



Camus, Roth, Covid-19: the dangers of forgetting

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Abstract

Pandemic literature (and there is a sprawling canon of it) tells us much about the past so that we can learn for our future, but we have been poor students. We should have been better prepared for Covid-19, and even merely scratching the surface of pandemic literature by examining Albert Camus's *The Plague* and Phillip Roth's *Nemesis* is very revealing. Despite the remarkable heterogeneity of our world, there are some things about disease that are shared globally, and many things that are recorded in literature are pertinent to the current pandemic situation. Remembering past pandemics is vital to dealing with future ones. This article argues that documentation of pandemics offers important reminders of epidemiology but also about how race, class, gender, and sexuality are involved both in the representation and in the movement of disease. Fiction gives us the chance to revise our thinking both about our relationship with microbes and about how we imagine a balance between individual liberties and social responsibility. These matters seemed to many of us entirely novel concerns brought out by the novel coronavirus. In reality, they are not novel and have long been the concerns of pandemic literature. There are great dangers in forgetting this.

Keywords Pandemic literature · Remembrance · *Nemesis* · *The Plague* · Covid-19 and literature

We should have seen it coming. The coronavirus may be novel but plagues are not. (Zakaria, 2020, p. 4)

The Covid-19 epidemic (SARS-CoV-2) has confronted us with a planetary emergency that we were unprepared for, as can be clearly seen in every area: psychology, society, economics, and—above all—biopolitics. (Marchesini, 2021, p. 13)

Covid-19 in many ways caught the world unprepared, and this is surprising because so much literature—scientific and fictional—has offered so many warnings.

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Novels by Albert Camus and Phillip Roth, for instance, have offered such warnings, and it is useful (and not too late) to examine these novels. We can learn much from these authors—indeed, we *should have* learned much from them—about the shortfalls in how we have approached pandemics and plagues in the past. While disease and death clearly are as varied as populations and geographies, cultures and topographies, medical practices and climates, the documentation of pandemics (both scientific and fictional) share many significant features, one of which is a commitment to the notion that memory is important and that recording facts is necessary for future remembrances of things past. Documentation of pandemics offers remembrances not only of the epidemiology but of social matters—race, class, gender, sexuality, and so on—involved both in the representation and the transmission of disease. It also offers us a chance to revise our thinking both about our relationship with microbes and about relationships between individual liberties and social responsibility—and both of these matters seemed to many of us entirely novel concerns brought out by the novel coronavirus. But they are not novel concerns.

One of the most noticeable early responses to pandemics and plagues is a failure to respond. Camus states the case in stark and unmistakable terms:

The people of our town [...] forgot to be modest and thought that everything was still possible for them, which implied that pestilence was impossible. They continued with business, with making arrangements for travel and holding opinions. Why should they have thought about the plague, which negates the future, negates journeys and debate? They considered themselves free. (Camus, 1947, pp. 30–31).

This failure to respond to real viral threats must at least in part be understood as itself a survival mechanism. With so many real things requiring serious attention, shunning alarmism and false threats is an important survival mechanism in that it frees us from wasting time on non-issues. Early responses to Covid-19 were measured, but precisely such measured responses quickly came under fire in mainstream media—the same media that is quick to point the finger at and mock alarmists (the type of responses that have crippled popular discussions about climate change).¹ It is a fine balance between responding to the real threats and ignoring false ones. There is a saying that fools rush in where angels fear to tread, but being slow off the block with pandemics results in deaths. The problem is in knowing for certain in the early stages of a disease that it is indeed a real threat. Pandemic fiction often depicts this quandary. Roth discusses in *Nemesis*, a novel about polio, the desire

¹ The matter of climate change is hardly new, with irrefutable research first appearing around 1956 in Gilbert N. Plass's article "The carbon dioxide theory of climatic change." With considerable understatement, Plass explained in 1959 that "we shall be able to test the carbon dioxide theory against other theories of climate change quite conclusively in the next half century. If carbon dioxide is the most important factor, long-term temperature records will rise continuously as long as man consumes the earth's reserves of fossil fuels" (Plass 1959, 47). It took another generation before "global warming" became an issue in the United States (see Brulle, 2018) and yet another generation (give or take) before it morphed yet again, this time back to "climate change" in mainstream media. We have had the topic for over 60 years, during which time ridicule has stifled action.

