Studies in French Literature 9

Camus: LA PESTE

D. R. HAGGIS

STUDIES IN FRENCH LITERATURE No. 9

General Editor
W. G. Moore

ALBERT CAMUS: LA PESTE

by

D. R. HAGGIS

Reader in Modern French Literature, University of Exeter

EDWARD ARNOLD

First published 1962 by
Edward Arnold (Publishers) Ltd.
41 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DQ

Reprinted 1964, 1967
Reprinted 1970 with revised Bibliography
Reprinted 1973
Reprinted 1976 with revised Bibliography
Reprinted 1978, 1980, 1981

ISBN 0 7131 5515 9

Printed and bound in Great Britain at
The Camelot Press Ltd, Southampton

Contents

1. *Introduction: the Author and the Work*

Between the Second World War and his death in January 1960 at the age of 46 the author of the work we are to study established himself as one of the most talented and most influential French writers of his time. His literary reputation was founded in France by the publication in 1942 of a short but brilliantly written story entitled *L'Étranger*;[1] the quality and importance of his writings as a whole received official international recognition in 1957 when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Between those dates, Camus had shown himself in a variety of *genres*—the essay, the novel, the drama, the short story—to be a writer of exceptional literary skill and imaginative power.

To realize his aims as a literary artist was Camus's chief ambition, and it was as a literary artist that he wished to be primarily considered and judged. This was not something which could be easily achieved in 20th-century France by a man of Camus's temperament and character. For Camus believed that the writer cannot ignore the social, political and philosophical problems of his day, that, in fact, in the modern world, there are no ivory towers still standing, and this belief led him, not only to join the French Resistance movement during the War, but to concern himself with social and political problems after the Liberation of France, and to take an active part, through journalism and occasional writings, in some of the major controversies of the post-War world. He was a man with an unbounded appetite for life and one who took an immense delight in living, but he was also a man with a sensitive conscience, a passion for justice, and a keen sense of the writer's responsibility. The vigorous imagination that made him a powerful writer also made him vividly aware of the terrible conditions in which vast numbers of human

[1] This was not Camus's first published work; two earlier works had appeared in Algiers, in addition to *La Révolte dans les Asturies*, a play in which Camus collaborated and of which he wrote the greater part.

beings were condemned to live and die in his times, and he felt it his duty to protest against those conditions, and to make others concerned about them. As a consequence, Camus found himself cast for a rôle that was not always or altogether to his liking: that of a public figure and of something like a lay *directeur de conscience*. We may regret whatever limits his journalistic activities may have imposed on the output of the creative artist, but we are, I think, bound to admit that the moral climate of post-War France would have been the poorer without the humanizing influence that Albert Camus exercised in the realm of social and political thinking.

In retrospect, these two aspects of Camus's writing—the creative and the political—are seen to be closely related. Camus felt himself compelled to protest against violence, cruelty and injustice wherever he saw them; his imaginative works reveal how lucid and penetrating his understanding was of the situation in which these things triumph, and of how difficult it is for men of good-will to remain uncorrupted by them. But creative writing was not for Camus simply a process of analysis and enquiry; it was also an act of affirmation. It was his own personal way of opposing the temptation to nihilism and despair that the spectacle and the experience of 20th-century Europe brought; it was, further, a means of establishing contact with other human beings and of entering into a kind of fraternal communion with them.

Any suggestion that his work contains a 'message' for his times Camus would, I believe, have immediately and vigorously opposed. Yet one of his motives in writing does seem to have been to communicate two things to his readers. Firstly, his own zest for living, and a view of life that he derived from his early experience of it. Camus's writings are full of images of light. 'Je n'ai jamais pu renoncer à la lumière, au bonheur d'être, à la vie libre où j'ai grandi,' he said in the speech he made on the occasion of the award of the Nobel Prize; and in one of his essays in which he numbers himself among the modern 'sons of Greece' he writes: 'Au centre de notre œuvre, fût-elle noire, rayonne un soleil inépuisable.' This light that pervades Camus's work is the light that shines on the Mediterranean shores of North Africa. Secondly, *La Peste* in particular suggests that he aimed to share with others a conviction that it was

possible to live in our age and to preserve both one's lucidity and a sober optimism concerning human nature. He shared the agnosticism of many of his contemporaries, and he was distrustful of all systems of thought, religious or political, that claimed to attain to the Absolute in some form or other. Yet he never doubted the importance of giving meaning and reality to certain human values; and when Dr. Rieux concludes, in *La Peste*, 'qu'il y a dans les hommes plus de choses à admirer que de choses à mépriser', he expresses, I think, Camus's own view. This conjunction of metaphysical scepticism and ethical optimism in Camus's thought has, perhaps, a good deal to do with the wide appeal his writings have made, for it reflects the uncertainties and aspirations of his age.

