Albert Camus at 100: A Mediterranean Son of France

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A Mediterranean Son of France

EAMON MAHER

THIS YEAR marks the centenary of the birth of one of the world’s finest writers, the French-Algerian Albert Camus (1913-1960). When his father, a *pied-noir* farm labourer died fighting in the French army during the First World War, Camus’ mother, Catherine, was forced to work as a cleaner to provide for her two sons. The younger one, Albert, demonstrated academic talent from an early age and managed to continue in education due to the interest taken in him by two inspirational teachers, Louis Germain and the well-known philosopher, Jean Grenier. He was also awarded scholarships, without which he could not have stayed in school or gone to university. While he suffered much hardship when growing up in Algiers, Camus always retained a love for his country of birth, particularly the revivifying waters of the Mediterranean, the sun-filled streets, port and beaches of Algiers which are all wistfully evoked in his writing. In fact, any proper analysis of his work cannot fail to take account of the significant role played by the writer’s Algerian background.

Camus was both French and Algerian, a mixture that gave him a

1. Pied-noirs was the name given to white colonists who settled in Algeria and jealously guarded their French identity. The term itself is variously ascribed – to the black boots worn by supporting French troops, to the stained feet of French sailors who worked barefoot in the coal bunkers of steam ships, and to feet coloured by trampling grapes. Before the outbreak of the Algerian War (1954-1962), their number was estimated to be in the region of 1.2 million as compared to 8 million Algerian Muslims, quite a sizeable proportion of the population. The majority of the pied-noirs, like Camus’ own family, were far from wealthy, but they remained extremely attached to Algeria and fought to retain a foothold there.

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dual perspective on existence. Patrick McCarthy notes how popular literature presented the pied-noirs as a people living simultaneously in two worlds: ‘Half-European and half-African, they are a frontier people; they are pagans as well as unintellectual barbarians; the men are virile and the women sexy; they live through their bodies and are devoted to sport; temperamentally they oscillate between indolence and frenzied emotion.’ Camus would not accept this stereotype, but some of his characters do conform to it, as we shall see later in this article.

Camus was a pied-noir for Camus, as we have seen, meant coming to terms with poverty from an early age. Unlike Sartre, with whom he is inevitably associated, Camus did not need to read Marx to understand the plight of the poor. Yet, in spite of the hardship and vulnerability of his childhood – a bout of tuberculosis almost put an end to his life at a young age – Camus remained true to his Mediterranean upbringing in terms of the opinions he would develop about the human condition: he tended to value experience above intellectual theorising and he trusted his instinct when it came to assessing dilemmas such as the inevitability of death and the suffering of innocent children.

ALGERIA IS HOME

In this article, I will briefly discuss the importance of the Mediterranean in the life and work of Camus by concentrating mainly on two of his best-known novels, *The Outsider* and *The Plague*, along with the unfinished autobiographical novel, *The First Man*, the manuscript of which he was carrying in his briefcase when he died in a tragic car accident in the south of France along with a member of the famous publishing Gallimard family. In his pocket was an unused train ticket, a sign of the fickleness of fate. His final novel supplies invaluable insights into the debt Camus owed to his Algerian roots. The following lines capture the excitement engendered in the main character Jacques Cormery at the thought of a visit home:

Jacques was half-asleep, and he was filled with a kind of happy anxiety at the prospect of returning to Algiers and the small poor home in the old neighbourhood. So it was every time he left Paris for Africa, his heart swelling with a secret exultation, with the satisfaction of one who has made good his escape and is laughing at the thought of the look on the guards’ faces.

The language used conveys the protagonist’s joy as the boat transports him from one world to another. Algeria is home; Algeria is the sun-filled beaches, the bronzed women who are at comfortable in their bodies; it is the sights, sounds and smells of childhood. Most importantly for Jacques, Algeria is home to his mother, a woman who is steadfast in her love of him and his brother, a love, because she is almost illiterate, that cannot be conveyed through language, but is transmitted in her facial expression on seeing her son enter the room. Through all her trials and tribulations, her resilience never wavers:

... hard days of working in the service of others, washing floors on her knees, living without a man and without solace in the midst of the greasy leavings and dirty linen of other people’s lives, the long days of labour adding up one by one to a life that, by dint of being deprived of hope, had become also a life without any sort of resentment, unaware, persevering, a life resigned to all kinds of suffering, her own as well as that of others (*First Man*, p.46).

The figure of the long-suffering, uncomplaining mother inspired many of Camus’ philosophical views. It is most obvious in *The Myth of Sisyphus* when the reader is asked to imagine the mythical figure sentenced by the Gods to eternally push a rock up to the top of the hill only for it to roll back down again, being happy. (Sisyphus’ plight is at the heart of Camus’ theory of absurdism).

