

# Disaster

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IT is a given that Covid has distorted our sense of time. In addition to the experience of time passing too slowly or quickly, there is another way in which shared disasters can produce uncanny temporalities: through retroactive hopefulness. This affect comes from looking back to a time when we were first becoming aware of the imminence of disaster but did not yet understand how serious it would become. For those of us in the United States, this was the period in January 2020 when we could still imagine ourselves (however irrationally or presumptively) as exceptional, exempt from the devastations that Covid was causing in China. We were like Dr. Bernard Rieux in Albert Camus's *The Plague* (1947), when he and his acquaintances begin to notice an increasing number of dead rats lying around Algiers. In response to his wife's question, "What's all this about the rats?" he says, "I don't know. It's bizarre, but it'll pass." When shortly afterward someone else asks him about the rats, he responds, "It's nothing"; the narrator adds, "All he remembered from that moment was the sight of a passing railwayman who carried a crate of dead rats under his arm."<sup>1</sup> While Rieux's memory inflects the scene with his subsequent knowledge of the plague, at the moment, there was still the possibility (however fading) of dismissing the crate of rats as "nothing." Looking back at such moments from a position of experience, it is difficult not to feel wistful for a time in which we could still imagine ourselves protected from catastrophe. We reverse expected chronologies and project our hope toward the past.

This retroactive hopefulness inverts the prophetic affect of *bukimi*, which Paul Saint-Amour describes as the "proleptic traumatic symptom" that some inhabitants of Hiroshima experienced before the atomic bombing of their city. In contrast to the Freudian temporality of catastrophic events preceding traumatized responses, with *bukimi* the symptom appears "in advance of its originary traumatic event."<sup>2</sup> Saint-Amour elaborates, "A certain preparation for trauma may amplify,

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rather than mitigate, the ensuing post-traumatic syndrome, insofar as those undergoing the trauma have had to confront not the question ‘What is this?’ but the more horrifying question ‘Is *this* the real thing, then, which I have dreaded all along? Is this *really* it?’”<sup>3</sup> For its part, the condition of retroactive hopefulness comes from having experienced the full scope of the disaster but desiring to reach back to a time of relative naïveté, when we could still downplay the scope of the catastrophe.

A late Victorian narrative of (near) apocalypse, H. G. Wells’s *The War of the Worlds* (1898) situates its readers within a temporality that projects hope into the past and despair into the future. Wells begins his account of a Martian invasion on England with the resonant phrase, “No one would have believed.” While these words ostensibly refer to the ensuing realization that “human affairs were being watched keenly and closely by intelligences greater than man’s,” they extend to the general sense of disbelief in the seriousness of the invasion that pervades the first part of the story, which the narrator retroactively describes from a position of survival.<sup>4</sup> He initially ignores the strange illuminations that appear in the sky, which turn out to be the first signs of the Martian attack, focusing instead on the “safe and tranquil” night scene around him (13). When an alien craft crashes to earth, the astronomer Ogilvy misinterprets it as the result of an accident rather than an attack (a response that hauntingly anticipates early misreadings of the first plane crashing into the World Trade Center as an inadvertent collision). A party forms around the site of the crash, culminating in the arrival of the Deputation led by a man “waving a white flag” (25). The atmosphere of optimism turns to horror with the first act of violence: the incineration of the Deputation, in which each delegate seems “suddenly and momentarily turned to fire” (26).

Looking back at these early events from the midst of a full-fledged invasion, the hopeful disbelief appears at once stupid and appealing. Because events like these seem to obviate the possibility of normalcy—what we now call the “before times”—we think back nostalgically to the period when things were only *somewhat* worrisome. The narrator encounters this temporality when he returns to his house after the Martian defeat (caused not by human intervention, but by a deadly bacteria) and on his desk finds “the sheet of work I had left on the afternoon of the opening of the cylinder. For a space I stood reading over my abandoned arguments. It was a paper on the probable development of Moral Ideas with the development of the civilizing process; and the last sentence was the opening of a prophecy: ‘In about two hundred years,’

I had written, ‘we may expect—’ The sentence ended abruptly” (155). Distracted, he had wandered outside and heard the newsboy’s “odd story of the ‘Men from Mars’” (155); the adjective “odd” matches Rieux’s response to the dead rat as simply “bizarre.” Returning to the interrupted scene of writing, the narrator locates a moment of transition from the reassurance of a barely disturbed present (the Martians have started to manifest themselves, but not in disastrous ways) to the catastrophic reality of invasion. By “reading in the aftermath,” to borrow Olivia Loksing Moy’s phrase, he revisits the self he was a month ago, when he could still believe in the idea of England’s primacy in “civilizing” progress narratives.<sup>5</sup> He experiences this retroactive hope once again at the close of the novel, after the “new normal” of postinvasion life has been established, and he can “recall the time when I saw it all bright and clear-cut, hard and silent, under the dawn of that last great day” (160).

The ability to believe in a “last great day”—or a “before time”—is as much a symptom of nostalgia as it is of privilege, linked to more harmful fantasies, in Wells’s case, of imperial domination. While the narrator explains that “our views of the human future must be greatly modified by these events,” he adds that “the invasion from Mars is not without its ultimate benefit for men; it has robbed us of that serene confidence in the future which is the most fruitful source of decadence.” This is not a humbling but a forceful return to an imperial mindset: “If the Martians can reach Venus, there is no reason to suppose that the thing is impossible for men. . . . Should we conquer?” (158, 159). The narrator has, in a sense, completed the sentence left unfinished on the day of the disaster, pointing the way to increasing nationalist violence. To return to Saint-Amour’s terminology, retroactive hopefulness thus turns into its own “proleptic traumatic symptom,” as it finds insidious ways of projecting that “last great day” into the story of the future.

#### NOTES

1. Albert Camus, *The Plague*, translated by Laura Marris (New York: Knopf, 2021), 11, 12.
2. Paul Saint-Amour, “Bombing and the Symptom: Traumatic Earliness and the Nuclear Uncanny,” *Diacritics* 30, no. 4 (2000): 61.
3. Saint-Amour, “Bombing and the Symptom,” 64.

4. H. G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds* (1898; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 9. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
5. Olivia Loksing Moy, "Reading in the Aftermath: An Asian American *Jane Eyre*," *Victorian Studies* 62, no. 3 (2020): 406–20.

