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# I

IEME VAN DER POEL

## Camus: a life lived in critical times

The life of Albert Camus (1913–60) was profoundly affected by the three major tragedies which dominate the history of twentieth-century France: the Great War (1914–18), World War II (1939–45) and the Algerian War of Independence (1954–62). It is unusual that Camus's destiny should have been so closely bound up with that of metropolitan France. As a French *petit colon* born in Algeria, he spent most of his life outside France. It was not until he was in his late thirties that, as a celebrated writer, Camus settled in France permanently. After the very successful publication of *La Peste* in 1947, he was able to set up house in the sixth *arrondissement* in Paris, near the premises of his editor, Gallimard.

Camus was born on 7 November 1913, on the eve of the First World War, in the little village of Mondovi near Constantine, one of the major cities of what was then French Algeria. His mother was of Spanish origin, his father a so-called *pied-noir*, a Frenchman born in the colony and whose family had lived there for several generations. In his last and unfinished work, the autobiographical novel *Le Premier Homme*, Camus claims that his forebears had fled from Alsace after the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870–1. According to Camus's biographer Olivier Todd, however, the Camus family came from the Bordeaux region in the south-west of France. This would make it more probable that it was economic rather than political reasons that led them to try their fortune in Algeria.<sup>1</sup>

In terms of social class, Camus's parents belonged to the colony's poor whites, who occupied an intermediate position between the French ruling class (*les colons*), and the indigenous population, which consisted mainly of Arabs and Berbers. When Camus was eight months old, his father was drafted into the French army and shipped to France, to become one of the first victims at the Battle of the Marne. He died on 11 October 1914 and was buried in Saint-Brieuc in Brittany. In *Le Premier Homme*, Camus draws a striking portrait of the father he never knew, showing him as one of the countless, nameless soldiers from the colonies who, immediately on their

arrival in a foreign country they were supposed to consider as their homeland, were thrown into the battle:

On n'avait pas eu le temps de leur trouver des casques, le soleil n'était pas assez fort pour tuer les couleurs comme en Algérie, si bien que des vagues d'Algériens arabes et français, vêtus de tons éclatants et pimpants, coiffés de chapeaux de paille, cibles rouges et bleues qu'on pouvait apercevoir à des centaines de mètres, montaient par paquets au feu, étaient détruits par paquets. (PH, 70)

There was no time to find them helmets; the sun was not strong enough to erase colours as it did in Algeria, so that waves of Arab and French Algerians, dressed in smart shining colours, straw hats on their heads, red-and-blue targets you could see for hundreds of metres, went over the top in droves into the fire, were destroyed in droves. (FM, 55)

Camus here criticises the seemingly casual way in which metropolitan France disposed of the lives of its colonial subjects during the Great War. It is also worth noting that the Arab and French soldiers are depicted here as brothers in arms, dying together on the same battlefield. From the author's point of view, this is not a coincidence: both the Arab masses and the poor whites from Algeria were victims of oppression and social injustice, united, so to speak, in their communal suffering and in their profound attachment to their native soil. One sees the theme's prominence in Camus's late fictional writings, such as *L'Exil et le Royaume* (1957) and *Le Premier Homme* (still unfinished when he died in 1960), at a time when the Algerian War of Independence was bitterly tearing apart the Arabs and the working-class Europeans. Yet this should not blind one to the fact that the same theme may also be detected in some of Camus's earliest stories, making it one of the more permanent preoccupations in his life and art.

Camus found the inspiration for his first book, *L'Envers et l'Endroit*, published in Algiers by Charlot in 1937, in Belcourt, the working-class quarter in east Algiers where he spent his early childhood. This also explains its initial title: *Voix du quartier pauvre* (*Voices from the Poor Quarter*). In the preface to the second edition published in 1958, Camus claims that, in spite of its 'forme maladroite' (*Ess*, 5) ('clumsiness'), he considers this small volume to be the source that sustained all his later life and work. It is about poverty and the Algerian sunlight, which, according to Camus, makes the misery of the inhabitants of southern locations less grim than the grey skies of the north; moreover, the author professes his love for the sparsely furnished Arab and Spanish houses, preferring them to the apartments of the wealthy Parisian bourgeoisie that he became familiar with after he had grown to be one of the most successful writers of his time. Finally, he concludes that if he had

to rewrite the original text, he would again centre it on ‘l’admirable silence d’une mère et l’effort d’un homme pour retrouver une justice ou un amour qui équilibre ce silence’ (*Ess*, 13) (‘the admirable silence of a mother and a man’s effort to find a kind of justice or love that would counterbalance that silence’).

