

Pandemics in literature bring consolation

One feature of the onset of the pandemic emergency has been a strong interest in reading great literature dealing with plagues. Writers in the major newspapers and literary journals have ransacked *The Plague/La Peste* by Albert Camus, Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* and most recently Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* for insights into our current situation. As someone interested in the field of theology and literature and as one of the editors of an encyclopaedia covering the afterlife of the Bible, I naturally believe that literature can stimulate sharpened understanding and human empathy in situations of this kind. My own recent reading has reminded me of John Milton's experience of the plague (in a life filled with plenty of other traumatic events) and of the fact that one of the great founders of European literature, Giovanni Boccaccio, set his masterpiece the *Decameron* in the context of the Florentine Black Death epidemic of 1340.

Until recently the word "disruption" and the associated adjective "disruptive" had a positive connotation. Successful business leaders were acclaimed for their ability to disrupt accepted ways of providing services or producing goods. Disruption, it seemed, was good for us. No longer does this seem to be the case. Instead people look for peace and continuity. It is reassuring to know that bird life goes on as before and (in the world of literature) that P.G. Wodehouse or Agatha Christie are still as diverting as ever. This is not just escapism. It is the search for some sort of balance in our minds, so that we can actually live with the horrors which fill the media and indeed real life for many people. The Bible itself contains literature of very different registers, from the plaintive laments of parts of the Psalms to the erotic poetry of the Song of Songs. The same is particularly true of the literary reception of the Bible, where a single story like that of Job can be rendered as high tragedy or as a farcical travesty, according to the cultural circumstances addressed by the writer. We need this range, both psychologically and spiritually.

Literature, at its best, helps us to come to terms with current experience. In fact it is often said that the mark of a great work is that we can read it at different points in our life and gain something new each time. To read Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* at the age of 50 is quite different from reading it at 20. To read Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (or watch it on a live stream with the actors social distancing) during the pandemic is quite different from seeing it at some acclaimed performance at Stratford in the past. Somehow the memory of the previous experience becomes a foil for what comes across now.

Of course, not everybody is drawn to heavy masterpieces at a time of great anxiety. Just a few lines from the poetry of Stevie Smith or T.S. Eliot or Anna Akhmatova may meet the need. A voice different from our own voice and different from the homogenised messaging of the TV news and government statements. Perhaps that in the end is the theological value of reading any kind of creative literature. It cleanses the doors of perception and allows us to become more receptive to voice of the Other. In doing this it may also, far from being merely a comforting distraction, help us to live more fully in the present moment.

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Ascensiontide 2020