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The last few years’ experience of global pandemic has triggered changes to many areas of scholarship—some lasting and some temporary. It has allowed reassessment and new understandings of historical works written during and about historic plague events. My first impressions reading Samuel Weber’s *Preexisting Conditions: Recounting the Plague* is that it reflects so exactly the time at the beginning of the pandemic lockdown, when projects were put on hold, when reading historic and fictional accounts of life under pandemic conditions felt like it brought new meaning to the eye. Indeed, Weber shows us in the introduction that the project was begun as part of a series of talks arranged prior to the world under COVID-19, when organizing a seminar series called “The End of the World as We Know It” was not a call for adding a qualifying statement of “not, at the time, ominous”: “the title was not meant [by contributor to the series Michel Lori-aux] to sound quite as apocalyptic as it might appear today, even if what it suggested was anything but harmless.... Little did he or I dream that in the space of a few months a very different type of destruction was about to engulf not just Europe but the world” (p. 9).

This introduction sets an alternate stage than the “plague” context that the book inevitably brings to mind given the year of its publication and the global experience of the last several years. Weber shows that the initial impetus for this book came out of a graduate seminar he taught in Paris in November 2019, when Albert Camus’s *The Plague* (1947 in French; English translation 1948) came up as a possibility for discussion and prompted Weber to consider “the distinctive historical significance of the plague—a significance that did not need the emergence of Covid-19 to be confirmed” (p. 10). Weber identifies the historical significance of plague as simultaneously ancient, modern, timeless, instant, natural, unnatural, and ever-present in human history and as “a visitation” (p. 11). This book is, then, a record of prior experience of plague and pandemic events
Throughout history—the “preexisting conditions” of the title.

To frame the historical experiences of plague, Weber offers a deeply read set of texts to lead the reader through a Western literary record of pandemic accounts. His focus is specifically on the Western canon, with two threads running from German Romantic and French existential or absurdist writers. The book unfolds in two parts through the ten chapters: the first part sets up the fundamental questions Weber returns to throughout the book, as well as the definitions and themes he relies on and draws throughout the text. In each chapter, Weber presents a close reading analysis of the text mentioned in the chapter title; however, the second half of the book is characterized by a tightened focus on the text, away from historical context and parallels to “‘plague’ in a traditional sense” (p. 19) This is in part a reflection of the kinds of texts Weber has chosen, ordered loosely chronologically: the Bible, Thucydides’s History of the Peloponnesian War, Giovanni Boccaccio’s The Decameron (1353), Martin Luther’s letter “Should a Christian Flee the Plague?” (1527), Daniel Defoe’s A Journal of the Plague Year (1722), Heinrich von Kleist’s fragmentary play The Tragedy of Robert Guiscard, Duke of the Normans (1808), Antonin Artaud’s lecture “The Theater and the Plague” (1933), Camus’s The Plague, and Friedrich Hölderlin’s “Remarks on Sophocles’s Oedipus” (1803). The plagues described in many of these texts are fictional, or symbolic, standing in for large and seemingly unstoppable historical or political events.

The scope of these texts and the wide variety of symbolic, fictional, or metaphorical meanings placed on the word “plague” in each text raise the question of what Weber means by a “traditional sense” of plague. The effect of textual variety and mix of historical, metaphorical, and fictional plagues or plague contexts make an irregular picture of what a plague can be. In one of Weber’s cases, the text itself avoids mentioning plague, and Weber’s deft analysis of the text and its context provides a generative possibility for further analysis. In this chapter, “Storytelling as Friction (Boccaccio, The Decameron),” Weber offers historical context to the plague of the fourteenth century to show that Boccaccio wrote this text describing plague neither as a historical event nor as an archetypical punishment from God but as a contemporary event that was lived through, and in Boccaccio’s case written through. In his reading, Weber adopts a Derridean mode of analysis to describe Boccaccio’s storytelling as creating “frictions”—recounting stories that do not mention plague at all despite being written in the middle of the experience of plagues.[1] Here Weber identifies the emergence of a “precondition”: because the stories are not interested in recounting the events of the plague, they are storytelling “in response to the plague” (p. 83). The Decameron’s storytellers gathering together huddled against the plague told their tales despite what was happening around them.

