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Albert Camus : an Existentialist with a Sense of the Absolute

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Albert Camus: an existentialist writer with a sense of the Absolute



A lecturer in French explores the sense of the Absolute to be found in Camus' writings. 'It can be seen in many of his descriptions of nature and in the quest for authenticity that marked his journey through life.'

EAMON MAHER

Camus is generally regarded as one of the brightest stars in twentieth century French letters. He became unpopular in his own time among his erstwhile Communist allies for his outspoken comments on totalitarian regimes, but people are now beginning to see how courageous a stand he took in denouncing what he saw as the excesses of Soviet expansionism. His existentialist contemporary, Sartre, did not engage in the politics of Stalin-denunciation because he would lose many of his supporters. Bryan Appleyard, in a thoughtful article on Camus entitled 'The lone voice of sanity' (*Sunday Times*, October 1997), noted wistfully that it was Sartre who came to dominate French intellectual life in the 40s and 50s, while Camus was ostracised. After structuralism came post-structuralism and deconstruction, ideologies that changed the whole face of literary appreciation and criticism in France and elsewhere. Form became everything: 'isms' held sway in a remarkable fashion. Mr Appleyard analyses the fruits of this:

Hypnotised by these complex, radical and frequently incomprehensible systems, students and teachers turned against the humane, moral impulses of the Enlightenment, adopting instead a hermetic, anti-humanist and pseudo-scientific language that dismissed the pursuit of meaning and purpose as bourgeois constructs.

From my studies of French literature, I must say that I never warmed to structuralism or post-structuralism, which I saw as deliberately obtuse and precious systems. Hence, I agree with the views expressed above. Despite being cast aside during his own lifetime by Sartre *et al*, Camus still remained steadfastly true to his belief in the dignity of the

human spirit. History has a way of demonstrating and proving the validity of certain stances and opinions. Camus' biographer, Olivier Todd, notes:

Camus was opposed to 'revolutionary imperialism' and to Nazi or Fascist imperialism. Few other leftists dared to write as Camus did in 1939 that 'today the USSR can be classed among the countries that prey on others'.¹

This was a brave pronouncement indeed at a time when over thirty per cent of the French electorate supported the Communist party. Moral courage is a trait I associate with Camus. The reader is probably now wondering what the thrust of this article is. I have long held Camus to be a spiritual writer, a fact that is not always acknowledged by those who place him in the existentialist school which is synonymous with atheism. Existentialism aspired to freedom and self-realisation and attempted to define morality in terms of the free, individual action rather than in terms of religion or society. The main feelings existentialist thought encourage, however, are those of absurdity and despair and a belief that man alone is responsible for formulating his moral code. When one considers the prevalence of this philosophy in post-war France, riddled with guilt about the collaboration of the Vichy government with the Nazis and realising the full extent of the horror of the concentration camps, it is logical that such a pessimistic and dark world-view should dominate. Camus, however, never quite buys into this black outlook.

Born in Algeria, a country generously bathed in a bright and unrelenting North African sun, he was imbued with a zest for life and a desire to live the present moment to the full. Sport was his great love, especially soccer, and he enjoyed the camaraderie which vigorous

physical activity engenders It was perhaps his move to France in the lead up to the Second World War that led to Camus' feeling of being an exile, driven out of his paradise by forces that were beyond his control. He was active in the French Resistance and had obvious socialist leanings. These did not, however, blind him to the abuses that were hidden behind many ideologies. He even went so far as to claim, in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize for literature in 1957, that the FLN in his native Algeria had gone too far. Olivier Todd quotes this significant comment from that speech:

I have always condemned terrorism, and I must condemn a terrorism that works blindly in the streets of Algiers and one day may strike at my mother and family. I believe in justice, but I will defend my mother before justice.²

Camus had a scrupulous honesty and an integrity that was lacking in the politician Sartre. His sense of the Absolute was also very pronounced. It can be seen in many of his descriptions of nature and in the quest for authenticity that marked his journey through life. He realised that it was only by stripping away the unessential that man could live in a fulfilled manner. He was irreligious, if one understands by religion the sense of the divine, or the dogmas and myths that frequently surround the term. However, as Jean Onimus correctly notes:

