



Introduction to the special cluster “Never really far from us—epidemics and plagues in literature”

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Accepted: 11 October 2021
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The CFP for this special cluster was put out before the current pandemic struck, and most of the articles contained in this issue are not a direct comment on Covid-19. The cluster was originally proposed in the Fall of 2019 by Professor Haifeng Hui of Huazhong University of Science and Technology in Wuhan, China. When he himself fell ill and became unable to work in March of 2020, I accepted his invitation to take over the role of guest editor. The cluster was motivated by several assumptions, the main one being that plague, epidemics, pandemics, and disease have been humanity’s companions throughout history and that this companionship is often reflected in and intertwined with literature in meaningful ways. Indeed, one of the first narratives in Western literature, Homer’s *Iliad*, starts with the story of a plague that strikes the Greek army at Troy. As we move through history to the dawn of modernity, the characters of Boccaccio’s *Decameron* try escape a plague in a rural estate and while away their time there by telling stories. Four centuries later in Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year*, death stalks blackly on the streets of London. In *The Plague*, Albert Camus gives the topic a more modern angle, offering images about disease and the human condition that are shockingly similar to images flooding mainstream media today. In between these years, hundreds of other literary and scientific renderings of disease appear. By the mid-twentieth century, pandemics in fully industrialized nations started to become rare, such that many of us alive today simply had not experienced pandemics until 2020. During this span of some 70 years or so, filmic depictions of pandemics seemed to many perhaps sensationalist and unrealistic—the stuff of fiction and fantasy. Even though pandemics have been with us throughout history, then, their relative rarity in our contemporary world makes their mortality data all the more striking. H1N1, Ebola, and SARS are recent examples, and now there is a new one on the list—the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) that began in December 2019 in Wuhan, China and quickly became a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) and finally a pandemic.

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The language of pandemic writing is a topic of considerable interest and discussion among scholars. Some of this discussion shows how cultural representations of outbreaks both reflect and shape social responses to pandemics, responses that subsequently shape the progress of the disease. There is much to be learned from these scholarly discussions. Priscilla Wald's *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* offers an extraordinary treatment of the topic, meticulous in its scholarship and uncanny in its relevance to the Covid-19 pandemic, though written more than a decade earlier. For Wald, narrativizing disease means writing stories that are simultaneously about “tragedy and triumph, horror and salvation” (Wald, 2008, p. 54). Wald notes that while “the outbreak narrative—in its scientific, journalistic, and fictional incantations—follows a formulaic plot that begins with the identification of an emerging infection, includes discussion of the global networks through which it travels, and chronicles the epidemiological work that ends with its containment” (ibid, p. 2), how we *read* these narratives is important. Part of Wald's argument is that it is important to see the social issues inscribed in such narratives: “It is possible to revise the outbreak narrative, to tell the story of disease emergence and human connection in the language of social justice rather than of susceptibility” (ibid, p. 270). The truly radical idea here is that it is not only germs but, perhaps more importantly, social conditions that give rise to many varieties of disease. Much of what Wald has to say is echoed in pandemic and epidemic literature. Indeed, the social implications of disease feature prominently in each of the discussions in this *Neohelicon* special cluster. It is hard to imagine how it could be otherwise, since what is the purpose in writing about disease, ultimately, but to situate epidemiology in its social context? Christian W. McMillen puts the case succinctly:

People—eyewitnesses, novelists, poets, memoirists, government bureaucrats, journalists, historians, anthropologists, epidemiologists, kings, queens, and presidents—have been writing about epidemics and pandemics for centuries, reflecting on what causes them, what might stop them, and how people have reacted to them. We have, collectively, accumulated an untold amount of source material of value not only to historians. We have accumulated a record of successes and failures that should be an aid to those working on epidemics and pandemics now. (McMillen 2026, p. 6)

Sadly, for all that has been written, our current pandemic in many ways caught us with our pants down. One of the reasons is that we just seem unable to take disease for what it is, perhaps because it is so threatening, preferring instead to see it as a metaphor. Paul Elie makes precisely this point in his March 19, 2020 “Daily Comment” in *The New Yorker*: “the ubiquity of virus as metaphor may have left many of us unprepared to recognize and fear the lethal literal viruses circulating among us, and to prepare ourselves and our societies against them” (Elie 2020). Metaphor and materiality are different things.