THE FIRST MAN

The opening pages of *The First Man* see Jacques visiting the military graveyard of Saint-Brieuc at his mother’s behest. Standing in front of his father’s grave has the effect of making him ponder the fact that, at 40, he is considerably older now than his father was when he was

4. Camus himself made the same trip to Saint-Brieuc and it left a lasting impression on him.
killed aged 29. The loss of the father at such a young age became a key factor in Jacques’ development:

Yet the secret he had eagerly sought to learn through books and people now seemed to him to be intimately linked with this dead man, this younger father, with what he had been and what he had become, and it seemed that he himself had gone far afield in search of what was close to him in time and in blood (First Man, p. 21).

In some ways, Camus’ artistic quest was an attempt to get to know the stranger that was lying in this soldier’s grave. His father’s premature death helps to explain Camus’ close identification with outsiders and misfits, those living on the margins of society. Because the father died fighting for France, Jacques Cormery inevitably associated that country with death and sadness. The First Man is therefore a paean to the stoical mother and to the beautiful country in which she lives. It is a somewhat romanticised vision that is viewed through the lens of the exile. The earlier fiction, to which we will now turn our attention, contains some of the same enthralling descriptions of Algeria, which is presented as a type of Mediterranean paradise compared to cold, miserable Paris. The following passage relating a hunting trip that Jacques does with his uncle Étienne captures the splendour of the Algerian landscape:

The countryside was changing, becoming more rocky, the orange trees gave way to oaks, and the little train chugged harder and harder and gave off great blasts of steam. Suddenly it was colder, for the mountain had come between the sun and the travellers, and then they realized it was only seven o’clock. At last the train gave a final whistle, reduced its speed, slowly rounded a tight curve, and arrived at a small station that was alone in the valley, deserted and silent, for it only served some distant mines; it was planted with big eucalyptuses whose sickle-shaped leaves shivered in the morning breeze (First Man, p. 85)

THE OUTSIDER

It is easy to see how one could fall in love with such an Edenic scene. It may explain why Meursault, the hero or anti-hero of The Outsider, when approached by his boss with the proposition of heading up an office in the French metropolis, politely refuses, associating Paris with grey skies and white-skinned inhabitants. He is far too attached to Algeria to countenance such a gloomy vista. Meursault is, in fact, a neopagan child of nature, a man who lives for and through the pleasures of the body. The feel of the sun on his back, the joy of swimming in the glittering water of the Mediterranean, the smell of his girlfriend Marie’s hair, the pleasure of making love to her or admiring the pretty dresses she wears – these are the things that he misses most after his incarceration for killing an Arab.

The day of the murder had begun happily. Marie and Meursault accompanied an acquaintance, Raymond, to the beach house of Masson, with whom Raymond was friendly. On alighting from the bus, the scene before their eyes is stunning:

The beach isn’t far from the bus stop. But we had to cross a small plateau which overlooks the sea and then shelves down steeply to the beach. It was covered with yellowish rocks and brilliant white asphodels standing out against what was already a hard blue sky. 5

In spite of the exotic beauty of the maritime paradise, there is menace also in the reference to ‘a hard blue sky’. Meursault will end up being a victim of the wild forces of nature. The group went swimming before having an early bite to eat. Afterwards, the men decide to walk on the beach. Already the heat was oppressive: ‘The sun was shining almost vertically onto the sand and the glare from the sea was unbearable’ (p. 54).

This hell-like atmosphere will persist for the next few fateful hours. Raymond has an altercation with the Arab brother of his former mistress, and Meursault, rather than taking shelter from the sun in Masson’s beach house to which they return with the wounded Raymond, finds himself once more out in the sweltering heat. ‘The sand was so hot that it seemed to have turned red’ (p. 55), we are told, adding to the hell-like atmosphere. Comments like the following: ‘There was still the same dazzling red glare’ (p. 58); ‘The heat was pushing against

me as I tried to walk. Every time I felt the blast of its hot breath on my face, I set my teeth...’ (p. 58), show the degree to which Meursault is in a dazed state when he arrives at the spot where an Arab, whom he recognises as the companion of Raymond’s assailant, is lying in the shade beside a spring. He knows he should withdraw, ‘But the whole beach was reverberating in the sun and pressing me from behind’ (p. 59), which causes him to edge forward as though in a trance: ‘My eyes were blinded by this veil of salty tears’ (p. 60). Shortly afterwards he will have committed the crime that results in his being found guilty of murder and sentenced to death.

When asked during his trial why he shot the Arab in cold blood, all Meursault can think of by way of explanation is that it was because of the sun. In a sense, he is telling the truth: the sun is an active agent in Meursault’s crime. It forces him forward when he would prefer to retreat; it flashes on the Arab’s knife, making it resemble ‘a red-hot blade gnawing at my eyelashes and gauging out my stinging eyes’ (p. 60). So we can see the North Africa is not always presented as an idyllic country by Camus. At times it can be harsh and unforgiving; it can push people to do things they would normally never even contemplate. Meursault’s failure to show remorse at his mother’s funeral or during an interview about his crime, allows the prosecuting magistrate to portray him as an unfeeling monster.