But there is in him the trace of a scar, even an open wound, precisely that which occurs in every lucid consciousness in the wake of 'the death of God'. The 'heart of the problem' in Camus is 'religious' if one refers by this term to what is at the origin of religions: existential anguish, the sense of guilt, the horror of death, the atrocious experience of the Absurd.³

This assessment goes to the core of the problem in Camus. Many of the feelings of anguish, void and despair are not confined to atheists and in fact characterise the spiritual itinerary of some of the great Christian mystics like Meister Eckhart and John of the Cross. Camus' quest for the truth and his struggle with the apparent meaninglessness of life after the death of God, show him to be a spiritual writer. He is read with equal profit by believers and non-believers — nowadays, these distinctions are largely redundant in any case. The increasing popularity of Camus since his death, in France and the Western world generally, can be attributed to a large extent, in my view, to the failure of organised religion to satisfy the spiritual search that many people are now engaged in and which is no longer concerned exclusively with dogmas and rituals. Value systems are breaking down everywhere; there are no longer any certainties, other

than the primacy of material possessions. The individual is being lost sight of in the collectivity; those who are unable or unwilling to keep up with the frenetic pace of life are left to fend for themselves. Camus does not shy away from the reality of the individual having to live in a merciless void but he is not prepared to deny the possibility of some degree of happiness. He even advances the thesis that Sisyphus' aimless pushing of a rock up a hill, only to see it rolling back down the slope, brings its own happiness:

He (Sisyphus) judges that all is well. This universe where from now on he will have no master, appears to him to be neither sterile nor futile. Each of the grains that composes this rock, each mineral gleam from this mountain steeped in darkness, in themselves form a world. The struggle towards the summit is sufficient to fill a man's heart: we should imagine the possibility of Sisyphus being happy.⁴

This is sublime thinking. To illustrate Camus' sense of the Absolute, we will now turn to a brief analysis of two of his most famous works, *The Outsider* (1942) and *The Plague* (1947). Although these two novels are at first glance extremely dark and depressing, there are nonetheless signs in each of a definite search for the Absolute.



Albert Camus

The Outsider

The Outsider is significant on many counts, not least being the comment made by Camus in the Preface to the novel that his hero, Meursault, a man who murders an Arab under a blinding North African sun, is the only Christ that modern society deserves. Camus obviously says this in a slightly ironical manner, because Meursault is very far removed from the figure of Christ. The criticism is directed not so much at Christ as at contemporary society which stubbornly tries to hide its nastier side and which chooses instead to live by appearances. Unlike the vast majority of men and women, Camus' hero is unable to lie. When, during his trial, he is asked if he regrets what happened on the beach where he shot the Arab, his response is totally unexpected:

After thinking a bit, I said that what I felt was less regret than a kind of vexation — I couldn't find a better word for it.⁵

Civilised society is not used to such brutal honesty. Meursault is a kind of anti-hero with whom the reader cannot completely identify. He remains detached from the majority of us because of his strange attitude to life, his lack of concern for social conventions, his tendency to speak his mind when silence or untruths would better serve his cause. We see him apparently unmoved at his mother's funeral at the beginning of the novel. He is not even sure exactly when she died. When he goes to the home in which she was staying, he shows no discernible sorrow. In fact, while following the funeral cortege to her last resting place, he observes: 'I caught myself thinking what an agreeable walk I might have had, if it hadn't been for Mother' (*The Outsider*, p.21).

Comments such as these are sprinkled through the book and are given added impact by the first person narration. The reader begins to sense that the protagonist is totally insensitive to the events happening around him. All he wants is for the ceremony to be concluded as quickly as possible so that he can get back to the city. The following day is a Sunday and Meursault goes for a swim, and meets Marie, with whom he had once worked and who accompanies him to a comic film that evening. They spend the night together. Much will be made of this fact at Meursault's trial. The jury will be asked how any normal person could go to a film by Fernandel the day after burying his mother. If that was not bad enough, Meursault then had carnal knowledge with a woman whom he scarcely knew. He is portrayed as being some sort of monster. In his Preface to the novel, Camus made this defence of his hero:

I simply wished to state that the hero of this book is condemned because he won't play the game. In this sense he is an outsider in the eyes of the society in which he lives. He wanders about, always on the margins, because of a private life that is both solitary and sensual, alien to the people who live at the centre.

