Due Preparations for the Plague: Globalisation, Terror and the Ethics of Alterity'

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Abstract
The plot of Janette Turner Hospital's latest novel, Due Preparations for the Plague, deals with some of those events and issues that humanity is presently striving to understand: terrorism, unlawful or unethical political dealings, and religious fanaticism, to mention but a few. The novel unravels these polemical issues through the story of the fictional hijacking of an Air France plane by Muslim fundamentalists in 1987, and in particular through the story of Lowell and Samantha, a young man and woman who desperately try to 'map their way out of fog' (Hospital 2003 47) by searching for the truth about the fate of loved ones who died on that doomed flight from Paris to New York. Although Due Preparations for the Plague is, over and above everything, an examination of a terrorist incident and the traumatic marks it makes upon the survivors, it also tackles the subsequent political obfuscation and unacknowledged interference by a government engaged in a different kind of war, one that involves consorting with the enemy, and thus diluting and obliterating any previously existing ethical codes and values. In the end, everything is relative and there are no fixed truths to cling to. To quote the explanation given to some would-be agents by Salamander, the CIA operative in charge of the hijack incident code-named Operation Black Death:

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> In our profession (*making the world safe for stability*, as we like to say; and sometimes, relishing our own esoteric wit, *making the world safe for moral systems*) it is a given that chaos is all; that order is not only arbitrary but evanescent, and that it is the task of a small circle of like-minded people to establish and guard it. Exactly which system of order we sustain — morally and politically speaking — is immaterial. We support the system most likely to stay in place. Hence our dilemma.

(227–28; emphases in original)

As Barbara Tuchman argued in *A Distant Mirror*, the Black Death of 1348–50 may have marked the transition from medieval to modern thought, since the random and undeserved deaths it inflicted could not be accounted for in a world created and designed to reflect God’s justice. If the plague did not make any distinctions between the wicked and the innocent, perhaps the Almighty was not capable of keeping earthly affairs under control. Perhaps luck, chance, accident and, what is even worse, absence, were running the show. How is one supposed to react in the shadow of such knowledge? (in Bliss 2004 78). This is one of the main
questions that *Due Preparations for the Plague* seems to ask. The novel is thick with literary allusions: Defoe’s *Journal of the Plague Year*. Camus’s *The Plague*. Thomas Nashe’s ‘In Time of Pestilence’. Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, together with allusions to the works of many other writers, such as Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Browning, Bunyan, Lewis Carroll, Meredith Wilson and S.T. Coleridge. However whimsical some of them may at first seem to be, they all aim to highlight one single but crucial idea: we cannot control our lives, nor the obscure mechanisms that rule the complex world we live in, and there is no escape from the caprice and injustice of death. As Homer Longchamp, one of the ten hostages that the terrorists eventually keep in the bunker so that they can exchange them for ten imprisoned fundamentalist fighters, asserts a few minutes before dying:

I don’t know [...] which of the three great mysteries can be considered the most impenetrable. Life. Or death. Or randomness. But I think randomness, the maddening nearness of randomness. Yes, I think the geography of chance is the ultimate teaser, intellectually and morally, because of the sheer enormity of divergence that results from a micro-change here and a micro-change there. It’s almost a commonplace now, with mathematicians: the Lorenz discovery — an accidental finding in itself — that minute changes in weather systems can have catastrophic results. (333)

The maddening nearness of randomness. Or should we instead speak about the maddening nearness of unstoppable globalisation processes? If, as Manfred B. Steger argues.

Globalization refers to a multidimensional set of social processes that create, multiply, stretch, and intensify worldwide social interdependencies and exchanges while at the same time fostering in people a growing awareness of deepening connections between the local and the distant (2003 13).

then it seems clear that nobody can escape the effects of this international phenomenon, since the transformative powers of globalisation reach deep, not only into the economic sphere, but also into the political, cultural, technological, and ecological dimensions of contemporary social life all over the world. Although the fact that the world is becoming increasingly interdependent could very well contribute to enhancing world-wide co-operation and mutual understanding, it is nonetheless true that most manifestations and tendencies of globalisation seem to be working against the configuration of a more egalitarian and less violent universal order.

In Hospital’s novel, the main stimulus for arousing moral and intellectual response to global insecurity and uncertainty from both readers and characters is terrorism. The novel thus becomes yet another desperate effort to cope with the impact of 11 September 2001 on the world’s collective unconscious. As Alex Houen explains (2002 1–17), most commentators found it difficult to respond to this massacre without making analogies with other previous events and images, real and fictional alike: Pearl Harbour, the nuclear bombs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, American *fin-de-siècle* fiction and Hollywood catastrophe movies
such as *Independence Day*, to name but a few examples. To quote one television critic’s words:

> What strikes me first is that the most vividly appalling images are all, in a strange way, palimpsests reflecting other images from the nation’s visual memory, whether factual or fantastic. (Lawson 2001 10)

Unless you were one of the victims, the brutal reality of the events, to quote contemporary Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek’s words, ‘could not but be reminiscent of the most breathtaking scenes in big catastrophe productions’ (2002 15). For many of us corrupted by Hollywood, the destruction of the World Trade Centre towers could only be experienced and expressed as hyperbole, that is, as surpassing the normal limits of experience and expression. All of a sudden, not only the fictional, but also the figurative was at the very heart of the massacre. The hyperbolic is an index of the way that performative aspects of discourse generally, and figurative language in particular, can affect the nature of material events, just as material events can modulate discursive practices. Within the ideology of radical Islam, 9/11 may have served, in Lee Harris’s words, as ‘a symbolic drama, a great ritual demonstrating the Power of Allah’ (2004 15) but, within the American collective unconscious, 9/11 certainly evoked a disturbing sense of *déjà vu* or *déjà lu*. To put it differently, the al-Qaeda mastermind behind 9/11 knew what he was doing only too well: the apocalyptic nightmares of the postmodern American imaginary would all of a sudden come true, ‘so that, in a way, America [would get] what it fantasised about, and that was the biggest surprise’ (Zizek 2002 16).