Scholarship on disease in fiction, such as Jennifer Cooke's edited collection *Legacies of Plague in Literature, Theory and Film*, often focuses on the metaphorical and cultural connotations of “plague,” but plague in the literal sense,

either in fiction or in reality, is never really away from us. Tension, ethical dilemmas, social paranoia, conflicts between senses of community belonging and social disintegration, and the democratic implications of draconian measures to isolate the infected are part of pandemics and pandemic literature alike. It is clear that a pandemic is an event with both social and individual consequences. Texts on plague and their contexts are open to many critical and interpretative possibilities. They are also open to just being ignored. To ignore representations of the impacts of previous pandemics or to consider fictional representations of them as nothing more than fiction, however, is a dangerous business, and metaphor is a partner in this business.

In her famous book *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag points out how “feelings about evil are projected onto a disease. And the disease (so enriched by meanings) is projected onto the world” (58). This remark implies complex relationships between the subject and the object world, between the imagined and the real, and between our abilities to grasp the emotional and the indifferent. And Nature, to be sure, is utterly indifferent. The microbe and the virus don’t think or feel, any more than a rock falling would think, “hey, I’m going to fall.” It just falls. Although he is being a bit tongue-in-cheek, Jared Diamond characterizes microbes as “damned clever” in how they modify “our bodies or our behavior such that we become enlisted to spread microbes” (Diamond, 1997, p. 198). It is not, however, cleverness; it is the logic of genetic mutation in a huge population with a short generation. It is pure chance, not cleverness, and, for all of our cleverness, genetic chance does not rule in our favor—not with our long wait for “gene frequencies from generation to generation” (ibid. p. 201). While microbes have a genetic advantage over us, our cleverness is a potent response. I write today with genetically modified material (the mRNA Covid-19 vaccine) coursing through my system. Even so, viruses can mutate quicker than we can develop responses, and they do it by chance (and they have lots of chances) in order to perpetuate themselves, wherever and whenever possible and without emotion.

It is utterly disempowering—“ego-deflating,” to use Diamond’s phrase (ibid. p. 197)—to think that a brainless and infinitesimally small thing can take us down. Perhaps nowhere is this more eloquently or succinctly put than by the character Sam Daniels in the film *Outbreak*: “You’ve got to love the simplicity. It’s one billionth our size, and it’s beating us.” Because this is unfathomable, incomprehensible, and, in so many ways, unacceptable, we project notions of the sort Sontag describes. Who or what can unravel our carefully crafted tapestry, our intricate global web of production and distribution, our delicate financial networks and chains? Isn’t it better, after all, to imagine a vindictive and evil microbe moving like a suave devil with the best laid plans—rather than a brainless and virtually invisible thing—undoing everything? But metaphors have their consequences.

The topic of metaphors is a complex one—and certainly not a one-way street, as Sontag points out, with metaphors projected onto disease and the disease metaphor projected onto the world. More recently, Roberto Marchesini has made a similar point about how “the virus paradigm” structures our understandings of the world. We call the programs people make to harm our computers “viruses.” When information becomes distributed in a manner that is seemingly out-of-control on the

internet, we say that they have gone “viral.” We talk about society being sick, bad news spreading, and so on. To cite Elie again, “Enthralled with virus as metaphor and the terms associated with it—spread, growth, reach, connectedness—we ceased to be vigilant. Jetting around the world, we stopped washing our hands” (Elie 2020). Despite all of the warnings in literature and science, news media and pop culture, religion and history, we got caught with our pants down. Even so, as we blunder through our current pandemic, we scrupulously document everything with technologies like we have never had before. All of this documentation itself has impacts.