A breed apart

The Meursaults of this world make others feel uncomfortable because they openly flout convention and live instinctively. They are a breed apart, exiles in a world where appearances dominate at the expense of authenticity. Meursault resembles his creator in his approach to life. He has no formal religious beliefs, but is moved when he contemplates the sea or beholds a beautiful woman. His primitive, hedonistic approach to life, his desire to be left alone to follow his instinct, run contrary to what is expected from people in civilised, sophisticated society. This is what condemns him before he ever pulls the trigger of a gun.

The structure of the book is thus significant. The details of the first half of the novel are evoked again during the trial as a means of convicting Meursault of murder. His lack of emotion at his mother's funeral is presented as revealing the ruthless side of a nature that will subsequently think nothing of killing a man in cold blood. The reader knows, however, that there was nothing premeditated in this murder. Camus describes for us the fierceness of the sun beating down on Meursault, his languid movements as he wanders towards the rock behind which is situated the spring. He is like someone walking in his sleep:

The small black lump of rock came into view far down the beach. It was rimmed by a dazzling sheen of light and feathery spray, but I was thinking of the cold, clear stream behind it, and longing to hear again the tinkle of running water (*The Outsider*, p.62).

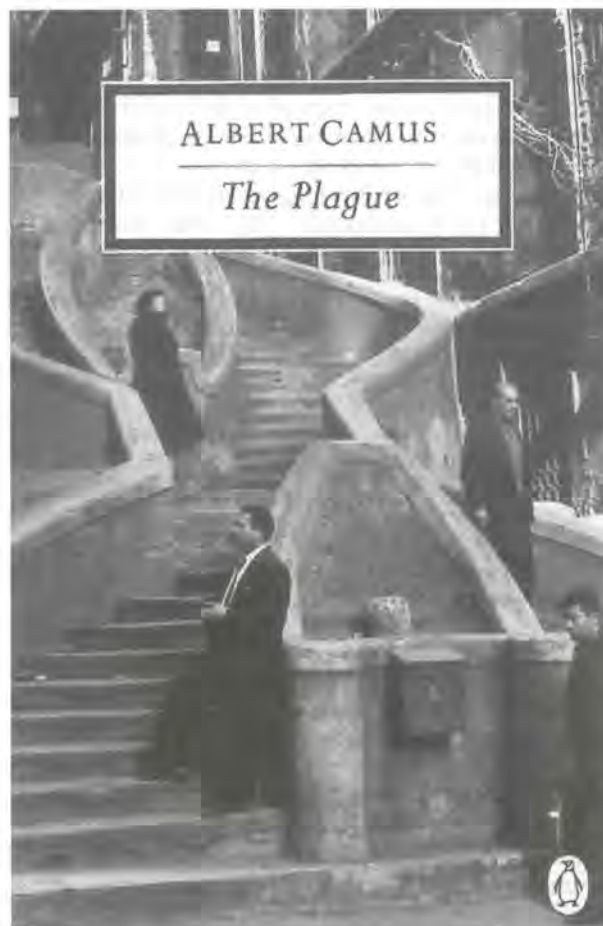
Meursault did not know that he would find here the Arab with whom his friend, Raymond, had had a violent row earlier in the day. The Arab stands up and in the same movement takes out a knife which gleams in the sunlight. Meursault's head is spinning; he feels the revolver in his pocket that he had earlier taken from Raymond, and he shoots. The Arab falls to the ground and is shot four more times. We read: 'And each successive shot was another loud, fateful rap on the door of my undoing' (p.64). 'Why', Meursault will be asked, 'did you shoot the Arab four times when he was lying defenceless on the bench?' Like Christ, Meursault is silent in the face of these accusations. In point of fact, he cannot reply to the questions he is asked, because he does not know exactly why he did what he did.