The truth of the matter is that his inability to lie about his feelings makes everybody feel decidedly uncomfortable. Had he been prepared to play the role that is expected of him, it is highly unlikely that Meursault would have received the death sentence. After all, this was a French court and the crime had been perpetrated on an Arab. A man who doesn’t cry at his mother’s funeral, who goes to a comic film the day after her burial, who then sleeps with a woman he met at the beach, these actions, it is claimed, are those of a person with a criminal soul. His indifference to his plight, his insistence to the ‘juge d’instruction’, who makes him gaze at the crucifix and express contrition, that he does not believe in God or an afterlife, places him outside the circle and seals his fate. Exasperated by Meursault’s unswerving lack of faith, the juge d’instruction asks: ‘Do you want my life to be meaningless?’ (p. 68)

Meursault is stoical in the face of his imminent death; he realises that we all have to die at some stage, so what difference does it make if this event happens when one is thirty or seventy years of age?

The prison chaplain is another who refuses to accept that he does not believe in God. Pointing at the bricks in the walls of his cell, he proclaims in an excited tone: ‘But deep in my heart I know that even the most wretched among you [prisoners] have looked at them and seen a divine face emerging from the darkness. It is that face that you are being asked to see’ (p. 113). Meursault does not see any face there, unless it is that of Marie, the real object of his desire.

It is evident that those professing a belief in God most stridently in the novel seem to be looking for their own reassurance in their dealings with the prisoner. Meursault snaps when the priest tells him that he will pray for him: ‘He seemed so certain of everything, didn’t he? And yet none of his certainties was worth one hair of a woman’s head. He couldn’t even be sure he was alive because he was living like a dead man’ (p. 115). Then comes the final outburst, which helps him to achieve a type of catharsis:

I might seem to be empty-handed. But I was sure of myself, sure of everything, surer than he was, sure of my life and sure of the death that was coming to me. Yes, that was all I had. But at least it was a truth which I had hold of just as it had hold of me (p. 115).

After the chaplain leaves in some distress, Meursault regains his calm and falls asleep. He awakens to stars shining in his face and sounds of the countryside wafting into his cell. We read: ‘The night air was cooling my temples with the smell of earth and salt. The wondrous peace of this sleeping summer flooded into me’ (p. 116). His epiphany is complete and he can now contemplate death with equanimity. Note how the external world, formerly hostile and threatening to him, has assumed a serene, benign aspect, as though in an effort to atone for what happened on the beach.

In his recent biography of Camus, Michel Onfray muses on the ending of The Outsider. He asks the question: How does one live in the knowledge that death is inevitable? Answer: By desiring that which desires us. He concludes:

During this Algerian period of his existence, Camus asks the Medi-
tremendous for a resolution to his existential dilemma. Question: What saves us from death? Answer: An unequivocal ‘Yes’ to life.⁶

₀ The Outsider is an important step in Camus’ philosophical evolution. It appears to argue that people’s behaviour cannot be explained by logical reasoning, that humans can never control their fate, merely their reaction to it. In Algeria, life is lived intensely and the country shapes its inhabitants in ways they do not comprehend. This is certainly the case with Meursault, who embodies many traits of the pied-noir population in terms of his alienation from both metropolitan France and native Algeria.

₀ THE PLAGUE

₀ A brief discussion of The Plague will demonstrate once more how easy it is to lose one’s moral compass. The inhabitants of the African coastal town of Oran, concerned primarily with making money and indulging their hedonistic lifestyles, are shocked at the sight of thousands of rats emerging from the underground lairs to die in a gruesome manner on streets, public pavements and around residential areas. When the pestilence spreads to people, panic takes hold and churches, long since abandoned by the majority of the inhabitants during the good times, are once more full for the religious ceremonies organised to pray for an end to the malady. From the opening page, we learn that Oran is an ‘ugly’ city without a discernible soul: ‘How can one convey, for example, the idea of a town without pigeons, without trees or gardens, where you hear no beating of wings or rustling of leaves, in short, a neutral place?’⁷

₀ The people reflect their surroundings: ‘They are especially interested in trade and first of all, as they say, they are engaged in doing business’ (pp. 5-6). Money allows them to indulge other pleasures: ‘Naturally, they also enjoy simple pleasures: they love women, the cinema and sea bathing’ (p. 6). Nothing wrong with that, you might argue, but such a life view hardly forms the basis for real happiness.

₀ ⁷ Albert Camus, The Plague. Translated by Robin Buss (London: Penguin Books, 2001), p. 5. As for other books, subsequent references will be to this edition, with page numbers provided in brackets.

