

Happy Clappy City

Tom Hubbard

Language, it seems, can see us through this: not to mention science. The discourse has inspired us to verbal variants, none of which are all that new. There's the finger-wagging 'We're all in this together' (though some are more in it than others); 'there's light at the end of the tunnel' (a perennial favourite of cornered politicians); we'll get back to 'normality' (wasn't it 'normality' that got us into this mess in the first place?) The corona clichés tumble out continuously, as the upcoming generations of, say, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Greta Thunberg call for radical action, rather than pious verbiage, on the inequality and climate emergencies that the plague has made visible in the countries of the blind.

'The Country of the Blind' is the title of a short story by H. G. Wells. His novel *The War of the Worlds* (1898) was perched on my shelves for a long time until I took it down again last spring, at the height of the first wave. The pattern of initial complacency and scepticism now seems pretty familiar.

'Haven't you heard of the men from Mars?' said I. 'The creatures from Mars?'

'Quite enough,' said the woman over the gate. 'Thanks'; and all three of them laughed.¹

You can almost see the smirk of the 'libertarian' anti-vaxers.

The Martian invasion, though, accelerates, and the trim Home Counties are caught up in what we'd now call 'unprecedented' horrors. The unwelcome visitors reach London and all seems lost. At last, though, it's the Martians, not the humans, who succumb unexpectedly to what in Scotland we call a 'smit': unaccustomed to earthly contagions, the Martians are routed by an 'invisible enemy', our home-grown bacteria.

H. G. Wells's many fictional Armageddons include *The Time Machine* (1895), with humanity split into two tribes: the effete Eloi living above ground in what appears at first to be a perpetual paradise, all luxury and no work, and the rough Morlocks, the subterranean labourers who keep the whole thing going but who exact payment by clambering to the surface during the night to grab and literally devour members of the upper world. Wells's other works, with their

¹ H. G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds*, (London: Penguin Books, 1967) 36.

antiseptic, authoritarian utopias, are less appealing to readers: maybe we prefer our horrors to be a bit raw.

It was that writer's contemporary, E. M. Forster, who came up with what he would describe as 'a reaction to one of the earlier heavens of H. G. Wells.'² This was the short story 'The Machine Stops', first published in 1909. The very title echoes Wells, as above, and here again we find motifs of overground and underground dwellers, if now in different contexts.

A little over twenty years ago I was preparing to return to Scotland after a short research trip to London. I had time to put off at King's Cross before catching the train, so I resorted to the station buffet. At a table adjacent to mine, there were two smart-suited guys sitting, facing each other, and they appeared to be colleagues. I expected them to start a conversation – but each was holding his phone and paying attention to that. I couldn't help but wonder at the time (the late 1990s) if their only means of communication with each other.

It's a situation foretold in E. M. Forster's story, his only foray into science fiction. I'm not the first to point to the remarkable predictions, in this tale, of today's technology. The internet, social media and video-conferencing have their benign and sinister possibilities, both; Forster concentrates on the sinister. In his vision of a mechanised totalitarian future, people can communicate with each other only via screens, but the rebellious Kuno insists on meeting his mother Vashti in physical space:

I want to speak to you not through the wearisome Machine. [...] The Machine is much, but it is not everything. I see something like you on this plate, but I do not see you. I hear something like you through this telephone, but I do not hear you. That is why I want you to come. Come and stop with me. Pay me a visit, so that we can meet face to face, and talk about the hopes that are in my mind.³

During the lockdown, however, we have been only too glad to have the likes of Zoom and Skype to keep in touch with at least the simulacra of our family and friends, but like Kuno we long for the real thing. Our attitude, then, is more ambivalent than his.

The novel *La Peste / The Plague* (1947) by the French writer Albert Camus narrates the progress of a deadly scourge in the Algerian coastal city of Oran. Algeria was then an integral

² H. G. Wells, *Collected Short Stories*, (London: Penguin Books, 1967) 6.

³ H. G. Wells, *Collected Short Stories*, (London: Penguin Books, 1967) 110, 111.

part of France and the book has been questioned for concentrating on its European population at the expense of the indigenous North Africans. Camus intended it rather as an allegory, with the plague standing for the German occupation and the collaborationist Vichy régime. Camus had been involved in Resistance activity during these dark years, and the fight against the disease in *The Plague* is clearly analogous to the struggle against the Nazis and their accomplices.

As with *The War of the Worlds*, there is a pattern of initial, near total complacency which must eventually yield to the accumulating horror: ‘Our townsfolk [...] went on doing business, arranged journeys and formed views. How should they have given a thought to anything like plague which rules out any future, cancels journeys, silences the exchange of views?’⁴ It is hardly surprising that Camus’s novel enjoyed a revival during 2020. As for ‘exchange of views’, though, 2020 hardly abolished that...

Dr Rieux is the medic who leads the ‘Resistance’ to the disease. As the novel proceeds, it continues to depict situations only too familiar to us at the present. There are the cruel statistics which persist even as the plague shows signs of flattening out: another doctor, feeling positive about developments, nevertheless falls ill himself and dies. It all reflects the violence which persisted through the days just before France’s liberation and De Gaulle’s famous walk down the Champs-Élysées. In the novel, locked-down services steadily resume, but Dr Rieux loses his best friend and comrade-in-arms against the plague, then learns of the death of his wife from whom he had been necessarily separated.

Oran comes to life: there is rejoicing, dancing, embracing. Disease/fascism has been defeated, for a while, at least. In 2021 we, too, hope to celebrate as the vaccination increases and COVID is eliminated if not quite eradicated (whatever may be the difference between ‘eliminate’ and ‘eradicate’). No doubt Boris Johnson will both claim and receive credit for the work of scientists and NHS staff; if his hero Churchill had won the 1945 election, there would have been no NHS. Johnson never utters the name of Aneurin Bevan, the founder of the NHS: that wouldn’t fit his narrative. Many of those who have ‘clapped for carers’ remain unaware of the UK government’s running-down of health and other public services over the past decade and

⁴ Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Stuart Gilbert, (London: Penguin Books, 1966) 34.

more. That said, we know of more thoughtful, more focused applause for beleaguered staff, together with a shared compassion for those in their care.

As Wells's and Camus's novels draw to their close, there is a striking similarity in their last utterances:

It may be that in the larger design of the universe this invasion from Mars is not without its ultimate benefit for men; it has robbed us of that serene confidence in the future which is the most fruitful source of decadence, the gifts to human science are enormous, and it has done much to promote the conception of the commonweal of mankind. [...] It may be, on the other hand, that the destruction of the Martians is only a reprieve. To them, and not to us, perhaps, is the future ordained.⁵ (*The War of the Worlds*, Chapter 10, 'The Epilogue', p. 191)

Forward to Stuart Gilbert's translation of *La Peste*, Part 5, Chapter 5:

And, indeed, as he listened to the cries of joy rising from the town, Rieux remembered that such joy is always imperilled. He knew [...] that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years [...] and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it roused up its rats again and sent them forth to die in a happy city (252).

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⁵ H. G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds*, (London: Penguin Books, 1967) 191.