Whereas many authors wrote about the feeling that the big surprise given by the events of 11 September 2001 had rendered literary productions futile, others, such as Hospital, felt compelled to respond precisely because of the events’ tragic dimension and symbolic nature. The inclusion of so many literary allusions—palimpsests in the novel could therefore be interpreted as one way to point to the hyperbolic, nightmarish, recurrent and postmodern nature of the attack. German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen, to give but one polemic example, was one of the many artists and critics who also saw this connection. As he argued, if according to the *New Oxford Dictionary of English* (1998), postmodern art would ‘include a deliberate mixing of different artistic styles and media, the self-conscious use of earlier styles and conventions, and often the incorporation of images relating to the consumerism and mass communication of late twentieth-century post-industrial society’, then it was obvious that 9/11 was the greatest work of art of all time (in Harris 2004 3–4). However, the tangible physicality of the bodies and buildings involved made it clear that the event was anything but artistic and metaphorical. For Osama bin Laden, though, the attacks were nothing but a copy, an imitation of the effects US foreign policy has had on Muslims in Palestine and Iraq (in Gillan 2001 1). According to Bin Laden’s interpretation, the attacks were simultaneously hyperbolised and diminished through being explained
as figurative events. As Zulaika and Douglass have put it, ""terrorism" as a term is primarily a "rhetorical product"" (1996 23). Chris Hables Gray makes similar claims about war in general. With the predominance of information technology and global networks of power, war has become both postmodern and discursive, 'its unity is rhetorical' (1997 243), he argues.

There is still no internationally accepted definition of terrorism, especially when terrorism takes on world-wide dimensions. The distinction between terrorism and war has become ambiguous, just as ambiguous as the definitions of terrorism put forward in the legislation of individual nation-states. The reasons for this are easy to guess: ambiguity allows for maximum flexibility in applying the law. By the 1990s, Adrian Guelke has argued, 'the concept of terrorism had become so elastic that there seemed to be virtually no limit to what could be described as terrorism' (1995 1). If anything, Zulaika and Douglass go on to argue, 'terrorism is a succession of actions; its real efficacy lies in its power to provoke, through sudden actions, disruptions of the existing order' (76). The physical, non-linguistic aspects of terrorism are therefore recognised as having a distinct role. And the way this role becomes significant is through ritualisation and pattern recognition. As long as terrorist events appear to be choreographed by the perpetrators as media spectacles, and often involve subsequent, at times even serial, attacks on symbolic buildings and sites, such ritualisation is clearly brought to the fore — the 3/11/04 and 7/7/05 terrorist attacks perpetrated in Madrid and London, to give but two notorious examples, clearly prove this. The belief that terrorism and the media form a symbiotic relationship has become commonplace. As Anthony Kubiak has put it:

Terrorism first appears in culture as a media event. The terrorist, consequently, does not exist before the media image, and only exists subsequently as a media image in culture [...] the media do not merely need and support terrorism, they construct it mimaetically as a phenomenon. (1991 1)

Information technology and widespread mechanisation have led to a blurring of boundaries between the private and the public, the physical and the psychological, perception and representation. The result is, according to Mark Seltzer, a traumatic space of socialisation. Serial killing, and by extension ritualistic terrorist attacks, are a response to this pathological public sphere, which is 'everywhere crossed by the vague and shifting lines between the singularity of the subject, on the one side, and collective forms of representation, exhibition, and witnessing, on the other' (1998 17–18). Furthermore, the terrorists' dramaturgical tendencies should not be underestimated. As John Orr has argued:

Acts of violence against property or people are staged for different audiences simultaneously, sometimes to frighten, often to intimidate, usually to provoke the state enemy into excessive and unpopular counter-terror, but always to ensure that the act itself cannot be ignored. Such outrages would be nothing without their dramatic impact. They are the unlikely fusion of two contradictory things: spectacle and secrecy. (1990 2)
It seems clear that the act of violence is also an act of communication. But what kind of messages does terror help to convey? As Anil K. Jain has claimed, contradiction lies at the core of the sign of terrorism, since the ultimate message that terrorist acts carry is, paradoxically, the impossibility of any kind of effective understanding. The only message terrorism can possibly convey is:

the (tragical) message about a failed act of communication. Terrorism symbolizes a severe crisis of understanding. The exclusions, which the order of modernity produces in its fear, fall back on it: as an attack. The misunderstanding of the ‘others’ that it creates is dreadfully disclosed to it. Terrorism is thus much less an act of mere physical violence but a communication act that seeks to overcome the speechlessness that results from the processes of silencing invoked by the order of modernity. (2004 np)