₀ The attitude to death is most revealing. Oran is a place where it is difficult to die:

₀ A sick person is very lonely here. So just think of one who is about to die, trapped behind hundreds of walls sizzling with heat, while at the same time there are all those people, on the telephone or in cafés, talking of drafts, of bills of lading and of discounts. You will understand what could be disagreeable about death, even a modern one, when it happens in such a dry place (pp. 6-7).

₀ When the threat of death takes hold of the citizens, when they see their friends and families dying in agony, a radical reappraisal proves necessary. Unsurprisingly, given the prevalence of plagues and pestilence in the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament, religion regains its hold on people. The Jesuit priest, Paneloux, addresses a packed church with the words: ‘My brethren, a calamity has befallen you; my brethren, you have deserved it’ (p. 73). Paneloux looks on the plague as a punishment sent by God to a population who have turned their backs on religion. Rather than viewing it in negative terms, however, the priest urges his congregation to consider its positive side: ‘This very scourge that assails you, raises you up and shows you the way’ (p. 76).

₀ Times of crisis can be times of opportunity. Paneloux relishes the prospect of bringing the inhabitants of Oran back into the loving embrace of God. The priest and Doctor Rieux, an indefatigable servant to his medical calling, assume different stances in their attempts to bring healing to a city in the throes of doubt and insecurity. As a man of science, Rieux relies on medicine and reason to supply the all-important antidote to the plague. When asked by Tarrou if he believes in God, he replies: ‘No, but what does that mean? I am in darkness, trying to see the light. I stopped a long time ago thinking there was anything unusual in that’ (p. 97). Seeing clearly is what Rieux seeks, even when what he sees is less than palatable.

₀ Faced with the agony of watching on helplessly as an innocent child dies, Rieux feels anger towards a God who would allow such an appalling event to take place. For a time, the priest and the doctor share common ground until Paneloux expresses the opinion that perhaps it is necessary at times to love what we cannot understand: ‘No Father’,
Rieux replies. 'I have a different notion of love; and to the day I die I shall refuse to love this creation in which children are tortured' (p. 169). Rieux’s duty is to look after sick bodies rather than to tend to souls. His friend Tarrou, an unbeliever, muses on whether a man can be a saint without believing in God. In a sense that is what Rieux is, a secular saint, a man who attends to the sick without a second thought for himself, a doctor who fights with every fibre of his being to eradicate disease and bring comfort to those in pain. He even offers to stay at the bedside of Paneloux, as the latter faces death. The priest declines the offer, saying: ‘Thank you... But priests have no friends. They have given everything to God’ (p. 180).

Michel Onfray looks on Paneloux as a kind of sacrificial lamb:

With his Christ-like death, the plague subsides and disappears. Is this a subtle way for Camus to say that the true, genuine and defensible form of Christianity can never really be a theological justification of reality, but must be, rather, a revolt against evil?

Such an interpretation definitely holds water. Jesus was crucified to atone for the sins of the world and not in order to pave the way for the emergence of a Church institution which focuses to an inordinate degree on emphasising original sin and the weaknesses of the human flesh. Camus had a Mediterranean view of religion. Characters like Meursault and Rieux are not afraid to risk death in pursuit of an authentic existence. They both appreciate the life of the body, friendship, solidarity with the victims of society, honesty and integrity. Towards the end of The Plague, in words that resonate with Camus’ own beliefs, Rieux tells his friend Tarrou: ‘But you know, I feel more solidarity with the defeated than with saints. I don’t think I have any taste for heroism and sainthood. What interests me is to be a man’ (p. 197).

It is this self-effacing humility, this lucidity with regard to his limitations, this commitment to delving into life’s mysteries in an open and transparent manner, that makes Camus such an intriguing writer. His unassuming nature is in stark contrast to some of his contemporaries who never shunned the limelight or missed an opportunity to advance their intellectual and philosophical theories. A key moment in The Plague which encapsulates Camus’ attachment to the Mediterranean is when Rieux and Tarrou decide to go swimming. The water wraps them in its comforting blanket and man senses the other’s happiness at being able to escape momentarily from the clutches of sickness and death: ‘Once they had dressed again they left without saying a word, But their hearts were one, and the memory of that night was sweet for both of them’ (p. 198).

SOLIDARITY

In this brief discussion of the role of some pertinent issues in the life and work of Camus, I have endeavoured to underline the importance of solidarity for a writer who believed neither in God nor in Reason. The Mediterranean way is the one Camus championed and it is characterised by courage in the face of adversity and a belief that the sun will still rise the morning after the most heart-breaking cataclysms. In another hundred years, I am confident that people will still return to Camus’ writings in search of answers to life’s existential questions. That is the greatest test for any writer.

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8. Onfray, pp. 257-8

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