The figure of the resigned, older woman, as she appears in several of the sketches collected in this volume, was modelled, no doubt, on Camus’s own mother, a partially deaf and taciturn figure. She belongs to the women who find themselves ‘au bord de la vie’ (‘on the edge of life’), as Maïssa Bey puts it, thus symbolising Camus’s humble origins, which he never denied and which laid the foundations for a political and social engagement that lasted a lifetime.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, in one of the stories, entitled ‘Entre oui et non’ (‘Between Yes and No’), the mother’s silence is juxtaposed with that of the owner of a Moorish café, where the narrator muses upon his past. In fact, there is a continual intermingling of the two spaces: the deserted café that is about to close, and the humble lodgings where the narrator lived with his mother as a child. In both, people sit together in total silence, which opens up the possibility for another, more corporeal kind of ‘communication’. It consists in a sharing, next to one another, but not jointly, of the same, strong, sensory perceptions, which are bound up with the Mediterranean: its smells, its sounds, its light, its starry nights. The three silent figures, then, of the mother, the owner of the Moorish café and the child, can be seen as the embodiment of an all-encompassing, Mediterranean culture, glossing over all ethnic and linguistic differences. In *L’Envers et l’Endroit*, the geographical and other ‘continuities’ of the Mediterranean basin are also evoked in a series of colourful evocations of the Italian landscape, the small harbours along the coast of Ibiza and the smiles of the Genoese women.

Around the time that Camus was working on his first book, he became increasingly involved in politics. In this respect also, the idea of a Mediterranean culture was of great concern to him, as is made clear by the text of a lecture that he gave at the Algiers Cultural Centre on 8 February 1937: ‘Nous sommes d’autant mieux préparés que nous sommes au contact immédiat de l’Orient, qui peut tant nous apprendre à cet égard . . . Le rôle essentiel que pourraient jouer les villes comme Alger et Barcelone, c’est de servir pour leur faible part cet aspect de la culture méditerranéenne qui favorise l’homme au lieu de l’écraser.’<sup>3</sup> (We are all the better prepared for this because we are in immediate contact with the Orient, from which we can learn so much in this regard . . . the cities of Algiers and Barcelona could play a small though essential part in the process of restoring the idea of a Mediterranean culture that defends human values, instead of crushing them.) Camus opposed Italian

fascism's call for a new Rome that would emulate ancient Roman imperial grandeur by once again radiating greatness across the Mediterranean, the *Mare Nostrum* ('Our Sea'). By dismissing Mussolini's revivalism, he exhorted his fellow citizens to save the Mediterranean from the Italian fascists. Instead of Mussolini's dream of the supremacy of a Latin culture which would match that of Hitler's *Germania*, Camus invited his audience to recall yet another aspect of a glorious past: that of *al-Andalus*, in which the different ethnic and religious groups from Spain and the Arab-Muslim Mediterranean had been united. In this way, Camus made it very clear that he was not only opposed to fascism, but that he also looked upon Arab culture as a substantial part of the Mediterranean heritage.

From 1935 until 1937, Camus was a member of the Algerian Communist Party. In his choice of membership, he was certainly influenced by his former teacher and mentor, the writer Jean Grenier. It is less obvious why, after a relatively short period of time, Camus was struck off the party's register. His fall from grace took place against the background of growing political tension between the communists and the nationalists in Algeria. Although the communists had already fought against colonialism since the beginning of the 1920s, they were unhappy that Messali Hadj, the leader of the newly created Algerian Popular Party (PPA), should hark back to certain traditional values in order to reinforce the notion of an Algerian identity. This was also the reason why Messali rejected the Blum-Violette plan (1937), according to which the French socialist government planned to offer full French citizenship to 22,000 Algerians. In Messali's view, this plan, to which the Algerian communists were also fiercely opposed, would increase the gap that already existed between the assimilated Algerian elite and the impoverished masses from the countryside.<sup>4</sup>

Camus's support for the PPA is also illustrated by his work as a reporter. In September 1938 he met Pascal Pia, the journalist and former Surrealist, who had recently arrived from France to become editor-in-chief of the newly created newspaper *Alger républicain*. Pia hired Camus as an editorial secretary and it was in this position that he first worked as a journalist. He wrote several book reviews, including an article about Sartre's first novel *La Nausée*, which had come out in the autumn of 1938. But central to Camus's contributions to the newspaper were the articles he produced about current developments in Algeria itself, which seem to have preoccupied him more at this time than the growing threat of war in Europe or the civil war in Spain.

