvait dire à ce moment, au milieu du mois d’août, que la peste avait tout recouvert. Il n’y avait plus alors de destins individuels, mais une histoire collective qui était la peste et des sentiments partagés par tous. Le plus grand était la séparation et l’exil, avec ce que cela comportait de peur et de révolte.³⁰

One of the decisive conversations that mark the passage from the first stage of the plague to the second, characterised by lucidity, is that between Rieux and Tarrou, where the problem of the struggle against death is posed in ontological terms. The revolt that will be identified as the only necessary attitude of man in the face of absurdity is announced from this point in the plot onwards:

“Croyez-vous en Dieu, docteur?” La question était encore posée naturellement. Mais cette fois, Rieux hésita. “Non, mais qu’est-ce que cela veut dire? Je suis dans la nuit, et j’essaie d’y voir clair. Il y a longtemps que j’ai cessé de trouver ça original.” “N’est-ce pas ce qui vous sépare de Paneloux?” [...] Sans sortir de l’ombre, le docteur dit qu’il avait déjà répondu, que s’il croyait en un Dieu tout-puissant, il cesserait de guérir les hommes, lui laissant alors ce soin. Mais que personne au monde, non, pas même Paneloux qui croyait y croire, ne croyait en un Dieu de cette sorte, puisque personne ne s’abandonnait totalement et qu’en cela du moins, lui, Rieux, croyait être sur le chemin de la vérité, en luttant contre la création telle qu’elle était. “Ah!” dit Tarrou, “c’est donc l’idée que vous vous faites de votre métier?” [...] “Oui, dit-il, vous vous dites qu’il y faut de l’orgueil. Mais je n’ai que l’orgueil qu’il faut, croyez-moi. Je ne sais pas ce qui m’attend ni ce qui viendra

30 Ibid. 150.

après tout ceci. Pour le moment il y a des malades et il faut les guérir. Ensuite, ils réfléchiront et moi aussi. Mais le plus pressé est de les guérir. Je les défends comme je peux, voilà tout.” [...] “Après tout”, reprit le docteur, et il hésita encore, regardant Tarrou avec attention, “c’est une chose qu’un homme comme vous peut comprendre, n’est-ce pas, mais puisque l’ordre du monde est réglé par la mort, peut-être vaut-il mieux pour Dieu qu’on ne croie pas en lui et qu’on lutte de toutes ses forces contre la mort, sans lever les yeux vers ce ciel où il se tait.” “Oui”, approuva Tarrou, “je peux comprendre. Mais vos victoires seront toujours provisoires, voilà tout.” Rieux parut s’assombrir. “Toujours, je le sais. Ce n’est pas une raison pour cesser de lutter.”³¹

By bringing this truth to the eyes of the inhabitants of Oran, the plague is presented above all as a question of human time, its duration, and its end, never possible to defeat, but always giving the possibility to rebel. Defeat is nothing but a new point of departure, and if at first the Oranians seek ways to escape from the crudity of the disease, as time passes, a change of attitude towards life takes place. From the moment when Oranians realize that the plague is a phenomenon that concerns them all, “because [...] it [has] appeared for what it was, that is to say, everyone’s business”³², finally, there is enough wisdom and strength for the revolt to appear as the only solution in the face of the experienced absurdity of existence itself.

THE SPACE AND TIME OF LIBERATION

The vicious circle of the frozen time in Oran is finally broken with the first cases envisaging a retreat of the disease. The end of the illness promises a new beginning, and, significantly, such a promise takes place at the end of winter, during the first days of February, when the gates of Oran open, heralding the arrival of the good weather. But the end of the suspense is not entirely achieved by the receding of the disease. There is a real surprise in the expectation of the

31 Ibid. 112.

32 Ibid. 119.

denouement, a twist, an unforeseen reversal that allows for a final increase in narrative tension, thus achieving the symbolic end of the imprisonment. This *coup de théâtre* is represented by the death of one of the protagonists of *The Plague*, Tarrou, the only character who experiences the disease as an inner pain too, as a disease of the soul and body. Tarrou is the real stranger in the city of Oran, the mysterious character who spends his days observing those who surround him, and whose dedication and courage during the long wait for the end of the plague are underlined more than in anyone else. Denouncing the impossibility of being a hero in a world where the absurdity of war and death exists, Tarrou embodies Camus’ call for lucidity:

D’ici là, je sais que je ne vaud plus rien pour ce monde lui-même et qu’à partir du moment où j’ai renoncé à tuer, je me suis condamné à un exil définitif. Ce sont les autres qui feront l’histoire. Je sais aussi que je ne puis apparemment juger ces autres. J’ai pris le parti alors de parler et d’agir clairement, pour me mettre sur le bon chemin. Par conséquent, je dis qu’il y a les fléaux et les victimes, et rien de plus. Si, disant cela, je deviens fléau moi-même, du moins, je n’y suis pas consentant. J’essaie d’être un meurtrier innocent. Vous voyez que ce n’est pas une grande ambition. [...] C’est pourquoi j’ai décidé de me mettre du côté des victimes, en toute occasion, pour limiter les dégâts. Au milieu d’elles, je peux du moins chercher comment on arrive à la troisième catégorie, c’est-à-dire à la paix.³³

The death of this character therefore represents the true conclusion of Oran’s enclosure. In this regard, the final episode, being the crucial point of the philosophical reflection of *The Plague*, employs a specific use of the space-time coordinates, firstly because in the face of the occurrence of the event that breaks the suspense, this death presupposes an additional wait for the development of the disease itself, and secondly, because it introduces the final uncertainty prompted by the disease in the face of the forthcoming liberation of Oran.

33 Ibid. 225.

Tarrou's final battle occurs during a cold, polar night, where the sky is clear and icy, but the stars are frozen, and the room is dark. The stages of the fever during the night are described with absolute accuracy, while the narrative tension is highlighted through the morning remission that implies uncertainty about the outcome. Nature seems to take part in the metaphorical representation of the plague: when the fever is at its peak, it manifests itself as a storm that shakes the body, "like a tempest, like a superhuman evil that burns, a shipwreck". The setting of this episode is achieved with specific spatial elements that endow the scene with the sense of further clausturation and separation: the window and the entrenched space of the room in Rieux's flat contrast with the external festive world that is celebrating the return to normality after the long reclusion:

Le docteur, pour la première fois, reconnut que cette nuit, pleine de promeneurs tardifs et privée des timbres d'ambulances, était semblable à celles d'autrefois. C'était une nuit délivrée de la peste. Et il semblait que la maladie chassée par le froid, les lumières et la foule, se fut échappée des profondeurs obscures de la ville et réfugiée dans cette chambre chaude pour donner son ultime assaut au corps inerte de Tarrou. Le fléau ne brassait plus le ciel de la ville. Mais il sifflait doucement dans l'air lourd de la chambre. [...] Les bruits familiers de la nuit s'étaient succédé dans la rue. Quoique l'autorisation ne fût pas encore accordée, bien des voitures circulaient à nouveau. [...] Des voix, des appels, le silence revenu, le pas d'un cheval, deux tramways grinçant dans une courbe, des rumeurs imprécises et à nouveau la respiration de la nuit.³⁴

The official declaration of the end of the illness comes at dawn on a beautiful February morning. This event is reported by the narrator, one of those who survived and witnessed the final liberation of the city. Camus' decision to allow Rieux to continue to live, albeit a life reduced to "the knowledge and memory of tenderness and friendship", transforms this character into the spokesperson

34 Ibid. 253.

for the author’s moral message: it is necessary to live to know and recognize the evil, to rebel with the flesh against injustice and to oppose it with all one’s strength. Therefore, it is important to relate his experience of the plague with the mission he has been given: to tell the horror that Oran was forced to witness. With his most obstinate struggle, it is Dr Rieux who embodies more closely Camus’ philosophy of the “eternal beginning”, of the meaning of existence found in the choice to start again. The idea of the “recommencement”, on which this character constantly insists throughout the fight against the plague, is once again translated in terms of setting: if the first appearance of the plague takes place the morning of 16 April on the landing of the doctor’s building, it concludes with the final scene in which Dr Rieux is portrayed writing his account of the plague experience, an evening on the terrace of the old asthmatic. The repetitive structure that concludes Camus’ novel illustrates the repetition of every aspect of what makes the world human: life and death, loss and hope. All the contradictions that are part of human life are materialized in the final words by Dr Rieux, which significantly serve as a conclusion of *The Plague*:

Écoutant, en effet, les cris d’allégresse qui montaient de la ville, Rieux se souvenait que cette allégresse était toujours menacée. Car il savait ce que cette foule en joie ignorait, et qu’on peut lire dans les livres, que le bacille de la peste ne meurt ni ne disparaît jamais, qu’il peut rester pendant des dizaines d’années endormi dans les meubles et le linge, qu’il attend patiemment dans les chambres, les caves, les malles, les mouchoirs et les paperasses, et que, peut-être, le jour viendrait où, pour le malheur et l’enseignement des hommes, la peste réveillerait ses rats et les enverrait mourir dans une cité heureuse.³⁵

CONCLUSION

Camus opens his *Myth of Sisyphus* by saying that while for others the absurd is nothing but a conclusion, for him this end is the starting point. Defeat

35 Ibid. 273-74.

experienced as triumph does not exist in Camus' thinking and, instead of being seen as the opening to an afterlife, life with all its absurdities must belong, according to the author, to this world. The meaning that can be found in non-sense lies in the acceptance of the absurd condition that man faces in the face of his fate. From the moment that he begins to reflect on this, he adopts a new position in relation to the world, inhabiting it with the awareness of its irrationality, and at the same time freeing himself from illusions and expectations. Therefore, the absurd man for Camus is the one who has time both to experience the absurd and to rebel against it and, consequently, prepare himself for a revolt.

With the arrival of the plague, the everyday life familiar to the Oranians is replaced by a world that reduces them to strangers among themselves, as well as strangers to the city where they live. The memories of the lost homeland fade away as the struggle against the absurdity of death is announced and the propensity to perceive reality wrapped up in hopes and ideals is made impossible the moment an epidemic arrives in Oran. The death that constitutes the absurd end is the central event of *The Plague*, which confronts all characters with the experience of the act of dying, making them understand "that no morality, [that] no effort is *a priori* justifiable in the face of the bloody mathematics that orders our condition."³⁶ In this sense, circularity becomes the fundamental structural element of the spatio-temporal construction of the novel's literary world. The victims trapped inside the absurd walls of Oran gain the possibility of a new start in the struggle and, paradoxically, the repetitive movements within the enclosed city provide the possibility of escaping from the absurd life, now when the level of absurdity - or of abstraction - is at its highest point. In their attempt to survive the night, Dr Rieux and his companions break the vicious circle, thus recognizing the plague as the inevitable element of human life.

The closing words of the story of the plague, "the happy city", deliver the author's final message: the importance of choosing happiness over everything

36 "(...) qu'aucune morale, [qu'] aucun effort ne sont a priori justifiables devant les sanglantes mathématiques qui ordonnent notre condition.", in Albert Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (Paris : Gallimard, Folio essais, 1992), 22.

else, even with the eternal threat of the plague bacillus. The Camusian Sisyphus struggles against the gods who have condemned him to an absurd destiny, but it is the ascent that makes him stronger. Similarly, the Oranians’ battle against the plague comprises their decision, day by day, to recommence, by undertaking the perilous journey once again and it is precisely in this decision to start again after each defeat where they find their happiness, given that “the struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart”.³⁷

In addition to Sisyphus, then, the men of *The Plague* are the embodiment of the heroes of the revolt. Faced with the realization of the absurd, Camus’ heroes choose to confront the world as it is. It is a revolt which, in Camusian thought, is initially personal and negative, but which gradually moves to the collective level, embracing the whole humanity. Notwithstanding the pessimism and criticism directed at the man and his contemporaneity, at false values and reality in continuous degradation, the author invites his characters, and consequently, his readers to deal with a problem that involves everyone and that underlines the deep need for a transformation of the world, or for regeneration that always arises after a crisis. From the moment that absurd man expresses his powerlessness in relation to creation, and especially from the moment that he transforms this negation into a positive view of the problem of the absurd, he arrives at the only modality of liberation: solidarity. It is only through this virtue that the real struggle against the absurd can be achieved: accepting the world and men as they are and arriving in this way at the sole possibility of authenticity, translated in the founding words of Camus’ thought: “I revolt, therefore we are.”³⁸

37 “(...) la lutte elle-même vers les sommets suffit à remplir le cœur d’homme. Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux.”, in Albert Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (Paris : Gallimard, Folio essais, 1992), 112.

38 “Je me révolte, donc nous sommes.”, in Albert Camus, *L’Homme révolté* (Paris : Gallimard, Folio essais, 1997), 49.

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