Terror, Anil K. Jain goes on to explain, is both an intrinsic part of civilisation and a taboo, and is thus placed in a strange relation of proximity to the divine and the diabolic alike. Fear and anxiety should not be seen as peripheral, but must be considered as central to the understanding of the order of modernity and its movement of Enlightenment. Modernity can never rest — it has wholly subscribed to never-ending progress. Paradoxically, it is its forward drive that paralyses modernity. In its permanent ambition of becoming something (else), neither can it be nor can it let be. The engine of the movement of modernity is fear, and this fear does not allow a break, nor can it allow divergence. Everything must submit to its urge for order and progress. The forward-drive of fear fixates modernity, turns it into the prey of radical rationalism. As Horkheimer and Adorno put it, ‘the curse of irresistible progress is irresistible regression’ (1972 36). Enlightenment has become a violent and totalitarian system in which full control is a must. Everything that is different or resistant to the order must be eliminated. Modernity is an endless war against ambivalence and chaos. Furthermore, the purifying movement of modernity is not only expressed in scientific classifications, but it also manifests itself in social practice.5 A system of discipline emerged to which we necessarily have to submit. Yet, the violence of modernity is a highly refined violence: it enacts itself in the form of a civilising process in which external constraints are transformed into self-constraints. This internalised violence is hard to identify, since it works below the surface and remains mostly invisible. It is the very fundamentalism of modernity, Anil K. Jain concludes, that triggers the emergence of fundamentalist counter-movements. Fundamentalists are the true children of modernity, and terrorism is nothing but one of the most explosive manifestations of the latent terror of modernity. Violence becomes the instrument of institutional politics par excellence. We are the hostages of terrorism as well as of the war against terrorism. As Jean Baudrillard asserts, ‘It is from this no-man’s land of terror that the world is now managed; it is from this in some sense extraterritorial […] space that the world is literally taken hostage’ (1991 38).

The position of exclusion is a condemnation to powerlessness and speechlessness. In order to be heard and become visible, the (subaltern) terrorists
make use of the suppressive logic of the language of the system they try to annihilate. Their only way out is destruction, a radical attack on the system. On the other hand, the challenged system cannot forgive this strike and responds in the same language, and the result is an escalating dynamics of misunderstandings, confrontation and violence. Yet, it must be noted that the terrorists do not become ‘others’ by the execution of terrorist acts, since they are already ‘others’ by definition: the order of modernity constantly produces the ‘other’ by its exclusions. As is well known, within this process of othering everything that is bad is projected onto the created image of the threatening ‘other’. Thus, we get rid of all our own ambivalences. However, it is the realisation of the deep similarity of the other to us that ultimately generates these strong defensive reactions against it. To put it in simple terms, we cannot stand the other within. Victims and victimisers are equally trapped in this destructive vicious circle that keeps them completely apart. Communication between them does not seem to be possible. As Amin Maalouf has argued, widespread refusal to see things with the eyes of the others encourages people to adopt an attitude that is partial, sectarian, intolerant, domineering, sometimes suicidal, and frequently even changes them into killers or supporters of killers. Their view of the world is biased and distorted. Those who belong to the same community as we do are ‘ours’ [...] As for the others, those on the opposite side, we never try to put ourselves in their place, we take good care not to ask ourselves whether on some point or other they might not be entirely in the wrong, and we won’t let our hearts be softened by their complaints, their sufferings or the injustices that have been inflicted on them. The only thing that counts is the point of view of ‘our’ side; a point of view that is often that of the most militant, the most demagogic and the most fanatical members of the community. (2000 30–31)

As Due Preparations for the Plague seems to claim, lack of communication, obstinacy and narrow-mindedness can only generate violence and death. Nobody wins in the end, because nobody is in control. ‘Consider that it is entirely possible that you too are being watched as you watch’ (284), CIA agent Salamander warns those who dare to watch his Decameron tape. On the other hand, the terrorists’ secrecy does not at all mean that they confidently pull the strings behind the scenes, but rather that, however hard these fundamentalists may try, they cannot possibly control the representations of themselves and the outcome of their actions. It is clear that most of them have powerful reasons to carry out such dreadful attacks: they support the Palestinian cause and denounce that the world’s superpowers have turned a deaf ear and a blind eye to their suffering and humiliation. However, all we know about these terrorists is what journalists say, namely that ‘the hijackers cannot be counted on to behave rationally or logically or with any recognisable human compassion [...] They are extremists. They are psychopaths. They are ideologically mad’ (151). Not only are they unequivocally demonised and deprived of their humanity, but they are also unable to be the masters of the situation they apparently originated. As one of the ten hostages who are about to die exclaims while addressing the terrorist leader and the camera
that is indifferently filming their agony, 'You think you have forged this bond, Sirocco, but it no longer has anything to do with you. You are nothing. Do you understand?' (326).

The novel under analysis clearly points to the obsession that both terrorists and CIA agents have with filming everything and preserving/destroying the records. Salamander wants the 'entire operation' to 'be transmitted and monitored' (177). Sirocco, for his part, indulges in believing that the media and 'the world [have their] eyes in [his] plane' and that 'the world is listening to [him] as [he speaks]' (159). He wants to believe other people's lives are in his hands. For Salamander, [Sirocco] is a gifted designer of the custom-made hell and enjoys a visual record of his power [...] he watches and rewatches his own tapes. He likes to imagine us watching [...] Sirocco [...] wanted me [...] to watch, and [...] the world to watch. See how calmly torture can be inflicted, he wanted to say. I am setting up shop in your nightmares. I live under your pillow and under your skin. You will never sleep peacefully again. (273, 283)

To be forced to watch while being completely helpless and unable to do anything seems to be the worst possible nightmare, affirms Samantha's aunt, the only relative of Samantha's who watched the hijacking and took care of her after her parents' deaths (49). Yet, according to Salamander, there is something that is even worse, namely, 'seeing and not intervening to stop. The worst is that this happened under hi-tech surveillance. The worst is those who watched and monitored and voted: acceptable collateral damage' (268; emphases in original). What Salamander for years regarded as 'the necessary rituals of risk' has all of a sudden turned into 'blasphemy' (28, 284).

It might therefore be argued that one of the issues that Due Preparations for the Plague puts forward is that uncertainty doesn't seem to free individuals of their obligation to be ethical, that is, to engage in an open-ended dialogue with the world and the others, to open themselves to the experience of alterity that will let them cling to love and make the most of the redemptive resilience of their spiritual dimension, however inevitable and tragic the ending may eventually be. In other words, this novel could be said to bring to the fore the lethal consequences of arresting dialogue and absolutising certain forms of life and thought. It invites the reader to meditate on the experience of otherness and the need to endorse a dialogical ethical model, thus subtly echoing some of the most well-known current discourses on narrative ethics.