Camus was very critical of the way in which the French-Algerian government handled the rise of nationalism. In the summer of 1939, several leading members of the PPA were arrested and died of ill treatment in Algerian prisons.<sup>5</sup> In an article published in *Alger républicain*, Camus commented:

‘La montée du nationalisme algérien s’accomplit sur les persécutions dont on le poursuit’ (*Ess*, 1370) (‘The rise of Algerian nationalism is brought about by the persecution directed against it’). In Camus’s view, the repressive measures taken by the French authorities against nationalist political leaders were not the only reason for the growing discontent among native Algerians. Between 5 and 15 June 1939, he published the ten instalments of *Misère de la Kabylie*. In this travel report, consisting of articles about the terrible famine that had struck the Kabylia region, Camus questioned the impact of colonialism on the native inhabitants of Algeria. He accused his fellow citizens of systematically exploiting the local population, by refusing them equal pay and by providing them with insufficient schools and medical care.

With the publication of *Misère de la Kabylie*, Camus became one of the first French intellectuals to criticise overtly the French colonial enterprise in its overseas territories. But in Camus’s case, his denunciations of the ill treatment of the Algerian peasants by their colonial oppressors did not have the same impact on the French public as, somewhat earlier, André Gide’s protest against the excesses of colonial rule in the French Congo, or Andrée Viollis’s condemnation of the atrocities that were being perpetrated in Indochina. In France, all public attention was now focused on the impending war in Europe.

Meanwhile, in Algeria, Pia and Camus had founded a second newspaper, *Le Soir républicain*. The outbreak of the war had made the distribution of *Alger républicain* more difficult and it saw an important decrease in the number of copies sold. By launching a new paper, the editors hoped to make up for this loss, but after a few months, *Alger républicain* folded. The impact of the war was not limited to economic matters; it also affected the ethics of journalism. Although the press in Algeria was placed under censorship, this did not prevent Camus from exercising his right to freedom of speech. In favour of neither Hitler nor Stalin, he and Pia were, above all, convinced pacifists: they protested against the rounding up of communists after the German–Russian non-aggression pact had been concluded and they published extensively on the historical background of the then current situation, as well as on the possibilities of restoring peace. After many altercations with the censors, *Le Soir républicain* was eventually suspended by the French authorities on 10 January 1940.<sup>6</sup>

The years 1940–2 constituted a turning point in Camus’s career as a writer, profoundly affecting both his political and philosophical views. Living in occupied France part of the time (and at other times in the Algerian city of Oran), Camus wrote the three texts that would establish his reputation as one of the most important writers of his generation: the novel *L’Etranger*

(1942), the philosophical essay *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942) and the play *Caligula* (1944). These texts, together with the articles that he wrote for *Le Soir républicain*, and the *Lettres à un ami allemand*, which appeared in the underground press during the German occupation, give a clear picture of the way in which the experience of war and oppression affected the development in Camus's way of thinking.

Time and again, Camus confesses his all-encompassing love of life. His writings abound with images that represent the physical world. The pleasurable experience of swimming and sunbathing is present in both *L'Etranger* and 'La Guerre' ('War'), an article he wrote for *Le Soir républicain* in 1939. The *Lettres à un ami allemand* praise the beauty of the European landscape, as embodied by 'les pigeons se détach[ant] en grappes de la cathédrale de Salzbourg' ('the clusters of pigeons taking off from the cathedral of Salzburg'), and 'les géraniums rouges [qui poussent] inlassablement sur les petits cimetières en Silésie' (*Ess*, 236) ('the red geraniums that grow with tireless energy in the small cemeteries of Silesia'). In 'La Guerre', however, these images of a physical world that seems absurdly unaffected by the atrocities of war and destruction are relegated to an irretrievable past. From this, the author draws the conclusion that 'c'est bien là peut-être l'extrémité de la révolte que de perdre sa foi dans l'humanité des hommes' (*Ess*, 1377) ('losing one's faith in the humanity of men may perhaps be the ultimate form of revolt'). This hint of pessimism recalls the answer that Meursault, in *L'Etranger*, gives to his boss, when the latter asks him if he would like to change his way of life: 'J'ai répondu qu'on ne changeait jamais de vie, qu'en tout cas toutes se valaient et que la mienne ici ne me déplaisait pas du tout' (*TRN*, 1155–6) ('I replied that you could never change your life, that in any case one life was as good as another and that I wasn't at all dissatisfied with mine' (*O*, 44)).