to avoid “communal fear” (Roth, 2010, p. 6) and the dangers it poses. Bucky Cantor, the central tragic protagonist, states it well: “an important thing is for you to calm down and not lose your self-control and panic” (ibid, p. 37). Fear can be as dangerous as the disease itself. Cantor urges “you mustn’t be eaten up with fear. What’s important is not to infect the children with the germ of fear” (ibid, p. 38). The theme runs throughout the novel. We learn that the doctors initially downplayed the dangers, explaining that “it’s important not to exaggerate the danger and to carry on normally” (ibid, p. 102). As the cases rose, the cautious feeling was that “there was as yet no cause for [...] alarm” (ibid, p. 2). It is easy for these fears to result in the promulgation of dangerous misinformation.² It is as dangerous for Mr. Trump to suggest injecting disinfectant as a viable treatment for Covid-19 as it is for the characters in Camus to suggest that microbes dislike alcohol: “After one café put up a notice saying that ‘microbes hate the honest grape’, the idea that alcohol protects you against infection—something that the public already found it natural to believe—became still more firmly anchored in their minds” (Camus, 1947, p. 62). History (and literature) has shown that delaying responses and underestimating a disease can result in horrendous losses.

Roberto Marchesini meticulously enumerates and distills the enormous catalogue of misinformation that people have spewed out in response to the Covid-19 pandemic:

the most fanciful conjectures have been made about absurd conspiracy theories, such as the concealment of the effects of 5G technology, the bacteriological war between the United States and China, the manufacture of an engineered virus that escaped from a laboratory in Wuhan, the implementation of the epidemic by a pharmaceutical company to get rich through the sale of the vaccine, the pandemic as pretext to establish a world dictatorship, the governmental excuse of prophylactic control to eliminate individual freedoms, world speculation by the financial elites, and even the arrival of aliens. (Marchesini, 2021, p. 13).

Covid-19 has not exactly brought out our best behaviors, and it has lain bare our eco-phobia, has shown us in the plainest of terms the terrifying reality that we, like other animals, hide when danger appears,³ leaving nature (and this is the truly terrifying part for us) to take over: “the theme of nature taking up the spaces abandoned by the human being,” Marchesini explains, “in line with the descriptions of the ecological transformations that took place in Chernobyl, returns in many videos shared on social media showing deer, badgers, wolves and bears walking peacefully through the city streets” (ibid, p. 15). Belonging to the larger “the world without us” or “life after people” genre, the images Marchesini describes are part of what I described in

² In the real world, this has translated into several issues: vaccine hesitancy, the notion that vaccination could result in Covid-19 infections or the loss of fertility, beliefs that religious faith will protect people from Covid-19, that young people don’t need vaccinations, and so on. See Yan, 2021.

³ We know that birds take flight, mudskippers retreat into the sand, and fish disappear into the depths when danger appears. We are not all that different when danger appears. We want to live.

The ecophobia hypothesis as an “ecophobic vision of Nature that will finally conquer humanity, reclaim all of the world, and remain long after we are gone” (Estok, 2018, p. 66). This is the real fear that prompts us to document through word and image the shocking emptiness that we began to witness in early 2020. These documents surely will be a warning to future generations, as pandemic literature of the past should surely have been a warning to us.⁴ Yet, mainstream media seems to enjoy pretending that all of this was unpredictable, unimaginable, and inevitable. “Unimaginable.” That’s the word CNN’s Nic Robertson used to describe the streets of London on the 23rd of March 2020, following British Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s “stay at home” order. But it *was* imagined. Danny Boyle’s 2002 post-virus-apocalypse horror film *28 Days Later* shot scenes of desolate streets and thoroughfares in London—one of them Piccadilly Circus, precisely the spot Nic Robertson was surveying when he said that the images of desolation were unimaginable. To say that it is unimaginable is simply dishonest.