Emmanuel Levinas is, without doubt, one of the main philosophical figures of the turn to ethics that has characterised literary criticism for the last two decades. His theories, mainly as put forward in Totality and Infinity (1961) and Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence (1974), have time and again been used by critics concerned with defining and advocating a postmodern post-foundational ethics. This ethics clearly asserts that it is possible to make ethical claims without relying on normative codes, categorical imperatives or universal moral principles
because ‘there are no categories or concepts knowable prior to what becomes the decisive ethical moment in Levinas’ philosophy: the encounter with the singular, irreducible Other’ (Kotte 2001 71). According to Levinas, ethical responsibility is prompted by the encounter with the Other, or ‘the face’, as he also names it. For him, the Other is always radically different and resists being transformed or appropriated. To quote Christopher Falzon’s words:

the other is an absolute difference, a truly other, in the sense of that which is genuinely new, unexpected, unpredictable, something which comes from ‘outside’. It is that which has independence from us, which resists or eludes our efforts to impose ourselves upon it, and which can in turn influence us, affect and transform us. (1998 33)

Yet, our encounters with the Other are often ruled by our attempts to assimilate it and transform it in terms of our categories of understanding. To put it differently, we strive to reduce the Other to the Same, which turns this ethical moment par excellence into a rather unethical imposition. This has been, according to Andrew Gibson, the characteristic mode and ultimate sin of Western philosophy, which has systematically tried to ‘speak of and therefore master the other as whole, to reduce the other to the terms of the same’ (1999 65). Change and modernity have systematically been associated with the West. This has led most Westerners to regard their civilisation as ultimately superior, and thus as a model to imitate by all the other cultures, which cannot in turn help experiencing ambivalent feelings towards this non-stop westernisation/ modernisation process. As Amin Maalouf has put it:

For the rest of the world’s inhabitants, all those born in the failed cultures [...] For the Chinese, Africans, Japanese, Indians and American Indians, as for Greeks, Russians, Iranians, Arabs, Jews and Turks, modernisation has constantly meant the abandoning of part of themselves. Even though it has sometimes been embraced with enthusiasm, is has never been adopted without a certain bitterness, without a feeling of humiliation and defection. Without a piercing doubt about the dangers of assimilation. Without a profound identity crisis. (72)

Is there a way to escape this humiliating assimilation, this phagocytic impulse towards the Other? The only answer for Levinas is to confidently open ourselves to the experience of reciprocity and alterity. Meeting the Other on ethical grounds implies assuming that there are no monolithic truths, that we cannot possibly be in absolute control, and that the subject is in constant dialogue and transformation, since our encounter with the world involves a reciprocity, a two-way movement or interplay between ourselves and the world that inexorably turns our self into un sujet-à-venir. In Levinas’s words:

A calling into question of the Same — which cannot occur within the egoistic spontaneity of the Same— is brought about by the Other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics. The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplishment as a calling into question of my spontaneity as ethics. Metaphysics, transcendence, the welcoming of the Other by the Same, of the Other by Me, is concretely produced as the
Due Preparations for the Plague is full of solitary characters who, like Lowell, desperately try to cope with sadness, absences, loneliness, bad memories and silences (93). They all share the same morbid incapacity to open themselves up and communicate with the others. Rowena refuses to believe that Lowell, her ex-husband, can begin to improve, and he finds ‘the injustice of this [...] monumental’ (13). Lowell can never get to know his father. To make matters worse, he feels totally unable to live up to what he considers to be his father’s expectations, which have tormented him permanently. ‘It was like living in parallel universes, [Lowell] said. All the time. Simultaneously. [...] I was never sure which one he was when he was with me. [...] Even when he was with us, he wasn’t with us’ (20). Lowell’s father has remained a complete mystery to everybody, even to Elizabeth, his new young wife, who after his funeral confesses: ‘he was a stranger to me. I knew the mailman better’ (23). Being a CIA agent, he felt compelled to cope with quite a contradictory and alienating situation: he was to know all the others’ secrets while scrupulously keeping himself to himself. He knew that people like him are inexorably doomed: the better you train a secret agent, the less he will trust his peers and be able to collaborate with them, and the more likely he will be to spoil everything by the obsessive need to know all. In the end, he will get killed: too much distrust — and too much knowledge — will annihilate him. The locker containing the secret documents and videotapes that Lowell’s father wants to hand to him can be said to symbolise not only his father’s own cryptic and labyrinthine inner self — his own ‘blacker than dark, and more dense [...] impenetrable’ particular Inferno (273) — but also Lowell’s anguish at the impossibility of understanding and reaching him.

Locker B-64 has taken up ghostly residence in Lowell’s bedroom. Sometimes, in dreams, he is inside it, banging on the door for the key holder to let him out. Sometimes, mathematically and malevolently, the walls of his room shift subtly [...] while he, Lowell, falls downward, faster and faster, down and down, clutching at handles that come away in his fingers and never getting below or beyond the endless doors [...] but he can never get to the bottom of the riddle of Locker B. (31)

