

Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis

Studia de Arte et Educatione 12 (2017)

ISSN 2081-3325

DOI 10.24917/20813325.12.8

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The distance between reality and fiction: Roland Barthes reading Albert Camus¹

At the end of 1954 Roland Barthes wrote a review² of Camus's *The Plague*. Barthes pointed out, that in this novel, there seems to be a lack of coherence between the real history of French Resistance against German occupation during Second World War and the fictional struggle of Oran's citizens against a disease. The problem, for Barthes, was that in reality the struggle of resistance couldn't be presented, without reservations, as an allegory of people fighting a lethal disease. French resistance members, when fighting the Nazis had to confront real people, not a disease or an abstract metaphysical problem: "The evil has sometimes a human face and about this, *The Plague* speaks nothing" (Barthes, 1955, p. 7). This observed difficulty has, according to Barthes important, moral consequences. The solidarity of people, as presented by the struggles of Oranians in Camus's novel, is formed against a dehumanized threat. As such, it avoids the moral consequences of the real confrontation with other human beings; there is, after all, nothing wrong about fighting plague, whereas combat against humans is much more difficult on moral ground to engage in: "Is it enough to be a physician, being afraid of becoming an executioner, should one be satisfied with healing wounds without confronting their causes? How should one behave, when confronted with an attack of a human being?" (Barthes, 1955, p. 7). According to the critic, one couldn't foresee, on basis of the novel, what the actions of citizens of Oran would be, when fighting against a threat, posed by human beings. The solidarity, as presented by Camus, even when obviously successful when opposed against fictional evil, cannot be helpful in real, historical struggles of humans against humans: "The characters of Camus could not keep themselves away from being executioners or their accomplices without

¹ This article was written in effect of realization of research project 2013/09/D/HS1/00873 funded by National Science Centre in Poland. This work is a substantially revised and developed version of my 2015 publication: M. Kałuża, *Roland Barthes versus Albert Camus. History and allegory in The Plague*, "Prolog", 1(3), 2015. p. 19–27.

² All quotes from French in this article are translated by the author. The aforementioned review was published by Barthes in February 1955, titled: *La Peste, annales d'une épidémie ou roman de la solitude?* "Bulletin du Club du Meilleur Livre", p. 4–8.

accepting being solitary and this is whom they truly are” (Barthes, 1955, p. 7). Worse still, according to Barthes, this eventual solitude (implicitly: a failure of solidarity based on morality of characters from the novel) does not await only Camus’s heroes. The author himself, firmly believing in such morality, as is presented in the novel, is consequently condemned to loneliness. The general verdict, by Barthes was, that allegorical presentation of historical resistance, depicted as a struggle against natural epidemic leaves the reader unaware of moral dilemmas, faced by people engaged in conflict. What Barthes means here, I believe, is that *The Plague* does not present the persistent difficulty of being actively engaged in resistance, which not only required killing people but also taking responsibility for retaliation actions, during which dozens or hundreds of innocents would be executed.

This was a second review of Camus’s work, written by Barthes³, but, more importantly, the first that caused Camus to react, almost instantly, even before the formal publication, in a letter to the author of the critique⁴. Author of *The Plague* could not agree with the verdict, calling his book a source for anti-historical ethic and the final condemnation of both characters and their creator to political solitude. The reservations of Camus, regarding the critique were directed both against the criticism of style and the implied inefficacy of morality of novels’ characters.

Regarding the style of *The Plague*, Camus could not accept the critique of his usage of disease allegory. He pointed out, that the first version of the book appeared during the occupation⁵, so the transposition of the enemy into a disease had an obvious, historical justification, for such concealment of actual meaning was necessary. Such argument would, of course be easy to counter, as the final version of the novel appeared in 1947, when the problem of German censorship was out-of date. More importantly however, Camus argued, that the historically influenced meaning of the novel, presentation of the struggle of resistance, is just one of many levels of meaning in the book. *The Plague* is, according to Camus, not an allegory, reaching only backwards to the period of 1940–1945. It should be noted that this argument did not appear solely as a means to counter Barthes argumentation, for Camus would write in his notebook in October 1942: “*The Plague* has a social meaning and a metaphysical meaning. It’s exactly the same. Such ambiguity is in *The Stranger*⁶ too” (Camus, 2010, p. 36). We may agree then, that from the very beginning, the confrontation was supposed to present a social problem (occupation) and a metaphysical problem (struggle of human being with absurdity of life). Furthermore, if we relate to Camus’s theory of novel, which was published already in 1942 in his essay *Myth of Sisyphus*, we must conclude, that already at this time, the