As the Covid-19 pandemic worked through its first several months, then-President Trump repeatedly told his supporters that the pandemic would go away when the spring came: “In the spring, indeed, they expected the illness to end at any time, so no one bothered to seek information about the duration of the epidemic because they had all convinced themselves that it would have none.” The source for this quotation, surprisingly, is not contemporary with Covid-19. It was written when Trump himself was but a year old. It is from Camus’s *The Plague* (Camus, 1947, p. 171). And it could as easily be misunderstood to be Trump explaining that “Epidemics have a way of spontaneously running out of steam [...] There’s still no cause for alarm as far as I can tell.” It is actually Dr. Steinberg from Roth’s *Nemesis* (Roth, 2010, pp. 102–103). Literature, then, clearly dramatizes the fatigue epidemics engender. Camus describes the hope and “feeling that the disease had exhausted itself” (Camus, 1947, p. 208) and how this feeling dangerously jeopardizes our safety. One of the spectacularly dangerous things that both Camus and Roth register is how the tendency to downplay the scope and potential of a pandemic is mirrored by the tendency to downplay the scope and effects of the thing when it is all over. Again, this is history, and these are lessons that *we should have learned*.

Boomers, Gen Xers, Millennials, Gen Zers, and Gen Alphas all grew up with little real education about or knowledge of the 1918 influenza pandemic. Other things filled the history books. Pandemics become like mythical things of the past that surely will not come knocking on our door. Immunity against disease—like the sense of peacetime security—is a fantasy enjoyed by many people in industrialized countries in the 20th and early 21st centuries. It is as though pandemics and plagues, to cite Camus “change nothing [...] and [...] everything would begin again as before, that is to say, as though nothing had happened” (ibid, p. 215). Pandemics again and again find us unprepared, but “pestilence is in fact very common, [and] we find it hard to believe in a pestilence when it descends upon us. There have been as many plagues in the world as there have been wars, yet plagues and wars always find

⁴ The following four sentences appear in Estok, 2021b.

people equally unprepared” (ibid, p. 30). This unpreparedness, because it has had such devastating results, warrants theoretical, personal, and political attention.

Memories of failure are sooner forgotten than celebrated in history. Memories of failure generate indignation and motivation when there is a clear understanding that we are in control, but such is not the case with most pandemics. History shows a preference for forgetting, putting lives at stake. It is not just fear, however, that causes this forgetfulness. There is the matter of power and how information management plays into this. Perhaps no one has more clearly articulated the power of pandemic discourse than Priscilla Wald in her very important *Contagious: Cultures, carriers, and the outbreak narrative*:

As [outbreak narratives] disseminate information, they affect survival rates and contagion routes. They promote or mitigate the stigmatizing of individuals, groups, populations, locales (regional and global), behaviors, and lifestyles, and they change economies. They also influence how both scientists and the lay public understand the nature and consequences of infection, how they imagine the threat, and why they react so fearfully to some disease outbreaks and not others at least as dangerous and pressing. It is therefore important to understand the appeal and persistence of the outbreak narrative and to consider how it shapes accounts of disease emergence across genres and media. (Wald, 2008, p. 3)

And while, as Roth shows, “the impact of the numbers [can be ...] disheartening and frightening and wearying” (Roth, 2010, p. 131), what we are today calling “pandemic fatigue” and “corona fatigue,” knowing the numbers in real time provides opportunities such as we have never had in our constant dance with disease and death.

The opportunities to secure the health and well-being of humanity offered by the Covid-19 pandemic has been profound, but these have, for the most part, been missed opportunities. The early focus on the sources of the disease clearly revealed that our chronically exploitative relationships with animals need immediate attention. The disease is, after all, zoonotic. Jared Diamond reminds us that “the major killers of humanity throughout our recent history—smallpox, flu, tuberculosis, malaria, plague, measles, and cholera—are infectious diseases that evolved from diseases of animals” (Diamond, 1997, pp. 196–197). Rather than attend to the our chronically exploitative relationship with animals, the real root of the problem, however, the world’s most powerful “leader” instead seized on the pandemic as an opportunity to conceptualize the disease along nationalist lines. Trump made clear by example what scholars have long noted—namely, that pandemic discourse routinely engages in xenophobia and racism. Indeed, as Wald explains, “surfacing routinely in outbreak accounts, this language [pandemic discourse] established disease outbreaks as ‘foreign’ or ‘alien’ agents that posed a national threat” (Wald, 2008, p. 27)—hence, Trump’s “Kung Flu” and “the Chinese Virus.” The irony of the divisiveness summoned here is that pandemics and plagues are events when people, in the interests of survival, *should* come together.