His father remains an absolute difference, a truly Other. No encounter between them seems to be possible. Génie, the only hostage who, together with Tristan, finally seems to be given a slight chance to escape and survive, experiences a similar feeling of isolation and failure — ‘a virus of bereavement’ (121), as she likes to put it. She has created her own ‘security system’, which consists in ‘leaving before she is left’ (121). She is too afraid of love. The same could be said of Cassie, who can only feel good and safe in the abandoned boathouse where the members of the Phoenix Club (the internet support club that the surviving children of the ill-fated plane set up, both to request information concerning the infamous incident and to help their troubled members to cope with life) occasionally gather;
or of Samantha, who for so long insists on rejecting the affection given to her by aunt Lou, the only relative she can actually trust and cling to. Refusal to establish any kind of encounter with the other is not the only source of agony and distress, though. The opposite attitude can also lead to the same regrettable end. To give but one example, it is Tristan’s attempt to wholly transform, possess and control Génie that makes her leave him. She is in love with Tristan, but cannot cope with so much jealousy and possessiveness: ‘Either you stop being a travel writer, he shouted, or you leave. And she had left. She had vanished without a trace’ (114). Tristan realises his mistake, but only when it is too late, when he is completely on his own. The novel abounds with scenes and symbols that bring to the fore the overwhelming solitude, isolation and otherness that are such an intrinsic part of the human condition: the unattended child on a swing (182–83), the old man whose family is not visiting him for Christmas (183–84), the man conversing with his dog for want of better company (194), and the Greyhound buses, almost exclusively used by society’s outcasts, that is, ‘the poor and the desperate’ (212).

There is only one possible way to overcome frustration and accept otherness, the novel seems to suggest: to go ‘beneath the radar of rationality’ that imposes categorical divisions and exclusions and have ‘a healthy respect for intuition’ (250), the intuition that enables us to understand that it is only by relinquishing our supposedly fixed selves that we will be able to preserve and enrich them. Tristan’s puzzling experience with the wave when he was only a child can very well illustrate this conviction:

he hunches up again, bracing his small body [...] with the wave hanging over him like a vast implacable wall. Terror. He sees the fluted green frown beetling above, utterly indifferent. You are nothing, boy. nothing, it says, bored. He prostrates himself before Wave, the annihilator, the God of Smash. [...] His brother Pierre keeps shouting: Like this, like this, keep your eyes open. [...] And curl yourself up in its armpit, give yourself to it, like this, so that you are the wave. (152–53)

Open yourself to the experience of alterity so that you can overcome terror and get to know and understand the Other, which will in turn allow you to better know and understand yourself, the novel seems to claim. It is only when Samantha realises how much she cares about Lowell and his children Amy and Jason: when she learns to love her aunt Lou — who eventually turns out to be her true biological mother; when she manages to hold them all ‘in the sanctuary of her mind’ (390) that she finally recovers peace. The same is true of Lowell. Now that he has succeeded in overcoming all his fears, forgiving his father and letting the world know — or rather letting those who really want to know know — the other side of that disgraceful story, he feels confident. For the first time in his life he is able to show firmness in his convictions. ‘I’m not asking you, I’m informing you’ (378), Lowell says to Rowena when she tries to prevent him from taking the kids to visit their grandfather’s grave. Lowell’s insistence should not be regarded as an act of defiance, though, but rather as his attempt to convince Rowena of the
importance of this visit so that a final reconciliation between the three generations can be possible. Last but not least, it is highly significant that it is Tristan and Génie, the two most altruistic characters, who seem to be allowed to survive and take refuge in some ‘unfindable [village] which is no longer on maps’ (352), or so we, readers, want to believe. The reasons for this are all too obvious. As Tristan explains to Génie: ‘They were gifted for love, Tristan and Genevieve. Great love was their destiny’ (138): love, generosity, openness, survival, transcendence. They are idealists, they do not easily crack under pressure. That is why Salamander finds them so attractive and dangerous. It is ‘the exceptional nature of their stubbornness’, their ‘insane thickheadedness which paradoxically makes [them] impossible to kill’ (232), he exclaims.

However, nothing or very little has yet been said about the other idealists, the Others par excellence in the novel: the terrorists. The only fundamentalist who is given any protagonism is, without doubt, Sirocco. Sirocco is often described as ‘a total stranger’ (146), as a cruel and ruthless mercenary who only cares about himself: ‘The Jews, the Palestinians, what do I care? I am for myself. Enlightened self-interest, I would say. Those are my politics’ (247). As was argued before, he is not an inexplicable oddity, but rather the logical outcome, the true child of modernity. Not in vain does he use the word ‘enlightened’. Yet, it must be pointed out that it is mainly through the eyes of other people, especially those of Salamander, that we have access to Sirocco’s thoughts. Consequently, he is systematically demonised and depicted as the enemy, the devil society must necessarily fight against. However, this might be nothing but an oversimplification, an attempt to manipulate reality and make it fit into clear-cut and binary categories such as good vs. evil. Samantha, for example, likes to think of Salamander — who eventually turns out to be Lowell’s father — as an unobtrusive and callous being who delights in destroying people’s lives (45–46), which does not finally seem to be the case. Similarly, Salamander and most of the characters in the novel have, and transmit, a rather negative and monochrome impression of Sirocco. Yet, Sirocco is given some identity, and is at times allowed to speak. By contrast, nothing is said about the other fundamentalists, about their lives, their problems, their families, their history, their beliefs, their reasons for doing what they do. They are the true Others of the story, the stubborn and thickheaded — and therefore dangerous — idealists at the other end, the subaltern that are not allowed to speak, nor even to have a name, an identity. It is evident, then, that the novel occasionally fails to treat all characters on the same ethical grounds. However understandable this exclusion may be — nobody who in his/ her right mind, and who is not undergoing a desperate situation, can approve of indiscriminate violence — it can by no means be justified. The novel’s refusal to give them a voice is one of its biggest and most blatant faults and contradictions. After all, as Samantha says to Lowell on the phone before they meet, ‘what can be worse than not knowing?’ (5). The experience of reciprocity and alterity accepts no exceptions.
Nevertheless, the void that this silence creates is so flagrant, so unexpected to some extent, that one cannot help thinking that this is the price that writing about such a polemical issue inevitably entails. Important drawbacks apart, *Due Preparations for the Plague* is a brave attempt to bring to the fore, explore and analyse the lethal consequences that turning one's back on the Others inevitably brings about. 'In a time of embedded journalists', Jonathan Bennett argues, 'it is ironic that a form as old as the novel is the one medium that can actually make us imagine what it might be like to live as another does' (2003 3). The novel, Hospital seems to argue, is still a valid vehicle, if not one of the best vehicles, to discuss all these thorny questions or, to quote from the novel itself, to gather the 'pieces which make up the puzzle of the self',