³ R. Barthes wrote a review of *The Outsider* earlier that year, see: *L’Étranger, roman solaire*, “Bulletin du Club du Meilleur Livre”, vol. 12 (1954) p. 6–7.

⁴ Camus’s letter was published in “Bulletin du club du Meilleur Livre” in February 1955, together with Barthes’s review. For English version, see: A. Camus, *Letter to Roland Barthes on The Plague*, “Lyrical and Critical Essays”, Vintage books, 1970, p. 338–340.

⁵ The first fragment of *The Plague* was published by les Éditions des Trois Collines in 1943. The excerpt was titled *Les exilés dans la peste*.

⁶ *The Stranger* is the american translation of the title of Camus’s book, translated in United Kingdom as *The Outsider*.

author had a developed understanding of the role of artistic creation, very distant from Barthes's interpretation and conclusion. For Camus, already at the dawn of work on *The Plague*, a novel cannot have a ready thesis, to be deciphered by the reader: "The thesis-novel, the work that proves, the most hateful of all, is the one that most often is inspired by a smug thought. You demonstrate the truth you feel sure of possessing. But those are ideas one launches, and ideas are the contrary of thought. Those creators are philosophers, ashamed of themselves. Those I am speaking of or whom I imagine are, on the contrary, lucid thinkers (...). Any thought lost, looking around, and looking ahead that abandons unity glorifies diversity. And diversity is the home of art" (Camus, 1955, p. 84–86). If we assume, that while preparing his novel Camus was trying to adhere to this theory, we may conclude, that at least in the intent of the author, *The Plague* should allow for diverse readings and interpretations, not be solely reduced to an allegorical chronicle of resistance. In his reply to Barthes from 1955, Camus concluded the stylistic attempt of his novel: "In a sense, *The Plague* is more than a chronicle of the Resistance. But certainly it is nothing less" (Camus, 1970, p. 339).

Camus also dismissed the conclusion regarding eventual, political solitude of his characters (and himself). He remarked, that if there is any evolution between *The Outsider* and *The Plague*, it is in movement from solitude to solidarity: „Compared to *The Stranger*, *The Plague* does, beyond any possible discussion, represent the transition from an attitude of solitary revolt to the recognition of a community whose struggles must be shared. If there is an evolution from *The Stranger* to *The Plague*, it is in the direction of solidarity and participation" (Camus, 1970, p. 339). This idea is clearly represented in the novel, by the struggle of citizen's in Oran, whose individual rebellions progressively develop into a working, efficient organization. Camus also addressed the issue of relation between the fictional struggle against disease in the novel and historical struggle of resistance against Nazi occupation. His reply is very interesting, as he openly rejected the implication, that the morality of characters in *The Plague* was solely his own – and also an inadequate one – creation: „What these fighters, whose experience I have to some extent translated, did do, they did in fact against men, and you know at what cost. They will do it again, no doubt, when any terror confronts them, whatever face it may assume, for terror has several faces" (Camus, 1970, p. 339). As Camus was actively engaged in French resistance since 1943 (as an editor for clandestine newspaper), his belief in being able to chronicle the motivations behind actions of "Combat" members seems at least adequate. Invisible in Camus's reply to Barthes is also a very personal experience that – as he remarked in an unpublished essay in 1952 – made his own solitary rebellion an element of the consequent solidary struggle of occupied Frenchmen: "To put it briefly, I didn't know men could torture others while looking them straight in the face. (...) But during the forties these stories, taking place in our midst, were our daily bread. I learned that crime, far from having been given birth and burning in a criminal soul only to be immediately extinguished, could justify itself, turning its theoretical system into a powerful force, spreading its adherents around the world, ultimately conquering and ruling. What else was there to do then except fight to prevent this result?" (Camus, 2004, p. 205–206). Action, as advocated by resistance militants had