Camus hints, at different points in the book, that if his hero had reacted differently, had he broken down and wept, for example, when the magistrate tried to convert him by dramatically drawing his attention to the figure of the crucified Christ, had he expressed genuine loss at the death of his mother or shown remorse for his crime, he would not have been condemned to death. But Meursault is not a communicative type of man — words condemn him as surely as silence. The magistrate cannot believe the prisoner's spiritual apathy. Even the most hardened criminals he had come across broke down when he brandished the crucifix at them. Similarly, the prison chaplain, who visits him before his execution, seeks to bring about a spiritual reconciliation in the condemned prisoner. This provokes the first obvious emotion in the hero, who ejects the priest from his cell telling him he does not need the ministry of someone who is not even a proper man. After the outburst comes some sort of catharsis, an acceptance of his fate. He thinks of his mother in a way that is far from indicating that he was indifferent to her:

With death so near, mother must have felt like someone on the brink of freedom, ready to start life all over again. And I, too, felt ready to start life all over again. It was as if that great rush of anger had washed me clean, emptied me of hope, and, gazing up at the dark sky spangled with its signs and stars, for the first time, the first, I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe (p.120).

The fact that Meursault makes reference to his mother at a time when he, like her, has to face the ultimate test, that of dying, shows that his relationship with her was not nearly as devoid of feeling as had been portrayed during the trial. Now that he is about to die, he remembers the things in life that gave him pleasure; the smell of Marie's hair or the pretty dresses she wore, the noises of the street, the sun setting on the sea. He knows he is not an ogre, just a misdirected and unfortunate victim of circumstance. He does not have access to the comfort that belief in an afterlife brings to some Christians, but he does evoke the admiration of the reader for his stoicism. After all, in many ways he merely pays the price of his honesty. And he does realise a kind of liberation at the end of his journey.

What lies ahead of him is uncertain. We know that he hopes 'that on the day of my execution, there should be a huge crowd of spectators and that they should greet me with howls of execration' (p.120), which is not a particularly optimistic note on which to end the novel. What we should remember, however, is that the person who is referred to as 'Mr Antichrist' by



the magistrate is seen in a more positive light than those who sit in judgement of him. In spite of his seeming indifference to many events that happen close to him, he is more worthy of our respect than his prosecutors are. Camus reveals through his hero, or anti-hero, his ambivalent feelings towards conventional living and accepted behaviour. Often what is seen as justice is injustice: there is no clear line between good and evil. There is neither too much hope nor too much despair in *The Outsider*, just a pitiless seeking out of the truth hidden behind social and religious posturing.

The Plague

The Plague contains more references to religion than *The Outsider*. The disease that grips the inhabitants of Oran is a metaphor for the *ennui* that lay at the heart of post-war France. The setting is once more North Africa and the general mood is definitely gloomy. The third person narrator, who is, we discover at the end of the book, Dr Rieux, the main protagonist and the person to the forefront in the struggle against the

plague, notes that the first thing the plague brought to the town was exile: 'that sensation of a void within which never left us, that irrational longing to hark back to the past or else to speed us the march of time'.⁶ There is an obvious sense in which the disease, which devastates the population of the town, might be construed as a punishment that is being visited on the population for its sinfulness. This is the point that is frequently made by the Jesuit priest, Fr Paneloux:

The first time this scourge appears in history, it was wielded to strike down the enemies of God. Pharaoh set himself up against the divine will, and the plague beat him to his knees. Thus from the dawn of recorded history the scourge of God has humbled the proud of heart and laid low those who hardened themselves against Him. Ponder this well, my friends, and fall on your knees (*The Plague*, p.80).

Increased religiosity often accompanies apocalyptic happenings, as people are faced with the unpalatable reality of their own mortality. Fr Paneloux's sermons are thus received with some trepidation by the oppressed inhabitants who listen to him. However, the eloquent priest fails to make a deep impression on Rieux. Although both are engaged in the fight to save the people from the plague, their interpretation of its origins is quite different. The doctor, a man of science, seeks out the medical causes even though he accepts that strong religious belief might aid in the fight against death. He is not frightened into becoming a believer, however; nor is he dismissive of religion per se. He sees that the plague helps men to rise above themselves, but this momentary heroism does little to obviate its horrific side effects. His main problem with religion is in coming to terms with how a merciful and omnipotent God can allow the suffering and death of innocent children. Paneloux and Rieux witness one such child in the throes of death:

Paneloux gazed down at the small mouth, fouled with the sores of the plague and pouring out the angry death-cry that has sounded through the ages of mankind. He sank to his knees, and all present found it natural to hear him say in a voice hoarse but clearly audible across that nameless, never-ending wail: 'My God, spare this child ...' (p.176).