[which] are held together by the glue of memory. Certain solvents can dissolve this glue: a stroke, catastrophic events. Then we are forced to become scavengers of our own past, searching, finding, relearning, reassembling the self. (47)

Literature can still help us to cope with uncertainty and remain alive. As the Yiddish writer proclaims before dying,

we must still tell stories [...] because the Horsemen of Death still gallop [...] Our villages are plundered [...] our houses are burned, but even so, the spark of the divine cannot be quenched, and where the spark of the divine touches, there is dancing and play. (309–10)

Like the Baal Shem Tov, first of the zaddiks (Jewish spiritual leaders), we tell ourselves stories 'because there [is] no escape', but over and above everything because we want to live 'in the land of even so' (309–10; emphases in original). Literature, and culture by extension, is a powerful constituent and vehicle at the core of possible transformations, given that it mediates and transfers ideas, values and intellectual refinement between generations and between civilisations. Culture is, therefore, both a preserving and a transforming force, a factor without which sustainable global development will never be possible. As Ada Aharoni stated:

Culture is a key factor in promoting genuine peace. If a peace culture system instils recognition of the ‘other’, respect for its identity and culture, as well as a commitment to solving conflicts and differences by peaceful means, then the chances for peace will be greatly enhanced. By contrast, if the cultural and educational system instils self-centeredness, rejection and hatred of the ‘other’, of its identity and of its culture, and calls for and justifies the resort to violence to solve conflict — then sustainability may be endangered. [...] There is therefore a crucial need for reform at an international scale, concerning culture, literature and the arts, that can undermine and replace the culture of violence terror and crime. (2002 unnumbered pages)

It is clear, then, that Hospital's novel explores a number of ‘terror and war-on-terror’ themes, such as the frightening sensation of permanent risk, the use of human beings as damage collateral for men who will do whatever they need to in order to achieve their own personal and political goals and enforce their own
Due Preparations for the Plague

immutable ideological creeds and, worst of all, the fact that neither the official (American) press nor the government (Congress) are concerned with knowing the dark side of their truth. As Lou dishearteningly says to Samantha in a desperate attempt to find some kind of explanation for this indifference: ‘Horror doesn’t reach people anymore. Horror’s TV. Horror’s special effects’ (383). The novel examines the psychological destruction inherent in personal loss, especially when this loss is cloaked in ambiguity, to conclude that any kind of definite understanding or belief in information received is simply impossible. Just as Defoe’s Journal of the Plague Year (1722) suggested centuries before, Due Preparations for the Plague makes it clear that we have no idea what the future will be like, so we have no way to genuinely prepare. All our efforts to stop oncoming disaster are, to some extent, futile. To quote Defoe’s words:

I have often asked myself what I mean by preparations for the plague ... and I think that preparations for the plague are preparations for death. But what is it to make preparations for death? Or what preparations are proper to be made for death?

(in DPP iv)

However, it is not only fear that this political thriller seems to wish to exploit. This novel is frightening in so far as it gives insight into how easily intolerance and terrorism can affect and destroy our lives, and how thin and questionable the barrier between what we regard as ‘good’ and ‘evil’ can be. Not in vain does Lowell’s father, code-named Salamander, finally become aware of the split personality that has tormented him for years:

S for substructure, subterranean, subterfuge. S for split selves, Siamesed. It is by the other man, Salamander, that events have been nudged in dreadful directions [...] I want [...] to stop Salamander from taking up more and more space while I am becoming [...] smaller and smaller, like Alice in Wonderland with the shrinking potion. (219)

He goes as far as to think that there is no such difference between himself and the rogue agent Sirocco: he also fantasises about punishing his wife, wishes to make idealists like Tristan and Génie pay for their defiance and pride, seeks to control his daughter’s life, and places all the people he wants under surveillance. ‘I plead guilty’ (274), Salamander finally says. It may not at all be accidental, then, that S is the initial of the names of both — Salamander and Sirocco. Salamander has an obscure and repressed dark side that, from time to time, firmly takes hold of him, thus disclosing his utter helplessness and inability to control anything, not even his own life and feelings. His extra-marital relationship with Anna is nothing but a clear eruption of ‘the other within’.

On those nights when the torment comes, when nothing else helps, I want continuing access to the basement apartment which is not in my part of the city. [...] The building through which one gains access to that dark and desirable basement is quite dissimilar, even violently so, from the graceful town house where I live with my young wife. [...] I refer to the cramped below-street-level space of the young courtesan, the lovely Anna in leather and chains. Anna [...] lives on the dark side of the moon. [...] The lovely
Anna, my Nefertiti, is black and croons the blue news of underground, which it is my professional duty to keep beneath sewer caps. We have a contact which both of us understand. (222)

Salamander’s sado-masochistic relationship with Anna seems to be the only way in which he can possibly handle the irrepressible fear, anguish and frenzy that so often gnaw at him: ‘When she cracks her whip, he tastes, very briefly, absolution’ (246). However dark and similar the condition of those two agents may at times be, it is only Salamander who eventually manages to redeem himself by saving the children who were travelling on that plane, that is, by opening himself up to the others’ needs and feelings. He wants to make up for the past, to restore self-confidence to his confused son. He longs for his truth to be known, even at the cost of his own immolation. It is by no means accidental, therefore, that Salamander should become obsessed with the words uttered by Scipio, the conquering and victorious Roman general, after the terrible Roman siege of Carthage in 146 BC: ‘How do we tell a glorious victory from horror?’ (244)