– according to Camus – a serious, moral foundation, which he tried to understand and develop from his clandestine 1943 publications (*Letters to a German Friend*) to his ethical considerations as presented in 1951 philosophical essay, *The Rebel*. If we come back to Barthes's reservations, we may notice, however, that Camus's counter-argument does not relate precisely to the issue the critic had in mind. Doctor Rieux from Camus's novel enters the struggle with lethal microbes almost unhesitatingly; it seems difficult not to agree, that his motivations for confrontation may be compared to the motivations of young Frenchmen, repulsed by actions of Nazi occupying forces. But for Barthes, *The Plague* fails at the level of translation, when the historical actions, leading to serious moral dilemmas: e.g. killing people and provoking executions of hostages in revenge are portrayed as attempts at curing the diseased and preventing the spread of an epidemic, in which the element of moral ambivalence disappears. Here, curiously, given the detailed analysis of the issue of killing as depicted in *Neither Victims nor Executioners* (1946), *Just Assassins* (1949) and *The Rebel* (1951), Camus does not explain in detail his moral position regarding political violence, founded on his strong, moral belief, that violence against oppressive ideology or tyranny is permissible, but must be significantly limited and consequently retributed for⁷. For Camus's defense, we may however add, that even if the translation of resistance struggle – portrayed as preventing an epidemic – is deemed inadequate, it does not mean, that moral dilemmas are absent from Camus's novel. All characters, as portrayed by Camus have to make very difficult, moral choices and accept possible, life threatening consequences of their actions. They are fully aware, that their activities are desperate measures and their success lies not in elimination of the symbolical disease, but in stubborn limitation of its deadly consequences. More precisely, if one closely analyzes the arguments from the confession of Tarrou in *The Plague*, it becomes also evidently clear, that the opposition against *The Plague* is seen as necessarily violent struggle, but understood as revolt against any legitimization of violence and killing (Camus, 2013, p. 647–648). Barthes's interpretation, we may conclude, may be thus seen as too heavily relying on the conviction, that it is solely the physician, Rieux, who composes the final moral argument of the book's meaning (focused on healing people). It can be efficiently shown, that the resistance in *The Plague* owes as much to Tarrou's much more political and engaged conviction (focused on stopping the disease at all costs), and consequently, that according to Camus, there exists a level of resisting terror, that does not make the agent combating the threat equal on moral grounds to an executioner.

At the very end of Camus's reply, we find also an interesting interpretative tool for the novel. The author remarks, that *The Plague* should be understood as a symbol, not solely an allegory of occupation. He purportedly did not show one enemy, one representative of oppression and this makes the book more universal: "(...) terror has several faces. Still another justification for my not having named any particular one, in order better to strike at them all. Doubtless this is what I'm

⁷ For a detailed analysis of the issue of violence in Camus's political and moral philosophy, see: J. Foley, *Albert Camus. From absurd to revolt*, London: Routledge, 2008, p. 87–99.

reproached with, the fact that *The Plague* can apply to any resistance against any tyranny” (Camus, 1970, p. 340). Such statement, presented in 1955 could clearly imply, that one may find inspiration in *The Plague*, not only to honor the historical resistance, but also to support anti-totalitarian movements struggling against soviet politics or Franco’s regime. In preceding part of the article, we will propose to see this context – especially Camus’s stubborn critique of Marxist ideology of 1950s, as a much more serious, political cause for Barthes’s claims about anti-historical ethics.