The ironies of the divisive potentials of pandemic discourse are well documented. Toward the end of *The Plague*, Camus describes the plague situation as follows:

Poor families [...] found themselves in a very difficult situation. Because of the efficient impartiality which it brought to its administrations, the plague should have worked for greater equality among our fellow citizens through the normal interplay of egoism, but in fact it heightened the feeling of injustice in the hearts of men. (Camus, 1947, p. 183)

Presumably in the hearts of women too. The divisive sexism inscribed in the language of *The Plague* is even more subtle in the scene with the Italians in *Nemesis*. It is the pivotal scene⁵ in the novel, and it reveals a lot about intersections of racism, classism, and gender issues. It is a gendered scene not only because it is men—a group of young Italian hoodlums who have arrived in the Jewish neighborhood looking for trouble—but because they are enacting gendered violence and are forcing themselves on their mostly passive victims. When the novel’s central protagonist Bucky Cantor asks them why they had come to the neighborhood, “‘We’re spreadin’ polio,’ one of the Italians replied” (Roth, 2010, p. 13). Class and ethnicity are tightly stitched into the fabric of the narrative here. The Italians had come from the East Side, which was “the industrial slum,” an area “that had reported the most cases of polio so far” in the narrative (ibid). Clearly, however, gender violence is also centrally implied here. This “rape scene” reaches a kind of climax when the hoodlums spit and then casually leave. What remains are the slimy remnants of the climax: “It turned out that there was sputum spread over the wide area of pavement where the Italian guys had congregated, some twenty feet of a wet, slimy, disgusting mess that certainly appeared an ideal breeding ground for the disease” (ibid, p. 16). The isomorphic tags of rape here are unmistakable, and the monstrous birth that will result from this crime is the materialization of the disease, though the narrative does not pronounce a verdict. On the contrary, the narrative diffuses the source of engenderment, with characters arguing about the situation:

“It had to be the Italians.”

“No, no, I don’t think so. I was there when the Italians came. They had no contact with the children. It wasn’t the Italians.” (ibid, p. 38)

Later, race and ethnicity remain central, as the source of the engenderment remains a mystery:

The anti-Semites are saying that it’s because they’re Jews that polio spreads there. Because of all the Jews—that’s why Weequahic is the center of the paralysis and why the Jews should be isolated. Some of them sound as if they think the best way to get rid of the polio epidemic would be to burn down Weequahic with all the Jews in it. (ibid, p. 193)

References to “the day the Italians tried to invade the playground” (ibid, p. 62) continue throughout the novel. There is at least as much fear of the Italians (and later the Jews) as there is of the infectious agency of the slime.

⁵ Parts of this paragraph appears in slightly different form in Estok, 2022.

Again, however, we need to be careful when we are working through this material. Responsibly representing how differently the disease and the health system function along cultural, racial, ethnic, and income lines is like tight-rope walking. When an entire nation (say Taiwan) is doing something right (as reflected in the low number of infections and deaths), it is natural to make some sort of comment; similarly, when an entire nation (say the India) is doing something wrong (as reflected in the *high* number of infections and deaths), it is again natural to make some sort of comment. The former does not result in an Taiwan-mania, a fandom of screaming and crying supporters, a Taiwan love fest and fanaticism full of fervent adulation and passion; the India situation, however, often *did* spawn racist contempt and virulent hatred—and hatred and fear are indeed like a virus, while love and admiration are perhaps less so. During pandemics, insecurities, fears, and phobias swell and bloat. Remembering heterogeneity is vital. More than 160 years ago, the 19th century French physician Jean C.M. Boudin explained the importance of recognizing heterogeneity as it relates with disease:

Man is not born, does not live, suffer, die in the same way in all parts of the world. Birth, life, sickness and death, all change with the climate and the soil [...] with race and nationality. These varied manifestations of life and death, of health and sickness, these incessant changes in space and according to the origins of man, constitute the special object of medical geography. Its domain embraces meteorology and physical geography, statistical population laws, comparative pathology of different races, the geographical distribution and migration of diseases. (Boudin, 1848, p. xxxv)

Yet, while there are clearly great differences in the world, a heterogeneity that patterns the occurrence and effects of diseases and pandemics, it is also critical here to remember that pandemics know no borders: “Microbial indifference to boundaries is a refrain in both scientific and popular writing about emerging infections” (Wald, 2008, p. 33). The ecological and microbial impacts of our egoism will be felt across borders in ways that we cannot imagine for many years to come.

Among the many threats the Covid-19 pandemic presents, one is a direct challenge to our sense of our own individuality, and we sit “impotently witnessing terror and death” (Roth, 2010, p. 150), like the characters in *Nemesis*. And we should make no mistake about it that the threat to our sense of exceptionalism is the microbe itself. Science journalist Ed Yong puts the case well: “No matter how we squint at the problem, it is clear that microbes subvert our notions of individuality” (Yong, 2016, p. 24). Personal liberties—and secrets—dissolve as much in the narratives microbes tell as in the outbreak narratives humans create: “microbes tell the often hidden story of who has been where and when, and of what they did there. Contagion, that is, charts social interactions that are often not otherwise visible, and the manifestations of those contacts and connections is another important feature of outbreak narratives” (Wald, 2008, p. 37). But Roth and Camus did not—could not—warn about what science is now discovering: the fundamentality of microbial worlds, worlds that compulsive sanitizing threatens.

It is very likely that our efforts, combined with the limits of the virus itself, will spell the end of Covid-19—or, at the very least, its taming. But that is not the end of

the story, and at some point, we really do need to think about what all of the sanitizing has done and how the effects of it will come back to haunt us. Camus certainly recognized that “what is natural is the microbe” (Camus, 1947, p. 195), and Wald reminds us that “Nature is far from benign; at least it has no special sentiment for the welfare of the human versus other species” (Wald, 2008, p. 40). Neither, however, is Nature evil; yet among researchers, as Wald continues, “the microbes are not only sinister; outbreak accounts manifest researchers’ respect for and even awe of their foe” (ibid. p. 43). Even so, it bears repeating that Nature is indifferent, and this is a concept that we simply find difficult to digest. Wald argues that “nothing better illustrates the reluctance to accept Nature’s indifference toward human beings and the turn from the ecological analysis in accounts of emerging infections of all varieties than the seemingly irresistible tendency to animate a microbial foe” (ibid, p. 42). Thus, in the creative imagination, disease invades everything. It is a sinister presence, a threat, and late in *Nemesis*, Bucky feels that “the birch trees encircling them looked in the moonlight like a myriad of deformed silhouettes—[the] island haunted suddenly with the ghosts of polio victims” (Roth, 2010, p. 228). No less in Camus is the plague the personification of evil, and we hear at one point both that it “was gathering all its strength for an assault on the town, so that it could take hold of it for good” (Camus, 1947, p. 106) and that the efforts of people “to rediscover happiness and to preserve from the plague that part of themselves that they defended against all assault” (ibid) were futile. The novel ends hauntingly: “the plague bacillus never dies or vanishes entirely” (ibid, p. 237). Attempts to get rid of it must be enacted with a view to the long-term.