The introductory chapter, “The Local and the General,” is an account of the current experience of plague, paired with analysis of storytelling provided by Walter Benjamin in his 1939 essay, “The Storyteller.” Here Weber points out that the telling of stories from “mouth to mouth” echoes the transmission of disease from person to person, a provocative connection in relationship to the transmission of disease (p. 27). Similarly evocative of the concerns of those (us) living through disease is another concept that Weber identifies from Benjamin—the concept of advice or counsel. For Weber, of all the elements Benjamin described as integral to storytelling, the most important is Benjamin’s querying definition of a story, a prompt for “what comes next?” (p. 38).

The chapter “Monotheological Antecedents: Life against the Living (Genesis, Exodus)” draws Benjamin’s account of narrating and storytelling through the first two chapters of the King James Bible. In doing so, Weber both includes a pre-
lapsarian account of a world without sin and death, much less disease, and fewer plague events, and telescopes the chronological view to encompass prehistoric mass extinction events, to contemporary films that are part of the apocalypse genre, and back again to the biblical narrative account of the ten plagues of Egypt described in Exodus. Weber binds these disparate threads together to form an image of what a plague is, as compared with some other catastrophe involving mass death. These things Weber weaves together span chronologies and biblical narratives: Weber draws parallels between the creation of life, the blood plague of Egypt in Exodus, bloodshed, and the COVID-19 virus “shedding” as a means of transmission. Weber’s analysis turns on a homographic layering of words that instantly reduces the context of each word’s meaning to an implication, complicating the possibility of disentangling each meaning from another.

If the review of this book so far has seemed disparate and lacking a common theme, this reflects the book as it currently exists. The strongest part of Preexisting Conditions is the depth of analysis Weber offers the reader, and it is undercut, from my perspective as a historian of medicine, by a constant tendency toward ahistoricism and the drawing of direct parallels to modern pandemics. For example, Boccaccio described the spread of a plague with the line “Just as a fire will catch dry or oily materials when they are placed in close proximity [quando monto vi sono avvicinate],” an image that evokes the destructive and exponential power of a plague in a closely associated community such as an early modern city like Florence. Boccaccio’s metaphor calls to mind social and class structures and cultural histories of urban environments. Weber focuses on the particulars of fire dynamics, where, for example, a fire, burning through materials, will catch most things but leave some things and materials untouched. Weber talks about this with an interesting phrase: “the reality of the time: the plague was spread by fleas” (p. 77). Here is the central slippage in the book: Weber moves between historical frames with a consistent perspective gleaned from the present. This is despite the promise of an account of “preconditions”; it is hard to see exactly how the preconditions are conditions prior to the experience of plague in the contexts of the works Weber chose. Some of the most powerful parts of the book come from Weber’s skill in telescoping analysis through historical encounters, but this is likely to be less useful for historians of science whose concern is in the contemporaneous weight and importance of reflecting on current experience.

Other questions arise when encountering a book published in 2022 about plagues and Western literary responses to them: what does it say specifically about the use these texts and theories can have in response to the brutal global pandemic we are all currently living through? Here Weber’s account is less vocal. He describes Boccaccio’s introduction of the plague in his Decameron as “hideous” and brutal rather than perhaps as a reminder of what real experiences were for a lot of people or as a trope of the experience of living through plague (p. 36). The power of the storyteller telling about a plague comes from “borrowing authority from death”: Weber here brings in the critique of Benjamin (p. 36).[2] This source of authority has been a preoccupation of many scholars over the period of the pandemic, and I wonder if it accounts for how we tell and retell stories about plague that include the horrors of it or that recall images that are impossible to ignore of mass graves or trailers full of cadavers or the horror of not touching or communing with loved ones. In the end I was left to wonder about what it means to recount something so large and all encompassing as a plague and how historial experiences can be compared to modern experience. I was curious about how Weber’s analysis put ancient texts closest in comparison with the experience of plague in the era of COVID-19. I wondered if the texts produced in a time closer to our own might have similar resonance. I began to wonder about the othering of people in History of the Pelo-
ponnesian War as it specifically relates to the account of plague and whether Michel Foucault might have been a useful interlocuter for the politics of that othering rather than as a foil for Artaud’s “The Theater and the Plague” later in the book.

Weber makes a compelling case for the contingency of responses to plagues and pandemics, though not always through consistent attention to the conditions present during the historical plagues or historical fictional plague experiences that he describes. Scholars of the works he analyzes will find the analysis fruitful and generative; scholars of the human experience of plague events might like to turn to other material to supplement it.

Notes


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