The impacts of the media coverage of new outbreaks are well embodied in fictional representations of pandemics, real life impacts that we see today in things such as panic and hysteria (the toilet paper crisis), accusations of fake news, distrust in the government, growing social turmoil and grave delusions about the reach of individual liberties in relation to social responsibility, and so on. We have not learned our lessons well. History recalls that many of our most deadly pandemics have come from zoonotic viruses—from animals in other words. They have come from our chronically exploitative relationships with animals—animals we exploit for entertainment and, most dangerously, for food. We have not learned our lessons well, and one of the reasons is simply that the implications of these lessons are, in some sense, unpalatable: people do not want to give up meat. History recalls the animal sources of our most deadly diseases. History also recalls the stigmatizing of people, the growth of xenophobia and racial hatred. We see it in the Orientalizing of the disease in the film *Outbreak* and in Mr. Trump’s virulent anti-Asian Covid-19 discourse. The threat (a very real threat) of disease is converted into a threat (a very fake threat) of outsiders, Others, exotic strangers with terrifying eating habits (as if consumption of cows is ethically different than consumption of beavers or porcupines). This conversion of the imagined threat, a kind of psychological transference, from the abstract disease to the material Other concretizes the danger, and concrete over abstract is surely preferable and beneficial; the cost here of this concretization, however, is far greater than the benefits. Racism is not beneficial. It is a lesson that we ought to have learned, but, at the risk of sound very repetitive, *we have not learned our lessons well.*

Literature presents us with a tangle of contradictions, and we have been singularly unable even to see these contradictions let alone untangle them. We hear—in fiction, in news media, and in scientific reports—variations of the theme that we are all together in our fight against pandemics. The contributors to *The Politics of Global Health Governance* put it best: “Health is the ultimate unifying issue for humankind—the world is becoming an ever smaller place, and microbes that cause devastating diseases do not stop for border guards” (Zacher and Keefe, 2008, p. 1). Yet, we also hear about “social distancing” and don’t bat an eyelid. We know that we are more isolated physically than we have been in a very long time, perhaps ever, and yet we are more connected with each other than ever. When I arrived back in Seoul from my sabbatical in late June of 2021, I was tracked through my phone for every moment of my two week quarantine. I dared not leave my apartment: there are cameras in the elevator and hallways. If my phone moved outside of the apartment, the government would know. If my phone didn’t move for more than an hour (to guard against me leaving without my phone), the government would know—there

were several times when I forgot to move my phone, and I got a phone call confirming my location. If I didn't respond to the alert, people would have come to my apartment and presumably punished me. Isolated but connected. We need each other but are a clear threat to each other—a point that Wald makes in her April 2020 talk *Contagious: the Outbreak Narrative*. Wald sums up the paradox a dozen years earlier in *Contagion*, putting the case as follows: on the one hand, “travelers indeed introduce new microbes into a community. But strangers are also essential to the health and growth of a community, both culturally and biologically” (Wald, 2008, p. 56); on the other hand, “the ever-present threat . . . signals at once the (presumed) need for the power of the state to regulate its borders and protect its citizens and the limits of that power” (ibid. p. 58). Put slightly differently, “while emerging infections are inextricable from global interdependence . . . the threat they pose requires a national response” (ibid, p. 53). We have a context in which humanity is being tested as much by other humans as by the virus, and this situation is resulting in very broad changes.