*

Of all Camus's works *La Peste* is the best known; it has, indeed, probably become one of the most widely read books to come out of France since the Second World War ended. It appeared first in 1947, and from that time until Camus's death hardly a year passed in which some new edition or other of the work was not published. It was issued during this period in popular paperback editions in English as well as in French, and it was translated into sixteen foreign languages.

It is, if not the most perfect of Camus's works artistically, certainly the most ambitious and the most interesting to study, both on account of the way in which the work of art is conceived and elaborated, and on account of the nature of the preoccupations that underlie the writing of it. It is, among other things, a book about the Second World War: through the fictional account of an outbreak of plague Camus conveys to us the experience of the defeat of France in 1940 and of the German occupation that followed. But he treats the plague in such a way that it does not simply evoke a particular historical event. We cannot exhaust the significance of what the plague is made to 'stand for' in this book by giving it any single interpretation. Camus makes the coming of the plague represent different aspects of misfortune in human life, in particular loneliness, suffering, and death. But through the conditions it creates the plague is also made to evoke the impersonal, mechanical character of much of modern life—the deadening routine of modern

bureaucracy, for example. It has political implications as well as social and metaphysical ones: it becomes clear at certain points in the book that Camus, in speaking of the plague, is thinking of the totalitarian state —of the methods its advocates and its rulers resort to, and the kind of world in which it condemns men to live. In the most general terms, we might say that the plague represents whatever threatens to curtail human existence, and whatever tends to prevent the fulfilment of life while it is lived.

These multiple figurative 'meanings' of the plague make *La Peste* a work of considerable complexity, and one that is rich in significance. Though the author's evocation of the experience of War-time plays a prominent part in it, the way he has treated the plague makes the work a fascinating one even for readers who did not share in that experience, and for whom the events that the book recalls are already history.

Yet when all this is said we must not lose sight of the fact that the interest of the 'ideas' underlying *La Peste* and their relevance to the contemporary world do not constitute the sole merit of the work. Camus undoubtedly makes a strong appeal because we feel him to be closely in touch with the trends of his time. But he is also a very remarkable literary artist, and by no means the least fascinating aspect of *La Peste* is the literary skill with which the author has contrived to suggest that he is telling us about an actual outbreak of plague, and yet, at the same time, to make the plague assume those complex figurative implications of which we have spoken. For this reason, and because this is primarily a literary rather than a philosophical study, a good deal of space in the following pages has been devoted to trying to show how *La Peste* reveals the activity of a powerful creative imagination and the skill of a distinguished literary craftsman.

2. Context

A full discussion of the development of Camus's thought and the place that *La Peste* occupies in it is to be found in many of the full-length studies of Camus that are now available,[1] and it is not possible to attempt to give an extensive account of that development here. But it may help us to understand the work we are to study, and to appreciate its artistry better, if we approach it with some of the leading ideas underlying it in mind.

Perhaps as good a way as any of approaching Camus's thought is to begin by looking at *L'Étranger* which was, as we have seen, the book that really first established his reputation as a writer in France, and which is probably the most widely known of his works after *La Peste*. Camus called this work a *récit*. It is a brief narrative in which the main character Meursault, tells the story, in the first person, of the events leading up to his being condemned to death for having killed another man. Meursault is a strange and somewhat disconcerting figure, and Camus's presentation of him is something of a literary *tour de force*. For he succeeds in holding our interest and in making us believe in his character while the story lasts; yet when we come to reflect on the account Meursault gives of his experience, we realize how peculiar, unfamiliar, and in some ways 'inhuman' his attitude to life is. His attitude is characterized by a kind of obstinate fidelity to a few limited but very real certainties. He lives almost entirely through his senses: of what he experiences through his senses he is intensely aware, and sure. But he is sure of very little else. Conventional sentiments, ideal conceptions and abstract systems of ideas have little or no meaning for him, and he refuses to pretend that they have. His relationships, therefore, with the external world and with his human environment are established almost entirely through his physical impressions and his natural appetites; such intellectual and moral relationships as he has seem to be of the most elementary kind.

[1] See Bibliographical Note.