However poignant this question may be, the novel often strives to make tolerance, hope, faith and forgiveness its very real issues, mainly though a strong belief in the human capacity for transcending old absolute forms through dialogue and for showing resilience in the face of extreme horror and adversity. It is true that Due Preparations for the Plague sometimes falls into its own trap by silencing most of the terrorists, the apparently most unpalatable protagonists of the story. Yet, the fact that this silence should be so conspicuous only reveals how successfully the novel has disclosed its daring message despite its own shortcomings. Contradictions and omissions apart, Hospital’s novel could be said to endorse Falzon’s belief in the necessity of throwing caution to the winds, to ‘expos[e] oneself and one’s culture to the possibility of being challenged and even transformed by the other in a concrete dialogue […] [because] if this dialogue exposes us to uncertainties, risks and dangers, the effects are ultimately positive’ (1998 98). It is lack of dialogue and understanding that can — and will eventually — bring about ever-increasing violence and ultimate destruction. To quote Maalouf’s warning words again:

When new facts emerge we need to reconsider our attitudes and habits. […] in the age of globalisation and of the ever-accelerating intermingling of elements in which we are all caught up, a new concept of identity is needed, and needed urgently. We cannot be satisfied with forcing billions of bewildered human beings to choose between excessive assertion of their identity and the loss of their identity altogether, between fundamentalism and disintegration. But that is the logical consequence of the prevailing attitude on the subject. If our contemporaries […] cannot reconcile their need for identity with an open and unprejudiced tolerance of other cultures […] then we shall be bringing into being legions of the lost and hordes of bloodthirsty madmen. (34–35)

The heart-breaking — and utterly symbolic — description of the ten hostages in the bunker simply corroborates this. They belong to very different ethnic,
social and cultural groups, and yet, they all seem to stand for the same: our fragile, but dignified and resilient, human condition. All of them, without exception, are isolated, trapped, stranded, helpless, terrified, completely different but utterly similar, with enormous difficulties in communicating with one another, deprived of light, and watched by an invisible presence which manifests itself in the form of absolute absence.

Strangely shaped shadow-beings, with grotesque heads, move about in a slow ballet, and if it were not for the dread fact that we know all too well what we are watching, we might think we were in the first circle of Dante’s hell. The light is murky [...]. Hooded shapes, stumbling about like the damned — they are the damned — reach out and grope at each other. They feel the walls, they stretch their padded arms against, reaching up, reaching down, describing large arcs in many directions, measuring the dimensions of their cage like blind men who have been told that somewhere on the walls is an Open Sesame switch. They have twenty-four hours to find it. [...] The stage set seems to be a room, or a bunker, about twelve feet square. There is no furniture. There are only the ten padded shapes which sometimes curl up on the ground, immobile, and sometimes bump into one another. When collision occurs, sometimes the bodies embrace and cling. At other times, they start apart like similarly charged magnetic poles repelling each other. High in one corner, where two walls and the ceiling meet, there is an eye of infrared light. (282–83)

Nevertheless, as soon as Yasmina Shankara, the Bollywood movie star, gives up her life so that she can pass Kalidasa’s beloved Sanskrit poem on to her son Agit, the remaining nine hostages miraculously become ‘one organism, multicelled’, as if they were ‘an ant colony or a swarm of bees’ (308). They are all possessed by ‘an oceanic sense of love and connectedness’ (334) to the other people with them in the room. Like Yasmina, most of them choose fast death so that they can try and help the other hostages out of the bunker and, most important of all, they can send a final message of hope and beauty — not in vain are many of them creators and artists — and ask for the forgiveness of the ones they love. Moreover, many of them are overwhelmed by the unexpected discovery that they are not as secular as they thought. After all, as violinist Avi Levinstein states, ‘the religious impulse begins in awe, and awe begins at death’ (326).

However hard we try to avoid the encounter with the other, the other will always come to us, because, as the Indian actress finally discovers, ‘[e]verything returns. Nothing can ever be lost’ (306). Poverty had frightened Yasmina since she was a child in Bombay. She couldn’t even bear to touch beggars or put coins in their hands. Paradoxically, she is now to die the death of the beggar girl who sat outside her gates and who, day after day, tapped at her window to ask for a coin. If the beggar girl died of hunger, Yasmina will die of oxygen deprivation, but not before passing the beautiful story of the Cloud Messenger on to her son Isabella Hawthorne, for her part, will also succeed in offering her tormented son Lowell the story of the two white doves that flew off into the sky as her powerful healing legacy. Love and acceptance of the Other will bring us, if not happiness, Samantha finally realises, at least ‘something rich and mellow that [we] could call a state
of being at peace’ (390). But one fundamental question still remains unanswered: ‘How do we ready ourselves for what might happen tomorrow? What possible preparations can be made?’ (390). It seems there is only one answer, a very simple — but also complicated — answer. Hospital’s meditation might be said to hold the key to find it:

[In the West] death is something that happens to other people. We live in a state of constant denial about it, and this is why I was so amazed and fascinated by the reactions of the people in the top floors of the World Trade Towers. That suddenly they were sort of rushing at incredible speed into the white effulgence of death and had to react with the minutes of life left to them, and reacted in ways that to me are hugely reassuring about the human spirit [...] what possible preparations can be made? The preparations that can be made are to live well and decently and magnanimously now, while we’ve got life. (in Hall 2003 1)

These words inevitably bring to mind, and desperately make us cling to, Albert Camus’s hopeful, although at times undoubtedly difficult to believe, defence of humanity’s worth as expressed in *The Plague*:

To state quite simply what we learn in a time of pestilence: that there are more things to admire in men than to despise. (in *DPP* iv)

**NOTES**

1 The research carried out for the writing of this paper has been financed by the M.C.Y.T. (Ministerio de Ciencia y Tecnologia). D.G.I. FEDER. Proyecto HUM2004-00344 FILO. A previous draft of this paper was presented at the 10th IBACS (Iberian Association of Cultural Studies) Conference *Culture and Society in the Age of Globalisation*, which was held in October 2004 in Burgos, Spain.

