

## Preface

Business as usual in the face of more than 257,000 fellow Americans dying from the coronavirus?—the business of editing *Delos*, a scholarly journal of literary translations, somewhat removed from the physical manifestations where our sisters and brothers, the first responders in the hospitals, nursing homes and schools, are employed. Together, our survival and livelihoods are at risk in the current pandemic.

There are many historical and literary precedents for what we are going through today, beginning with Boccaccio in the fourteenth century and culminating with Albert Camus's novel *The Plague* (*La Peste*, 1947), which he effectively employed as a symbol of Nazi ideology and occupation of France, and as a warning against mass hysteria for future generations, not merely for students of the political process and future epidemiologists, but for ordinary citizens like us.

We the editors are therefore putting a phrase from the essay by Laura Marris about her translation-in-progress of Albert Camus's *The Plague* as a motto on our cover. Although her translation will not come out until 2021, we are quoting here the last paragraph because of its very relevance for today. In other words, it is too early to celebrate, letting our guards down, literally, as if we have turned the corner:

Indeed, as he heard the cries of delight rising from the city, Rieux remembered that this delight was always threatened. For he knew what this joyous crowd did not, and what you can read in books—that the germ of the plague never dies or disappears, that it can lie dormant for decades in furniture and linens, that it waits patiently in rooms, in basements, in trunks, among handkerchiefs and paperwork, and that perhaps the day would come when, for the sorrow and education of men, the plague would revive its rats and dispatch them to die in a happy city.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Laura Marris, "Camus's Inoculation Against Hate," *New York Times*, August 9, 2020, Sunday Book Review.

Michael Ayrton's illustration of the pandemic, a.k.a. the plague, horrifying in its graphic detail, shows a rat enveloping a dying young woman.<sup>2</sup> This is arguably more effective than the rather harmless-looking COVID-19 depiction of a baseball-size sphere, decorated with reddish flower buds, which we see today ubiquitously in the media. We seem to be still in the early phase of understanding a horrible and dangerous "bazillus."

To be sure, the stories and poems in this issue, regardless of the original language, are not business as usual to begin with. As the cultural historian Joan Didion famously said: "We tell ourselves stories in order to live." Of the authors translated, only one would have been old enough to read *La Peste* when it was published—Luigi Malerba, born in 1927. With the exception of the nineteenth-century Russian Leskov, the others were all born after 1935.

The issue begins with two authors wrestling with the process of translating poetry—Jim Kates, with the experience of decades of poetry from a variety of languages, and Andrea Pham, a Vietnamese-born poet trying to articulate her first experience of translating and being translated.<sup>3</sup> Then five poets from Brazil, Romania, Russia, Mauritania, and Algeria raise their voices in as various responses, from minimalism to exuberance, from glimpsed secrets to ghosts to torn memories, visions and scents and always the sounds of words. Each of the four prose works, on the other hand, tries to capture the pain of loss in some scientific aspiration—geometry, music, taxonomy, algebra. In particular, Luigi Malerba's conceit seems to foreshadow the present, now when it seems all of nature and life is being scanned and photographed before it is gone, and as it disappears.

We are rich in reviews, as well. A particular pleasure is Timothy Sergay's review of an inadequate "scholarly" translation of an important work for Bulgakov readers. It is a reminder (one that might be posted to publishers, too) that the love we scholars have for our subjects requires telling stories to live, too, and telling them just so.

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2 We describe Ayrton's image on the cover of the 1960 Penguin paperback of *The Plague*, trans. Stuart Gilbert.

3 See the Fall 2019 issue (34.2) of *Delos* for a group of poems translated from French, Italian, and Russian by J. Kates, and also for Andrea Pham's exchange of translations with Lola Haskins.