Efforts to wipe out dangerous microbes, we need to remember, will have long-term consequences. The smallest of all of the microbes, viruses provoke retaliatory responses from us that can produce worse results than the virus itself. The questions about social responsibilities versus individual liberties aside, serious as they are, more important biological questions—none of which are currently being addressed in mainstream media or popular scientific peer reviewed research—need immediate attention. In 2019, not long before the Covid-19 pandemic, I wrote in *ISLE* as follows:

Today, as Michael Pollan notes in a discussion about fermentation, “the microbial world is regarded foremost as a mortal threat” (Pollan, 2013, p. 296). The legacy of Louis Pasteur, he explains, “is a century-long war on bacteria, a war in which most of us have volunteered or been enlisted. We deploy our antibiotics and hand sanitizers and deodorants and boiling water and ‘pasteurization’ and federal regulations to hold off the rot and molds and bacteria and so, we hope, hold off disease and death” (ibid). Pollan calls it “germophobia” (ibid, p. 297), but it is also known as “microbiophobia,” “Mysophobia,” “verminophobia,” “bacillophobia,” and “bacteriophobia”—all of them clearly falling under the rubric of ecophobia, which, as I have suggested elsewhere, plays out in many spheres, including the personal hygiene and cosmetics industries. (Estok, 2019, pp. 473–474)

Compulsive use of hand sanitizers in public venues is a recent example of our obsessive fear of dirt and bacteria. The reality, however, is that the human body is

comprised of more nonhuman than human DNA, and *obsessive* hand sanitizing is more harmful in the long-run than it is beneficial in that we are killing microorganisms that are beneficial to our own survival. For instance, we need intestinal flora in order to digest our food, regulate our immune system, and reduce inflammation. These gut flora (the bacteria) produce antimicrobial substances that outnumber the total number of cells in the human body by 1000%—ten to one, in other words.⁶ The biological questions about what we are doing to future generations with our compulsive sanitizing needs our attention. No less does our sense of being besieged, outnumbered, and under attack by our microscopic companions;⁷ imagining war rather than cohabitation with the microbes will not help us in the long-run, and the fact remains that “we are more microbe than human” (McFall-Ngai, 2017, p. M52). There will be blood for tearing into microbial ecosystems.

We are facing a serious loss—one that has nothing to do with personal liberties or social freedoms: before Covid-19, with the growth of the Anthropocene, we had already begun to face “the loss,” Margaret McFall-Ngai explains, “of the complex microbial worlds both within and beyond organismal bodies—worlds that make nearly all life possible” (ibid, p. M51). These microbial worlds are absolutely essential for us, yet we are tearing into them willy-nilly with our sanitizing regimes. I am not on any level arguing against the need for good hygiene in the Covid-19 era, but we need to know that there will be blood for this. Summarizing the work of Carl Woese, McFall-Ngai describes how, by the early 1990s, it had become clear that “the earth’s biological diversity is far more microbial than ever imagined” (ibid, p. M54) and that “microbes don’t just ‘rule’ the world: they make every life form possible, and they have been doing so since the beginning of evolutionary time” (ibid, p. M59). McFall-Ngai summarizes important arguments about how “bacteria matter not only in themselves but also in relation to other living beings, who depend on them for processes as basic as bodily development” (ibid). She spells it out so that even the most non-scientific of readers can clearly understand: “Bacteria are not only changing the way our guts behave; their metabolic products interact with our entire bodies in complicated ways that we are just beginning to explore. For example, we are finding out that gut bacteria have significant impacts on our brains, affecting the ways we think and feel” (ibid, p. M64). Citing the work of Wang and Kaspar (2014), McFall-Ngai contends that “there is growing evidence that the presence or absence of certain microbial strains is linked to depression, anxiety, and autism” (ibid). So why in the world is there no media attention to the possible harm that our anti-septic, anti-biotic, compulsive sanitizing might be doing to our future? At least part of the answer is quite simply that we do indeed suffer from that branch of ecophobia called Pollan called “germophobia.” McFall-Ngai argues strongly for the need to see “bacteria [less] as disease-causing invaders [...] than [as] potential symbiotic partners” (ibid, p. M65), something that is *not* happening in microbiology circles: “Human bodies can no longer be seen as fortresses to defend against microbial onslaught but must be reenvisioned as nested ecosystems” (ibid). Moreover,

⁶ See also Saxena and Sharma (2016).

⁷ This paragraph appears in slightly different form in Estok, 2021a.

given that “individuals are ecosystems,” it becomes clear “that the loss of a single species probably entails the loss of many kinds, not just one. Attention to microbial life raises the specter that our extinction crisis may be even more serious than we thought” (ibid, p. M66). McFall-Ngai concludes powerfully that “in the era of the Anthropocene, noticing microbial worlds seems more important than ever” (ibid, pp. M66–M67). In the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic, these words could not be more timely.