In 1953, when Barthes published his collection of critical essays⁸, he would highly praise Camus for *The Outsider*. What he admired was the transparency of language in that book, signaling a new style in French literature. In view of Barthes: “This transparent form of speech, initiated by Camus’s *Outsider*, achieves a style of absence which is almost an ideal absence of style; writing is then reduced to a sort of negative mood in which the social or mythical characters of a language are abolished in favor of a neutral and inert state of form; thus thought remains wholly responsible, without being overlaid by a secondary commitment of form to a History not its own” (Barthes, 1967, p. 77). This style, called “Écriture blanche”, had according to Barthes a significant, social function, it presents “the last episode of a Passion of writing, which recounts stage by stage the disintegration of bourgeois consciousness” (Barthes, 1967, p. 5). This style, understood as a stubborn escape from of literary language from stylistic ideology, is seen as an attempt at reaching honesty and clarity in writing. Such preference for clarity and honesty of the writer, I presume, was not found in Barthes’s of *The Plague*. The meaning became for him unnecessarily hidden behind an allegory of disease; stylization pushed away neutrality and clarity. Reading Barthes’s critique on basis of his theory of neutral writing allows for understanding that the book fails by introduction of allegories – or symbols – in writing of an author, who previously did succeed by avoiding them. There is, however, a deeper and more complicated problem with Barthes interpretation, I would like to present here in detail, reaching back to the famous confrontation of Camus, Jeanson and Sartre after the publication of *The Rebel*⁹. In his first review of the book, F. Jeanson, before attacking Camus’s ethics of revolt, interpreted *The Plague*, calling it a “transcendental chronicle”, aiming at building grounds his consequent critique of Camus as a detached idealist disengaged from genuine, historical and revolutionary action. He would also show its distinction from the style of *The Outsider*, but conversely to Barthes, only highlight its universal, or metaphysical meaning, detached from any relation to historical facts: “*The Plague* could have been titled *The Human Condition* because the real setting was not this city but the world; and the real characters were not these men and women of Oran but all of humanity, not this disease but the absolute Evil that weighs on every conscious being” (Jeanson, 2004, p. 83). In summing up the style of the book, Jeanson claimed, that there is a contradiction between distant narrative of the chronicle and historical (or factual) being: “The analogy between an epidemic narrated by

⁸ See: R. Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, London: Jonathan Cape 1967.

⁹ For detailed analyzis of the conflict, see: R. Aronson, *Camus and Sartre: The story of a friendship and the quarrel that ended it*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2004.

a pure mind and the human condition lived by a situated consciousness is illusory” (Jeanson, 2004, p. 83). The argument then, is that Camus’s second novel, far from being a book narrating the resistance struggle, is not only about something more universal, but also, the influence of this universal on any genuine, historical event is at least debatable. Barthes would later view, commonly with Jenson, the observed illusiveness of relation, between Camus’s anti-historical ethics and historical events. Notably, the conviction, that *The Plague* inadequately portrays the struggle of resistance was also raised in 1952 polemics, concerning *The Rebel*. In his famous reply to Albert Camus, Jean Paul Sartre dismissed the novel, referring to the relation between allegory and history: “By choosing injustice, the German, of his own accord, allied himself with the blind forces of nature, and in *The Plague* you were able to have his role played by microbes, without anyone appreciating the mystification” (Sartre, 2004, p. 152). *The Plague* would then be a literary proposition of perceiving the struggle against the disease as an attempt at promoting action in accordance to some universal, detached and abstract forms of justice. Sartre would then argue, that Camus tried to distance himself from history, believing in justice, which is empty of any content and without an actual meaning in relation to historical events. Any critique of contemporary Marxism from that position

In 1953 Barthes did praise Camus’s *Outsider*, as its neutral and transparent language attempted successfully to evade running too deeply into historical connotations¹⁰. The author of “Writing degree zero” would approve of such method of writing, as he believed, that the mere multiplicity of forms in contemporary literature forces the writer to choose; making the form and style of writing an ethical statement. The decision to apply limitations to form would be seen as an attempt at avoiding victimization by contemporary artistic ideology and allow for temporal artistic freedom of expression. By criticizing *The Plague*, following Sartre and Jenson’s criticisms, and by pointing out the duplicity between morality and history in the novel, Barthes seems to have suggested a break in Camus’s writing, primarily on stylistic level. By further suggesting, that this break reflects some form of anti-historical ethic, detached from desired realism, he would have not only condemned the choice of the style, but denounce the author on the sociopolitical plane. It becomes, I believe, clearer to understand now Camus’s harsh reservations, when he writes to Barthes in 1955: “It is not legitimate to reproach me or, above all, to accuse me of rejecting history – unless it is proclaimed that the only way of taking part in history is to make tyranny legitimate” (Camus, 1970, p. 340). In response to Barthes’s critique, Camus is repeating an argument from his debate with Sartre and Jenson from 1952. Camus did not believe, that by writing *The Plague* and *The Rebel* he had found himself outside of history – rather, he understood, that he is