At the opening of the novel we find him showing a strange insensibility towards the death of his mother. When he presently enters for the first time into a relationship with the man who is later to involve him in the crisis of his existence, it is not because he has any obligation to him, or even because he likes him that he does so, but because at that moment he happens to be hungry, because he is inclined to be lazy, and because the man offers him food. When he becomes involved through this man in a quarrel in which he has no personal interest, he kills an Arab, but he feels neither guilt nor remorse as a consequence. Camus, with great imaginative ingenuity and literary skill, makes him kill the Arab while he is the momentary victim of a hallucination, thus, as it were, 'exculpating' Meursault. When he is brought to trial he is quite unable to establish any connection between the account of his crime that is given by the prosecution, and his recollection of his own impressions and feelings.

It is only at the close of the book that he becomes passionately involved, when he realizes that the one thing that means everything to him and to which he is profoundly attached—his physical existence—is going to be taken from him for reasons that he does not understand and that seem to him, quite literally, irrelevant. In a final meeting with the prison chaplain in his cell after he has been condemned to death, the chaplain tries to speak to him of sin and repentance, God and an afterlife. Meursault refuses to hear him, affirming that these are words that have no meaning for him, for the only kind of existence of which he can conceive is the physical existence in this world which he is about to lose.

Camus makes the character of Meursault credible to us partly by making him a North African, and there is little doubt that one thing Camus is doing in portraying him is to give us his impression of the North African mentality, and of the attitude towards life of the people of the country in which he was born and grew up. At the same time, it seems clear that certain philosophical preoccupations underlie Camus's conception and presentation of his character. One of the most interesting features of this brief *récit* is the way in which it illustrates the connection that exists between a literary style and a philosophical—or, more pre-

cisely, metaphysical—point of view. Jean-Paul Sartre in his article on this book: *Explication de 'L'Étranger'*,[1] has made a penetrating study of its style. He points out the discontinuous character of Meursault's account of experience: sentences are juxtaposed in it, or linked by words like 'and', or 'but', or 'then', but all those syntactical relations which weave such an account into a whole are left out. It is, Sartre says, rather as though one were to give an account of a Rugby match by relating purely what one saw, without giving any indication at all of the aim of the game and the intention of the players, which would alone give meaning to the description. He goes on to point out how this method was used by 18th-century writers with comic effect. A foreign visitor to Europe, for example, might give an account of what he observed when witnessing certain European customs. Being a foreigner, he can relate what he sees, but he cannot interpret it since he is quite unaware of the motives underlying the actions that are being performed. The impression produced by such an account is humorous because it makes something familiar suddenly appear ridiculous, and the purpose of such writing is, of course, generally a critical one.

Meursault's account of his experience may not strike us as humorous, but it does seem to have an oblique critical implication. Camus said of Meursault that he confines himself to replying to the questions that life and men put to him, but that he makes no affirmations. In this way he challenges the basis of such things as feelings, principles, and purposes—indeed, of all those common assumptions that we make when we interpret experience and the world around us.

The manner in which Camus has presented the character of Meursault reflects the author's awareness of what he called the 'absurd' nature of man's condition, that is to say, the meaninglessness—in any commonly accepted sense of the word 'meaning'—of man's predicament in the universe. This concept of 'the absurd' plays an important part in Camus's thought. It derives, primarily, from an impression that experience makes on the writer's sensibility. This impression is one that may be produced in many different ways: by a sudden conscious awareness of the repetitive, mechanical character of so much that constitutes people's daily

[1] *Situations I.*

lives in the modern world, for example; or by a sudden realization of the fact of man's mortality. 'The absurd', however, is not solely an affective impression; it has an intellectual aspect also. In Camus's view, the report of the human intellect on experience confirms the testimony of the sensibility. The natural impulse of man's intellect is to seek coherence and unity, to introduce order where there is none. This, Camus says in his essay: *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942), is precisely what the modern intellect finds itself unable to do. 'Le désir profond de l'esprit même dans ses démarches les plus évoluées rejoint le sentiment inconscient de l'homme devant son univers: il est exigence de familiarité, appétit de clarté,' he says. But, he continues, 'l'intelligence aussi (i.e. as well as sensibility) me dit . . . à sa manière que ce monde est absurde.'[1] The world remains impenetrable to human reason, obstinately opaque, and unresponsive to man's attempts to understand and to 'make sense' of it.