The prayer goes unanswered and when questioned by Rieux about the problems such a death might cause for a believer, the priest replies: 'That sort of thing is disgusting because it passes our human understanding. But perhaps we should love what we cannot understand' (p.178). In a subsequent sermon he states that while people might be able to justify that a libertine be struck down, very few could find any

reason for a child's suffering. Camus' highlighting of such fundamental spiritual issues shows him to have been a man who was embarked on a quest which involved much searching for answers to questions that were unanswerable. Loving 'what we cannot understand' is perhaps the essence of faith. Paneloux himself undergoes something of a crisis when he is struck down by the plague. We are not privy to his last thoughts but there is no doubt that he is much disillusioned by his spiritual travails. Rieux engages in many conversations of a metaphysical nature with people like Paneloux and Tarrou, the latter of whom wishes to become a saint. When it is pointed out to him that he doesn't believe in God, he states: 'Exactly. Can one be a saint without God? — that's the problem, in fact the only problem, I'm up against today' (p.208). I have the impression that this was a dilemma that preoccupied Camus also. His strong sense of the Absolute was at variance with his experience of organised religion with its belief in a God who remains silent while children die.⁷ Rieux sees many of his friends die and is helpless to save them. When the plague finally abates, however, his assessment is far from pessimistic. He states that he decided to compile his chronicle:

(...) so that he should not be one of those who hold their peace but should bear witness in favour of those plague-stricken people; so that some memorial of the injustice and outrage done them might endure; and to state quite simply what we learn in a time of pestilence; that there are more things to admire in men than to despise (p.251).

This confidence in the inherent goodness of man distinguishes Camus from the majority of his existentialist contemporaries and gives a pronounced spiritual dimension to his writings. He sees most philosophies as being little more than religion in a different costume. He recognises that existentialism tends to glorify what crushes man, in that it uses reason to present an absurd and pessimistic view of existence. Camus prefers experience to reason and, while he is nowhere near as clever a philosopher as Sartre, he at least attempts to make sense of a world that has lost God and every other source of spiritual meaning. As Brian Appleyard points out:

Camus' less spectacular wisdom was to see that, after God, it was not Mao or intellectual subtlety we needed but a simple, objective assertion of human goodness (*Sunday Times*, 12 October, 1997).

I am not claiming any startling new insights into Camus' philosophy of life. Many readers before me have noticed the sense of the Absolute, of the sacred,

in his writings. His ability to see beyond darkness to the light at the other end of the tunnel, his restless soul that is aware of its exile and in search of reasons to go on living, these elements mark him out as an extremely valuable spiritual witness in a period in France marked by despair. He may never have embraced the formal rituals of religious practice, but his revolt against the suffering of little children marks him out as a man of compassion and courage, a writer who almost unconsciously evokes the Absolute. He is not impressed with grandiose words but rather with authentic witness. I conclude with the words of Rieux, who echoes the views of Camus:

But, you know, I feel more fellowship with the defeated than with saints. Heroism and sanctity don't really appeal to me, I imagine. What interests me is — being a man (*The Plague*, p.209).

It is no small task being a man in a society racked with doubt and uncertainty, anguish and suffering.

Rieux managed it through displaying much courage and endurance as well as a confidence in humanity that is the hallmark of his creator. Camus is ruthless in his search for the meaning of human life and courageous to the point of heroism in his expressions of the vision of the ugliness and beauty of twentieth century living as he experienced it.

Notes

1. O. Todd, *Albert Camus: a Life*, Translated by Benjamin Ivry, London: Chatto & Windus, 1997, p.90.2. Ibid., p.378.
3. J. Onimus, *Albert Camus and Christianity*, translated by Emmet Parker, Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1970.
4. *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, Paris: Gallimard/Idées, 1942, p.166. (The translation from the French is my own).
5. *The Outsider*, Translated by Stuart Gilbert, Penguin Books, 1963, p.74. All my references will be to this edition.
6. *The Plague*, Translated by Stuart Gilbert, Penguin Books, 1960, p.60.
7. In the autobiographical account of his childhood and early adulthood, Camus notes how he never received any formal religious instruction at home.

Eamon Maher lectures at the Institute of Technology, Tallaght, Dublin.

His book of essays, Crosscurrents and Confluence: Religious echoes in some 20th-century French and Irish Fiction, (Veritas), will be published later this year.



Photo: Imperial War Museum

Welcome Home Hector
(See p.240).