Among the many things that Covid-19 has changed is the way that we interact. Roberto Marchesini's comments, worth quoting at length here, accurately and insightfully capture our current situation. He argues that Covid-19 has

justified more intense forms of digital connection . . . has catalyzed the advent of a new society based on digital subjectivity. Like a computer being reprogrammed, human society is experiencing, albeit forcibly, a system reboot involving the human condition on a planetary scale. The pandemic would therefore be a caesura, a threshold between a “before” and an “after”, capable of establishing a new world where control, deterritorialization, the domestication of the subject imposed by interconnection and the digital economy open up different scenarios from those we are used to. In other words, there is a growing feeling that after the pandemic, nothing will be the same as before. (Marchesini, 2021, pp.13–14)

This is sensationalism, of course, and to say that “nothing will be the same as before” is both terrifying and false. Some things will be the same as before—for instance, there will still be a need for toilet paper in restrooms and cotton candy in Disneyland. Marchesini can be forgiven for the sensationalism, because perhaps it is necessary to shock, given our terrible track record with listening. Marchesini is right, of course: many things will not be the same. Wald's description of the matter is less sensational and more accurate: “While catastrophic infections can result in the annihilation of an existing community, the devastation will in turn precipitate new communal affiliations” (Wald, 2008, p. 49). These new communal relations are the system reboot and the sense that everything is different about which Marchesini talks.

As we look to an uncertain future, we will face many issues that people throughout the world and throughout history have also faced. We can take lessons from how literature has represented these issues. This Special Cluster, while by no means exhaustive, offers a geographically balanced set of articles on the broad topic of “pandemics and literature.” At least part of what we do in this Special Cluster is address the fact that there is remarkably little, relatively speaking, available in

English about Chinese literary representations of diseases. The first two articles are a direct response to this deficit.

Wei Guo's "When Disease Encounters Precepts: Healing Narratives in the *Further Biographies of Eminent Monks* (續高僧傳)" examines the features and the implications of healing narratives in the Chinese classic *Further Biographies of Eminent Monks* by Dao Xuan. While discussing these aspects in the *Biographies of Eminent Monks* (高僧傳) by Hui Jiao, Guo shows that healing narratives, though important in Buddhist rituals and prominent in these two biographies, have rarely been explored in the previous research. Guo, based on his analysis of the two books, argues that Dao Xuan's emphasis on the medical function of adhering to "the precepts," which is different from the view of Hui Jiao, actually demonstrates his concern with the problems that appeared in the process of Buddhism's expansion in China. Dao Xuan's endeavor aimed, in the final analysis, at maintaining what he saw as the purity of Buddhism.

Peina Zhuang and Weiwei Qi in "On Metaphor of Diseases in the Classical Chinese Novel *Liaozhai Zhiyi*" explore the metaphorical connotations of diseases in the novel *Liaozhai Zhiyi* (*Strange Tales of a Lonely Studio*). A well-known collection of classical Chinese short stories, Pu Songling's *Liaozhai* has attracted wide attention, both within and outside of China, for its diversified and profound themes, such as the darkness of feudal rule, the corruption of the imperial examination system, the shackles of feudal ethics, and so forth, but disease, the most prominent aspect of this novel, has received little attention. Based on the analysis of the disease metaphors, this article points out that disease in the novel indicates the problems confronting the late Qing society, and also to a wider extent, signifies the struggles between goodness and evil in humanity.

From China, we move to Europe with an article entitled "Youth Solving Pandemics: Hopeful Futures in Maths Claesson's Novel *Pandemic*" by Helen Ehriander and Michael Godhe. This article analyses the young adult novel *Pandemic* (Swedish title: *Pandemi*, 2018) written by the Swedish author Maths Claesson. The novel is the third part of a trilogy (2013–2018), with 15-year-old astronaut-trainee Linux as the main protagonist. As a novel, *Pandemic* is an interesting hybrid between science fiction and teen noir, utopia and dystopia, inspired by contemporary popular fiction, games, and movies. During the time for Linux' astronaut training program on a space station, a pandemic breaks out on Earth. The top-notch training of the candidates—and the trainees' new ways of thinking about co-operation and common values—proves decisive in stopping the disease from spreading, and they manage to rescue humanity from total catastrophe. Departing from the perspective of *Critical Future Studies*, Ehriander and Godhe focus on the figures of hope for a sustainable future and analyse how the novel widens the scope of possible futures. In the novel, the conquest of space offers new opportunities, one of which being how to solve environmental crises on Earth. In this sense, the novel is hopeful, as it depicts the younger generation as the inheritors of progress and, therefore, as the problem-solvers of tomorrow.