But these texts also reflect Camus's struggle with the absurdity of a world in which God is no longer present. In *Caligula*, the main character's lawless behaviour calls to mind the Surrealists' idea of revolt against a civilisation seen as fundamentally restrictive. It is a behaviour also reminiscent of the sense of revolt as articulated by the marquis de Sade in the eighteenth century. In a similar way, Caligula claims the right to exercise his individual freedom, even at the expense of the lives and happiness of his fellow men, and totally rejects human law. But in the last scene of the play the tyrant is killed by his best friend, Cherea. Although the latter shares Caligula's conviction about the overall absurdity of human destiny, he is revolted by the pointless sacrifice of human lives that results from it.

If *Caligula* marks the beginning of a major change in Camus's philosophical insights, this becomes even more apparent from the first of the *Lettres*

à un ami allemand, published in 1943: 'C'est beaucoup que de se battre en méprisant la guerre, d'accepter de tout perdre en gardant le goût du bonheur, de courir à la destruction avec l'idée d'une civilisation supérieure' (*Ess*, 222) ('It demands a lot to fight when one despises war, and to accept to lose everything while keeping a taste for happiness, to run headlong towards destruction while being guided by the idea of a superior civilisation'). In Camus's view, it is precisely because we cling to life so much that we find the strength to sacrifice it for a future of which we ourselves will no longer be part. In a world in which God is no longer present, solidarity provides the only possible answer to the absurdity of human destiny. In this respect, Camus's idea of revolt has developed from the contesting of the legitimacy of any human law, as illustrated by Caligula, to laying claim to a human order in which all answers are human. Or, as Camus puts it in *L'Homme révolté*: 'L'homme révolté, c'est l'homme jeté hors du sacré et appliqué à revendiquer un ordre humain où toutes les réponses soient humaines' (*Ess*, 1688) ('The rebel is man thrown outside the sacred and keen to lay claim to a human order in which all answers are human').

The *Lettres à un ami allemand* also read like a declaration of love to European culture. Contrary to the Germans, it is not out of patriotism or to gain supremacy over 'cet espace cerclé de mers et de montagnes' (*Ess*, 234) ('this space surrounded by seas and mountains') that the author of the letters wants to fight. He is prepared to sacrifice his life in order to defend a set of spiritual values that represent to his mind 'Europe', and which he considers to be 'ma plus grande patrie' (*Ess*, 236) ('my wider fatherland').

Camus spent the war years partly in Algeria, partly in France. In 1942, he suffered a relapse of the tuberculosis that he contracted in his adolescent years and was advised to spend some time in the mountains in France. He stayed in Le Chambon sur Lignon, a Huguenot village in the Vivarais region. After the war, its inhabitants were the only community in occupied Europe to be awarded collectively the Yad Vashem decoration for their support of Jewish refugees during the German occupation. It is not unlikely that during his stay in the mountains Camus got involved with the French Resistance. It is equally possible, though, that it was through his friend Pascal Pia (living in nearby Lyons), that he became engaged in the Combat group of the Resistance movement in 1943.

Soon after settling in Paris, Camus became the editor-in-chief of the clandestine newspaper *Combat*, which drew together a number of Resistance groups. By this time, Camus had come to be a prominent figure in Parisian intellectual circles. He had made friends with Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, as well as with his editor, Gaston Gallimard, and had also become involved with the world of theatre. On 21 August 1944, *Combat*



celebrated the Liberation of France with a leading article, 'De la Résistance à la Révolution' ('From Resistance to Revolution'), written by Camus. It already contains the core of the paper's programme for the next few years which was to stand for political renewal and freedom of speech, while keeping its independence from any political party.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, *Combat* had to operate under various restrictions. Printing paper was scarce and censorship continued, since the war in Europe had not yet ended. Moreover, *Combat* and the other newspapers that had been founded during the days of the Resistance had to compete with new titles, such as *Le Monde*, which published its first issue on 19 December 1944.<sup>8</sup>

From 1944 to 1947, Camus as *Combat*'s editor-in-chief played a major role in public debate in France. In the direct aftermath of World War II, the former Resistance divided into two groups which strongly disagreed about the country's political future, the communists and the adherents of General Charles de Gaulle. This controversy was deeply influenced by the dramatic events in Greece, where, after the defeat of the German army, a bloody battle was unleashed between the adherents of the former government, now returned from exile, and the former partisans who had fought the Germans.