2 The story begins with the tenth anniversary of this catastrophe. The children on the plane were released before the tragic end — the plane was set on fire and literally disintegrated in air. Those surviving children are now adults who, from time to time, meet in an abandoned boathouse, and who have set up an internet support group, significantly called the Phoenix Club. Of these surviving children, Samantha, Jacob and Cassie have forged the closest bonds. Samantha is particularly obsessed with trying to find answers and she searches constantly for links and connections. An additional layer of complexity is provided by Lowell, whose mother was on the ill-fated plane, and whose father, an important CIA operative, was a top agent in the hijack incident code-named Operation Black Death. Blaming himself for his father’s emotional distance, Lowell has been an ineffectual husband and father. When Lowell receives a mysterious package from his father, who has just died in a suspicious car crash only four days before the tenth anniversary of the massacre, the contents change his perspective and raise serious questions of personal responsibility. Samantha has relentlessly pursued Lowell via telephone, desperate for any clues he might have about the terrorist attack. When Lowell finally decides to contact Samantha, he is in a panic. He is quite rightly convinced that he is being pursued for the inflammatory material now in his possession. Lowell and Samantha wonder if they are becoming paranoid. As a result of their separate investigations, they come to believe that it is not only possible but likely, that members of US security agencies helped engineer and implement the catastrophe which claimed their parents. They believe a Muslim
Due Preparations for the Plague

man called Sirocco to be the terrorist who commanded the hijacking, but they are also trying to identify Salamander, the American CIA agent who is supposed to have ‘controlled’ him. When some of the other now-adult children of the tragedy begin to die mysterious deaths or find themselves followed and observed, the tension between the remaining survivors increases, and when Lowell reads that ‘Operation Black Death was a politically necessary exercise that got out of hand’, his own fear and anger at this betrayal by his own countrymen — especially his father, who eventually turns out to be Salamander himself — threaten to drive him mad. In a secret meeting, or so they hope, Lowell and Samantha must make a difficult decision on how to balance the use of the explosive information they have and their desire for survival. They are faced with a serious dilemma: to determine who is friend and who is foe as they strive to unravel a picture of American political influence, unethical schemes, double-crossing and a cover up conspiracy.

3 The etymology of the term hyperbole points in different directions. In Greek the verb huperballein has more than one meaning: ‘to overshoot’, ‘to exceed all bounds’, ‘to go on further and further’, and ‘to pass over, cross, or traverse (mountains, rivers, etc.)’. In other words, it denotes both material and discursive excesses, and those excesses are in turn bound to produce transferences between discourse and material events.

4 It must be said, however, that in a subsequent message Stockhausen stated that the press had hideously misinterpreted his meaning, and clarified as follows: ‘I am as dismayed as everyone else about the attacks in America. At the press conference in Hamburg, I was asked if Michael, Eve and Lucifer were historical figures of the past and I answered that they exist now, for example Lucifer in New York. In my work, I have defined Lucifer as the cosmic spirit of rebellion, of anarchy. He uses his high degree of intelligence to destroy creation. He does not know love. After further questions about the events in America, I said that such a plan appeared to be Lucifer’s greatest work of art. Of course, I used the designation ‘work of art’ to mean the work of destruction personified in Lucifer. In the context of my other comments this was unequivocal’ (Stockhausen 2001).


6 Cassie’s talented parents — her father was a prestigious cellist and her mother a well-known soprano — died in the terrorist attack. From that moment onwards, Cassie has been unable to lead a normal life and has lived in a psychiatric hospital on an almost permanent basis. Significantly, the abandoned boathouse is totally isolated and surrounded by water, which could plausibly be interpreted as symbolising Cassie’s desperate regression (to her mother’s uterus) and inability to cope with life and reality.

7 Tristan runs Editions du Double and helps poor and proscribed writers to make their works known and read in the West. Génie, for her part, works for Caritas. She carries family and personal letters from one place to another, thus connecting ‘too many small and ordinary lives behind too many dangerous barriers’ (127).

8 Yet, such is the subversive and revelatory power of literature, the novel also seems to warn, that it can conversely put us into a difficult situation. The sudden death of Agit, Indian movie star Yasmina’s son, clearly shows how wrong Samantha is when she exclaims: ‘No one in government circles or Intelligence pays any attention to fiction’ (74). Jacob has reasons to believe that Agit did not commit suicide. He is convinced that Agit got killed simply because he drew attention to himself and his mother’s
disquieting death by publishing the book of short stories *Flight into the Dark*. Contrary to what Samantha wants to think, literature is anything but neutral, and even politicians may pay attention to it, if only to prevent people from thinking.

Yet, the meanings of those two names are rather different, if not complementary. If sirocco means ‘the hot wind that burns where it blows’ (148), a salamander is, among other things, ‘a mythical creature having the power to endure fire without harm’ (45). Both of them can be just as tough but, whereas the former stands for destruction, the latter represents endurance and resilience.

It is certainly no coincidence that the secret documents and tapes that Lowell’s father hands to him in the blue sports tote should be firstly made to fit into Lowell’s old-time pillowcase, the same pillowcase he had until he was six years old and started school.

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