



THE PLAGUE AS MYTH OF THE MODERN WORLD

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We are very pleased to present this excerpt from *Camus' Plague: Myth for our World*, by Gene Fendt, and published by St. Augustine's Press, who continue to publish excellent and important books. And this one is no exception. It is a very fine work of analysis of the current state of the Covid pandemic by way of a classic work of fiction, Albert Camus' *The Plague*.

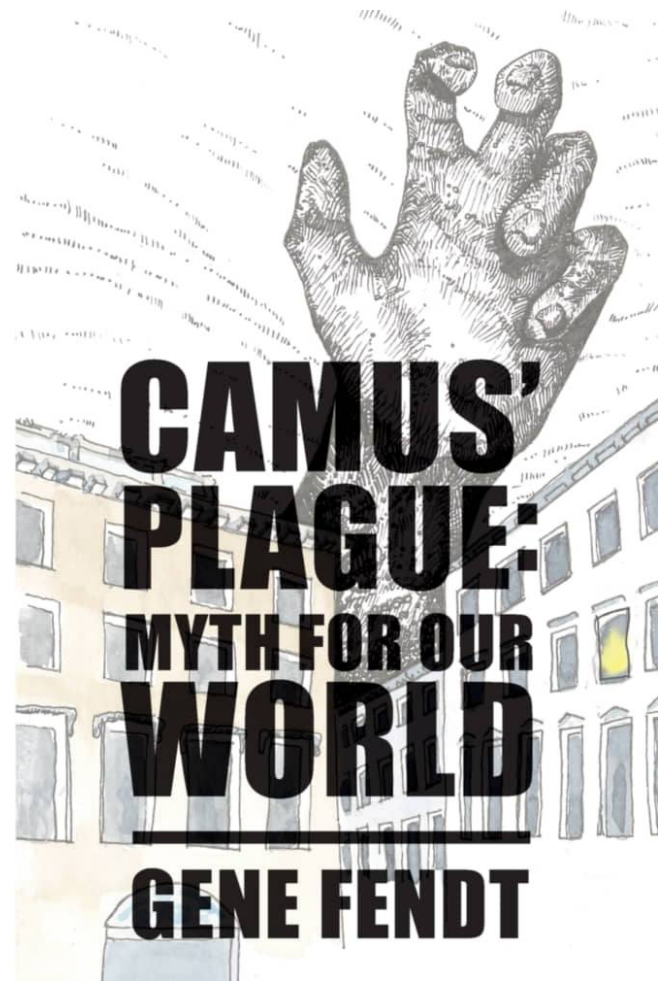
Presently, civilization cannot allow itself to think about being better. First it has to survive. Referencing Thomas Merton's claim that Camus' fictional account is actually a "modern myth about the destiny of man" and indication of the blight of "ambiguous and false explanations, interpretations, conventions, justifications, legalizations, evasions which infect our struggling civilization," Fendt makes the case that "modernity itself is a time of plague."

Fendt asserts that perhaps "the originality of the modern plague is that most people admit of no symptoms." This chilling likeness to the asymptomatic Covid-19 victim is but one of the images of what the plague stands for in both the novel and contemporary society. The existentialist fiction of Camus is unwrapped by Fendt's fidelity to realism and Camus' motivations as an artist. As Camus calls nihilistic art and culture "barbaric," Fendt calls the barbarian a natural slave. If we are moved by the forces of powers that be without sense or knowledge of a proper end, we too have been rendered worse than ignorant.

Make sure and pick up your copy of [*Camus' Plague: Myth for our World*](#).

The proper understanding of "myth" is not that it is an archaic first attempt at scientific or historical explanation, but that it originates a worldview within which all the actions, stories, explanations (including scientific explanations) and judgements of daily life can and do take place. It is the objective framework within which the society whose myth it is understands their lives; it is what defines and delimits "objective". The vast majority of mankind does not even think to give what Kant called a transcendental deduction for that framework within in which all their world appears; myth is that framework. One connection between religion and a work of art is just this: each creates a spacing, an "aesthetic distance" from which and within which life and its experiences can be seen as something whole, and being see as a whole, life becomes understandable, we achieve some clarity of vision; it embodies not only what Wordsworth called emotion recollected in tranquility, but emotion and actions

set within a clear vision of the whole—a cosmos—within which, in turn, we may understand ourselves and our existence, and experience the engendering of emotions like those of our life.