¹⁰ We may notice here, that Barthes’s reading of *The Outsider* is thus in polar opposite to postcolonial interpretations of the novel, where the racial, ethnic and historical aspects of the story, especially concerning the anonymity of the Arab victim, are put to front, exposing deep engagement of the story with the problem of colonialism. See: C.C. O’Brien, *Camus*, Fontana 1970, p. 7–32. From such perspective, Barthes would be seen as yet another victim of mystification, in which neutrality of the language in the novel succeeds at hiding the genuine, historical problem of colonial violence.

being pushed away from history by French intellectuals, who strongly opposed to his criticisms of Marxist ideology and his notorious condemnations of the soviet enterprise. The writer perceived the described actions from *The Plague*, exactly as a literary attempt at showing development of action against any historical problem of tyranny (Stalinism being obviously one possible point of reference), not merely referring to history of French resistance. Also, the choice of showing the struggle in form of a chronicle, had stylistic reasons – understandable in my opinion – to be taken under consideration when referring to Barthes’s and Jeanson’s critique of novels’ form. The work of Rieux, the narrator, who would collect and describe the events, can be seen as stylistic element, aimed exactly at limiting the role of form in the novel; it can be seen as a way of gathering the diverse reactions of citizens of Oran, without visible preference or hierarchy of their exposition. Regardless of the success or failure of the whole enterprise, Rieux would highlight this element of his (and indirectly Camus’s) plan: “The narrator has sought to be objective. His intention has been to modify, for artistic reasons, as little as possible, except for the elementary requirements of a more or less coherent retelling” (Camus, 1991, p. 166). Peter Dunwoodie, an author of many analyzes of style in Camus’s work, would highlight this intended objectivity, describing the role of the language in *The Plague*: “Its declared aim is to shift the focus towards transparency of language (objectivité) in order to dismantle discursive hierarchies and allow the emergence of moral responses to a major existential dilemma” (Dunwoodie, 2013, p. 1–2). Such reading would pose difficult questions as to the role of style and Barthes’s critical remarks on the aesthetics of the novel. The form was applied with intention to limit the contamination of described experience of characters: exactly – we may add – what Barthes would praise in his preference of form referred to as “zero degree”.

Barthes, in his 1955 critique, did find the usage of Camus’s chronicle inadequate to the task of describing historical struggle, stating, that when referring to history, the author should “organize the progressive unveiling of facts according to their relation, exterior to the crisis itself, to substitute the idea of times the idea of structure” (Barthes, 1955, p. 4). He accused Camus of presenting solely the crisis (related to the idea of times), without explaining its origins and its structure. On the moral ground, Camus focuses on the ideas behind confrontation of Oranians against something, they do not understand, and – according to Barthes – something that can be poorly translated into historical facts. Consequently, *The Plague* is using a detached style, failing at relating to the original experience, and proposes a morality that is detached from dilemmas, caused by human engagement in conflict. In Camus’s response to these critiques, he openly admitted, that what Barthes is advocating, is actually realism in art: a perspective Camus openly rejected in his second, theoretical essay on literary theory in *The Rebel* (Camus, 2013, 1044–1054). Camus did also ask Barthes what, in his opinion, would be a more complete and sufficient morality, that would avoid the failure of distancing and alienating people, advocating for a more successful solidarity. The critique’s reply to this question is very straightforward and allows for a better understanding of Barthes coherence with Jeanson and Sartre’s arguments from 1952: “You are asking me, in what name

do I find the morality of *The Plague* insufficient. I will not make a secret; it is in the name of historical materialism" (Barthes, 2003, p. 573)¹¹.