I write in the middle of a pandemic, masked, vaccinated, and sanitized. I write from two worlds, having as my primary residences Vancouver and Seoul, and I have spent roughly equal amounts of Covid-19 time in each place. The debates in the West about personal liberties seem absurd in the East, where there is a broad understanding that masks and vaccinations are as much about social responsibility as about individual health. Our current pandemic has borne out Wald’s observation that “communicable disease illustrates the logic of social responsibility: the mandate to live with a consciousness of the effects of one’s actions on others” (Wald, 2008, p. 22). Again, however, we cannot make a blanket statement here, since power and privilege allow people to evade their social responsibilities. Thus, Roth records how “the privileged lucky ones disappeared from the city for the summer” (Roth, 2010, p. 8) while everyone else remained in the pandemic hotspot. Overall, however, pandemics have evoked (and literature has recorded) the sense that “we are all involved [and that] we must accept things as they are” (Camus, 1947, p. 67), that “there [are] no longer any individual destinies, but a collective history that [is] the plague” (ibid, p. 129). Governments around the world make sure that its citizens follow the rules legislating social responsibilities. We are all familiar with such legislation (whether traffic light rules or mask mandates), and to many people the resistance to mask mandates in the United States is astonishing—rather like protesting about having to stop at red traffic lights! It is ironic, moreover, that Western media initially criticized Chinese responses to the pandemic as “draconian,”⁸ especially given that the West followed China’s lead not much later.

How literature has recorded issues from past pandemics is fascinating. Reading *Nemesis* and *The Plague* is like reading today’s newspaper: “Any person violating the isolation and quarantine rules and regulations [...] without authority is liable to a fine of \$50” (Roth, 2010, p. 131). Though the penalty is different,⁹ the message has remained the same. So have stupid people: “stupidity always carries doggedly on” (Camus, 1947, p. 30). People continue to put themselves first: “One might say that the first effect of this sudden and brutal attack of the disease was to force citizens of our town to act as though they had no individual feelings” (ibid, p. 53). Camus captures well the sense that on the one hand pandemics give people the feeling that they “resemble those whom justice or human hatred has forced to live behind bars” (ibid, p. 58) and, on the other hand, pandemics have the effect “of distracting attention and confusing the issue” (ibid, p. 59).

⁸ See, for instance, Lui et al. (2021); Gunia (2020); and Zhou (2020).

⁹ The fine in Canada for breaking quarantine rules is a 15,000 times higher at \$750,000!

It is surprising that we have been caught off guard by Covid-19, since literature (of which I have barely scratched the surface with Camus and Roth) has catalogued so meticulously the many issues we are currently facing, not to mention the fact that we seem to have a predisposition to thinking in terms of viruses.¹⁰ When the pandemic passes, and it will, we will need to face the environmental crises we have been creating for a very long time, crises that themselves spawned the pandemic,¹¹ and crises that have resulted from the pandemic. The latter include adjusting to the new realities of what Marchesini calls “a system reboot” to which we will all be subjected, since “nothing will be the same as before” (Marchesini, 2021, p. 14). It will include dealing with compromised microbial ecosystems. And it will include figuring out how to resolve the “debates about social responsibility” (Wald, 2008, p. 16) that pandemics and their discourses have raised. Perhaps most of all, it will require us to spend a bit more time reading and learning from literature. Fiction has as much to tell us about our history as it does about our future.

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¹⁰ Roberto Marchesini has gone so far as to suggest that we are living in “the Age of the Virus” because so much of our thinking is imbued with the language of virology. Things go viral on the internet, and “we [ourselves] are behaving like a virus” on the planet (2021, p. 2).

¹¹ There is little question that our depletion of resources, our intensive farming, and our search for alternative foods (in high quantities) has extended the boundaries of what we exploit. The animal sources (bats and pangolins) of the Covid-19 virus are well-documented (see Anderson et al. (2020), Wu et al. (2020) and Zhou et al. (2020)).

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