The myth is that in which we are able to know and to feel our existence. To put things in a more directly philosophical statement myths are the embodied transcendental rational ideal of those in it (the readers, co-religionists, or audience); it is the unconditioned "totality of the conditions for any given condition," the unconditioned ground within which thought and feeling take place and are understood. It is a mistake to consider what we might call the elements of myth as having "any suitable ... employment in concreto." Without such myths however, "no coherent employment of the understanding" is possible. A myth makes of the world a limited complete whole—an *opseos kosmos*; and this making so can never be a fact in the world, or even a fact about the world. Its myths are a

culture's means of formation—moral, intellectual, emotional, and whatever we might mean by spiritual. As a rule, what lies outside the myth cannot be seen to have happened, cannot be seen to be going on. The one who tells the myth—supposing there is one: Homer, Moses, Freud, Marx, Hitler, Camus, Rothko—has been formed by, as much as he is forming the story, unless you want to believe in the myth of the great man inventing his own culture.

This last has sometimes been called the myth of patriarchy, though autochthony would perhaps be the more adequate name of the general form of this myth, depending upon which of the two matriarchy is considered the alternative of, for matriarchy, too, is a myth. This sense of myth does not only apply to those stories, such as Homer's, which we usually intend, but it covers also Nietzsche's sense when he suggests that we still believe in the gods because we believe in grammar, for our grammar, because it has substantives and verbs, makes us still look for that mythical "subject" the self whenever there is a feeling or thought or action; or as he suggests—perfectly in line with Kant's discussion—because we think "world" we must also think "God". That he has myths is symptomatic of a being whose knowledge is limited.

Thus, the critique of myth depends on a different spacing, that is, a different myth granting the aesthetic distance upon the "what is the form" or "what had been formed"—the myth—of the first culture or epoch. So, we might ask of someone like Sir James Frazer—"what is that cultural myth from which you investigate the myths of 'primitive' cultures?" Seeing our point, he would confess that it is the myth of empirical science, and undoubtedly chuckle, for everyone here knows that empirical science is not a myth—right? And Nietzsche's point might not be the insane one of attempting to speak without any grammar whatsoever, but a warning about the wrong way to think about things, into which we are led by, let us call them, the facts of our grammar. In such a case we would find him aligned with Wittgenstein, who is a much less explosive, but no less insightful writer of German sentences. In every such case we are taking the myths as if they refer and have meaning in the same way that all those things that appear in them (the whole world—material and social) refer or have meaning, mistaking that through which and in which we understand to be the same sort of thing as that which we understand (or wish to understand).

Sophie Bourgault reports such a myth which Camus told about himself and his work as an author while in Stockholm to receive the Nobel Prize. He said that he intended there to be three layers to his work: "absurdity, revolt, and love." The last was to be the center of his reflections in the coming works; thus, after his sudden death, we are left "with an unfinished trilogy". In the preface to the second edition of his

youthful (1937) book of essays, *The Wrong Side and the Right Side*, published the year after his visit to Stockholm (1958), Camus tells a story of his work which aligns with this layering, for he finds “more love in these awkward pages than in all those that have followed” (LCE 6). He hopes, in the near future “to construct the work I dream of... it will speak of a certain form of love” (LCE 15). These statements are the best sign that Camus is, near the time of this re-printing, taking a new, at least more clearly defined, aesthetic distance on himself and his work, framing it as a coherent life-story under the aegis of these three “stages”.

I propose taking it to be true, that is, the framework that allows us to see more truly; but it also seems quite clear that Camus has been learning from his own work, and one thing he has learned is that, seen truly, love seems to have been “the backdrop of everything.” Or perhaps the center sphere of several, growing like an onion, but written and read—and lived?—from the outside in; perhaps only having lived and written through what is already behind him does he see what the living, growing center has been all along. In the reading of Camus' own myths it is not evident, within the absurdity of *Sisyphus*, or within *The Rebel*, that love is “the backdrop to everything.” Nor the center either. Indeed, love seems to have a different significance—if it has any, if we treat each of the previous stages as the expression of Camus' myth at the time of its writing. But perhaps “like great works, deep feelings always mean more than they are conscious of saying” (MS 8). Perhaps, then, his late myth about his work is the true confession about his life, as well as his work. Absurdity, rebellion, love—it's a life trajectory Augustine would recognize, as well as many other sinners. How shall we ask if such a myth is true? From what mythic standpoint could we judge?

This latterly told myth of his writing life is the confession of that world within which he wished his work to be understood, within which he understood himself now to have always been working, within which he thought his work could best work—or did, does, and will do its best work—for us. Those earlier works, taken for themselves—as their own autochthonous myths—were partial, of severely limited focus. Lucidity about his own life and experience demanded that he be living in another myth, a framework distinct from those—each of which brought its own kind of fame and trouble in its day. For the sake of understanding this novel as myth of the modern world it is worth recalling Camus' earlier “stages”—those which led into “love.” Let us consider each of them in turn, given Camus' own late told myth, “stories that could be true,” of characters who might instantiate them—but rightly seen only if oriented to this proper centering: love.

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Featured image: "The Plague," by Arnold Böcklin, painted in 1898.