I have dealt at some length with Camus's view of the 'absurd' nature of the human condition because it underlies his treatment of the plague-image in *La Peste*. The origins of this view are complex. As we have already seen in speaking of *L'Étranger*, it seems to owe something to the climate and the landscape of the country in which Camus's early years were spent.[2] It probably owes something also to the humble and difficult circumstances in which Camus grew up. Finally, it was confirmed by Camus's experience of life in Europe, and particularly by his experience of the War years. It is a view which sees man as a lonely figure in an indifferent and strangely ambiguous universe—ambiguous because it provides intense and deeply satisfying human pleasures, yet also condemns man to suffering and death. The 'absurd' view sees man, moreover, as a prisoner in this universe, for it regards conscious existence in this earthly life as man's only existence, and all that man can do is to come to terms with the conditions that have been imposed upon him, in the lucid recognition that nothing can make them acceptable to his mind, and that there is no way of escape from them.

In three of his early works—the two we have already mentioned and his first play: *Caligula* (written 1938)—we find Camus exploring the

[1] *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. Paris. 1942 (Edition augmentée), pp. 32; 36.

[2] See, further, below: Chap. 4, pp. 28–29.

implications of this concept of 'the absurd', from an analytical and theoretical point of view in the essay: *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, imaginatively in *L'Étranger* and *Caligula*. The play shows us the more sombre side of the 'absurd' view of man's predicament, for Caligula finds the burden of it intolerable. As a Roman emperor, he is a man in whose hands fortune has placed unlimited power; he is also a man of ruthless logic. He has become aware that man's situation is 'absurd', yet he really craves for an ordered and meaningful universe. He seeks to transcend the nihilism and despair to which the experience of 'the absurd' leads by systematically denying and destroying *all* human values, and in doing so creates a nightmare world of terror and violence for those around him.

L'Étranger and *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, however, lead to a different conclusion. Meursault clings to life, and he protests with all the force of his being against the inevitability and finality of death when the prison chaplain tries to bring him to accept the losing of it. Yet while his life lasts, he enjoys it intensely in a simple, unreflecting way, and even at the end he seems to die resigned, and reconciled with 'la tendre indifférence du monde'. At the conclusion of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* Camus compares the fate of modern man to that of Sisyphus condemned by the gods to push his rock unceasingly to the top of the hill in the knowledge that it must inevitably roll to the bottom again. Yet the essay ends with the words: 'Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux.'

These attitudes towards 'the absurd' have an important bearing on the later development of Camus's thought, and on the attitudes we find portrayed in *La Peste*.

In both the *récit* and the conclusion of the essay one thing that Camus seems to be saying is that man may become aware of the fact that it is impossible for him to 'make sense' of his situation in the universe he inhabits, and yet find individual happiness. But what Caligula primarily finds in the discovery that man's predicament is 'absurd' is a 'permission' —a sanction for complete moral irresponsibility. Nothing—not even human life and human happiness—matters any longer.

When the Germans started the Second World War not very long after *Caligula* was written, Camus seems to have seen their attitude and their actions as being not very different from those of the emperor in his play.

Their act of aggression against their neighbours was the consequence of their nihilistic philosophy. Despairing of life and of making sense of life themselves, they had consented to add to the misery and misfortune of others. In his *Lettres à un ami allemand*, the first two of which were published clandestinely under the German Occupation, we find Camus justifying French resistance to the Germans by thinking along these lines. It is precisely the conclusion that an awareness of the 'absurd' nature of the human predicament makes *anything* permissible that Camus is resisting there. In theory, this conclusion may appear inescapable; in practice, it has to be qualified. For Camus was not really prepared to press the logic of the pursuit of individual satisfaction and happiness in a meaningless universe to the length of a total disregard for the welfare of others. The crime of the Nazis, in his view, is that they have done precisely that. To become aware of the 'absurd' character of man's predicament is to experience with a fresh urgency the human craving for happiness. But the War emphasized in a vivid and terrifying manner how dependent the happiness of each is upon the attitudes and the conduct of others. So we find Camus contrasting in these Letters two possible attitudes towards the experience of 'the absurd'. One may, he says, adopt an attitude of acquiescence, and this is what the Nazis have done. Or one may adopt an attitude of protest and 'revolt'. And to revolt against the injustice of the universe means to refuse to add to the misery of mankind and to oppose those who do so; it means trying to promote the happiness of others as well as one's own.

It is with these social implications of his 'absurd' view of man's predicament, which the War forced to the forefront of his attention, that Camus is concerned in *La Peste*. It seems to have been early in 1941 that he began to plan this work, but the writing of it was not completed until 1947. Camus's return to France in 1942 and his participation in the Resistance movement appear, as we shall see, to have exercised a decisive influence on the character of the work in its final form.

Yet the moral problems raised by Camus's view of the human situation could not be finally and completely solved by taking up a position in the struggle with the foreign enemy of his country. Other, and if anything more perplexing, problems remained after the invader had been