

Letter to Roland Barthes on The Plague, Albert Camus

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Paris, January 11, 1955

My dear Barthes, However attractive it may appear, I find it difficult to share your point of view on The Plague. Of course, all comments are justifiable, within an honest critical appraisal, and it is both possible and significant to venture as far as you do. But it seems to me that every work contains a number of obvious factors to which the author is justified in calling attention if only to indicate the limits within which the commentary ought to go.

To say, for example, that The Plague lays the foundation for an antihistorical ethic and an attitude of political solitude, involves, in my view, exposing oneself to a number of contradictions, and, above all, involves going beyond a certain number of obvious facts which I shall briefly summarize here:

1. The Plague, which I wanted to be read on a number of levels, nevertheless has as its obvious content the struggle of the European resistance movements against Nazism. The proof of this is that although the specific enemy is nowhere named, everyone in every European country recognized it. Let me add that a long extract from The Plague appeared during the Occupation, in a collection of underground texts, and that this fact alone would justify the transposition I made. In a sense, The Plague is more than a chronicle of the Resistance. But certainly it is nothing less.

2. 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.

3. The theme of separation, whose importance in the book you bring out very well, throws a good deal of light on this point. Rambert, who embodies this theme, does in fact give up private life in order to take his place in the common struggle. Parenthetically, this character alone shows how misleading it is to contrast the friend and the militant. For the one virtue common to them both is active fraternity, which no history, in the last resort, has ever done without.

4. The Plague ends, moreover, with the promise and acceptance of struggles yet to come. It is a testimony of "all that had had to be done, and that [men] would doubtless have to do again against terror and its tireless weapons, whatever their personal anguish ..." I could develop my point of view further. But even if I already find it possible to consider the ethic at work in The Plague inadequate (and it must then be stated what more complete morality it is being compared with), and legitimate to criticize its aesthetic (many of your remarks are clarified by the very simple fact that I do not believe in realism in art), I find it, on the contrary, very difficult to agree with you when you say in your conclusion that its author rejects the solidarity of our history-in-the-making. Difficult and, permit me to say in all friendship, a little disappointing.

In any case, the question you ask: "What would the fighters against the plague do confronted with the all-too-human face of the scourge," is unjust in this respect: it ought to have been asked in the past tense, and then it would have received the answer, a positive one. 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. 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 reproached with, the fact that *The Plague* can apply to any resistance against any tyranny. But 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.

This is not what you do, I know; as far as I am concerned, I am perverse enough to believe that if we resigned our-selves to such an idea we should be accepting human solitude. Far from feeling installed in a career of solitude, I have, on the contrary, the feeling that I am living by and for a community that nothing in history has so far been able to touch.

Here, too briefly expressed, is what I wanted to tell you. I would merely like to assure you in conclusion that this friendly discussion in no way alters the high opinion I have of your talent or of you as a person.

Albert Camus

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1 In an article in the review *Club*, Roland Barthes had argued that *The Plague* was an inadequate transposition of the problems of the Resistance movement because Camus had replaced a struggle against men by a struggle against the impersonal microbes of plague. This is a fairly common criticism of *The Plague*, and it could be argued that Camus also neglected an important aspect of the Resistance movement when he made no reference to the moral problem created by the German habit of executing innocent hostages. The Resistance fighter risked having on his conscience the death of fifteen or twenty people executed as a direct result of his act of sabotage. —P.T.

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