In "'Christianity is an epidemic': On Hölderlin and the Plague," Will Greenshields argues that Friedrich Hölderlin's poetic cosmology is one in which God is neither present nor absent but is instead languishing and departing. Through a reading of

the poet's notes on and translation of *Oedipus Rex*, the late fragment “...the Vatican...,” and revisions to “Patmos,” this article shows that the plague repeatedly features in the work of Friedrich Hölderlin not as a sign of divine intervention nor as evidence of a godless materialism but as a symptom of a faltering Absolute that is no longer immune to change and time. Greenshields shows the cosmology at stake through discussions of Jacques Lacan and Jean-Claude Milner's treatment of the historical and literary plagues of Athens and Thebes. These appear to haunt Hölderlin as examples of events that traumatically render untenable the subject's belief in the (divine) exception to universal mortality. This transition is further illustrated by the contrast Milner draws between Plato's account of the death of Sophocles and Thucydides' account of the Athenian plague. Ultimately, for Hölderlin, a cosmos in which plagues (and the contingency and finitude they impose) are present requires an interpretative and poetic response sensitive to the Absolute's incompleteness and distance—a stance to which Oedipus provides the counter example.

Lastly, to America with the two final articles of this Special Cluster. In “AIDS and its representation in the works of William S. Burroughs,” Riccardo Gramantieri works from the premise that a popular reaction to the spread of any disease has been to imagine conspiracy theories. Gramantieri explains that the idea that a virus can be used to control ethnic groups is as old as the medieval plague. William S. Burroughs exploited this idea in his *Naked Lunch*. He mixed medical literature and science fiction in several of his subsequent works between the 1960s and 1980s and imagined that a sexually transmitted virus could be used by a totalitarian government to identify some otherwise unrecognizable groups of population (drug addicts, homosexuals). These conspiracy theories have led some commentators to claim that Burroughs prophesied AIDS. In fact, in the early 1980s, a debate developed about the origin and nature of AIDS. There were those who claimed that AIDS did not exist and those who imagined it was a virus artificially created in the laboratory. Gramantieri highlights not only how the theme of the virus is recurrent in modern US literature from Poe onwards but also how several works of Burroughs represents the virus that produces reactions similar to Kaposi's sarcoma (the cancer that most develops in patients with AIDS). Burroughs was not the prophet of AIDS; rather, he re-proposed the idea of the conspiracy in a contemporary way, at the same time that similar theories emerged in the real world. He imagined answers to the question of what was the origin of AIDS and why it spread mainly in certain classes of the population.

In the final article in this collection, I stress a theme that all of the articles in the collection also express, whether implicitly or explicitly—namely, the dangers of forgetting. In “Camus, Roth, Covid-19: the Dangers of Forgetting,” I argue that our failures to read the lessons of past pandemics in literary and cultural documents causes us to unwittingly repeat deadly patterns of behavior—the very patterns that have often characterized our responses to past pandemics. Part of my argument is that many of our failures and subsequent loss of life with Covid-19 could have been avoided if we had paid better attention to literature and cultural histories that are easily available. I show how race, class, gender, sexuality and other social issues are involved with the perception and representation of disease in Albert Camus's *The Plague* and Phillip Roth's *Nemesis*, and, drawing on the abundant data, show

how these representations also find an echo in the realities we are experiencing with Covid-19.

How long Covid-19 will last and what comes after it is anyone's guess, but one thing is certain: stories from the past will continue to shed light on the narratives that the future will write. It is for this reason that we have followed in this Special Cluster the premise articulated by Wald that "attention to storytelling must be a part of the analysis of the problem of disease emergence" and spread (Wald, 2008, p. 265). We ignore these stories at our peril.

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