Barthes would conclude the ethical disagreement, stating his preference is in the morality of explication, calling Camus's attitude a morality of expression. In 1955 Barthes confessed, that, for him, a plague in a book should relate to a plague, a description of resistance should relate to the history of resistance (Barthes, 2003, p. 573). When literature becomes detached from facts, using allegories and symbols, the ethic it proposes is also detached from history and reality. In effect, stylization and abstraction lead to formal morality (Barthes, 2003, p. 573), disengaged and hostile towards facts. The short reply to Camus's letter focuses on the relation between historical French resistance and an allegory of *The Plague*, avoiding any relation to Camus's developed ethical and political positions. We may, however, refer to *The Rebel*, as a theoretical work containing the foundations of Camus's stylistic reservations regarding focus on historical aspects in literature, to understand Camus's rejection of Barthes's critique. The chapter "Revolt and style" focuses on the dichotomy between reality and creation. Camus describes two stylistic movements: the first one attempts at evading realism by concentration of the pure form, the second seeks unity between creation and its foundation, resulting in literary realism. Camus concludes, that neither of these attempts can function without any connection with reality, nor could it ever be possible for a work of art to be indiscernible from material element it reflects. The novel, Camus claims, cannot be an affirmation of reality, nor a total negation. The author's ideal would situate itself between extremities, between pure form and complete realism, referred to, pointedly, as heresies¹². We may notice, that such statement makes Barthes' reservation understandable, as he openly admits the preference of realism. What is interesting in the discussion, in relation to Camus's theory is that Camus would not situate himself in an opposite position (as Barthes' final remark could be understood), for he would rather try to balance between mentioned aspects in accordance to his theory. *The Plague*, as seen from such position, regardless of evaluation of success (or failure) of the enterprise, aims at finding itself in equilibrium between realistic and formal art, using both aspects – maintaining relation with historical elements and avoiding a complete abstraction from reality. Rather than offering a vision of formal morality, it also can be effectively seen as offering a vision of morality, appearing exactly at the crossing of individual and collective, real and abstract, solitary and solidary, historical and universal. It is – we may add – very possible that this may be the reason, why it is still being read, and critically addressed nowadays.

¹¹ According to French scholar C. Coste, there is a paradox in Barthes in the bespoken period, as he tries to evaluate and condemn Camus's novel by using external (marxist) criteria, while simultaneously refusing to reduce a literary text to its direct, ideological meaning, see: C. Coste, *Roland Barthes: une certaine idée de la France et de la littérature*, Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle 2011, p. 129–131.

¹² For a deeper analyzis of Camus's theory of novel, see: J. Cruickshank, *Albert Camus and the literature of revolt*, Santa Barbara: Praeger Publishing 1978. Although, written over 60 years ago it still remains one of the best analyzes of Camus's literary achievement.

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Różnica między rzeczywistością i fikcją – Roland Barthes czyta Alberta Camusa

Abstrakt

Niniejszy esej koncentruje się na mało znanej debacie literackiej pomiędzy Rolandem Barthesem a Albertem Camusem, dotyczącej problemów interpretacyjnych związanych ze słynną powieścią Camusa, *Dżumą*. Rozpatrzenie argumentów owej debaty wymaga, jak sądzi autor, odniesienia do teorii literackich, rozwijanych paralelnie przez Barthesa i Camusa w latach 50. oraz wskazania na kontekst, jakim była słynna polemika Camusa z Francilem Jeansonem oraz Jean-Paulem Sartre'em w 1952 r. Kontekst owych sporów, jednoznacznie odwołuje się do kwestii marksizmu oraz realizmu w sztuce; pozwoli on na pełniejsze

zrozumienie kolejnych ataków na powieść Camusa, postrzeganą jako źródło antyhistorycznej etyki, prowadzącej bardziej ku samotności niż ludzkiej solidarności. Na metapoziomie omawiana debata wskazuje jednoznacznie, jak ideologicznie zorientowana teoria sztuki prowadzić może do poważnych ograniczeń możliwości interpretacyjnych.

Słowa kluczowe: Albert Camus, Roland Barthes, krytyka literacka, filozofia literatury

Key words: Albert Camus, Roland Barthes, literary theory, philosophy of literature

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