Another matter of discontent involved the purges taking place across France in the aftermath of the war. Camus wrote a series of polemical articles against his fellow writer and journalist, François Mauriac. The latter, opposing the general climate of hatred and vengefulness, had pleaded for clemency to be shown to former collaborators. Camus, in turn, argued that justice, not Christian charity, should guide the French in dealing with the darker side of their recent history: 'Si nous consentons à nous passer de Dieu et de l'espérance, nous ne nous passons pas si aisément de l'homme. Sur ce point, je puis bien dire à M. Mauriac que nous ne nous découragerons pas et que nous refuserons jusqu'au dernier moment une charité divine qui frustrerait les hommes de leur justice' (CC, 442) ('If we agree to manage without God and hope, we can't so easily do without man. On this point, I say to Monsieur Mauriac that we will not be discouraged and that we will refuse right to the last a divine charity that would deprive mankind of its justice'). As in *La Peste* (1947) and *La Chute* (1956), Camus here shows himself to be a humanist at heart.

It was also due to this humanist stance that Camus definitively broke with Sartre and the *Les Temps modernes* group in 1951. To understand this controversy, one should be aware of the highly polarised atmosphere which dominated intellectual life in France during the post-war years. This situation was to last until the second half of the 1970s, when Marxism finally lost its attraction for the majority of the French intelligentsia. In *L'Homme révolté* (1951), Camus reproaches Marxism for sacrificing the defence of universal

human values to historical relativism. He draws a clear distinction between the Marxist *prophecy*, that is, the generous and universal ambition to secure a certain quality of life for the destitute masses, and the revolutionary *practice* which resulted from it and which made everything dependent on, as Camus termed it, history and nothing else.

Camus's criticism of Marxism also implied a condemnation of Sartrean existentialism, which valued the idea of 'taking action', 'making political choices', at any cost, even if it later turned out that one had supported a political system that was most repressive (as was the case with Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir's support for the new China in the 1950s). It is, therefore, quite understandable that *Les Temps modernes*, with Sartre as its director, should publish an unfavourable review of Camus's *L'Homme révolté*. This led to a long-lasting polemic between Camus and Sartre's influential literary review, and resulted in the final break between the two leading intellectuals (see below chapter 9). Sartre became a fellow traveller (as sympathisers were called) of the French Communist Party, whereas Camus turned away from communism altogether after the existence of the Gulag – the concentration camps created under Stalin's regime – was made public in the West. As illustrated by the fictional works he wrote during these years, including the play *Les Justes* and his most famous novel *La Peste*, the concept of revolution and the bloodshed it implied, even if it was meant to create a better world, became intolerable to Camus. As a result of his humanist stance and firm anti-communism, he became a somewhat lonely figure on the French intellectual post-war scene, where communist sympathies held such sway.

By 1954 the Algerian War of Independence had become inevitable. In France, Sartre and a number of other influential intellectuals immediately gave their support to the Algerian nationalists, but Camus's position was more ambiguous. At this point, a noticeable difference also emerges between the articles he wrote for *L'Express* and other news media, on the one hand, and his fictional writings on the other. In his 1957 essay 'Réflexions sur la guillotine', Camus condemned the severe French repression of the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale), the Algerian resistance movement. But, in spite of his long-lasting criticism of French colonial rule in Algeria, Camus was also opposed to the idea of an independent, Arab nation. In fact, even when the hostilities among the three main parties involved – the Algerian nationalists from the FLN, the French army and the right-wing 'secret army' or OAS ('Organisation d'Armée Secrète'), which wanted to keep Algeria French – had reached a point of no return, Camus continued to foster the hope of a federal state reuniting France, Algeria and the two former French protectorates, Tunisia and Morocco.

From 1952 until his untimely death in a car crash in 1960, Camus's homeland served as the major locale in two of the fictional works he was working on, *L'Exil et le Royaume* and *Le Premier Homme*. A careful reading of these texts uncovers a more subtle approach to the Algerian tragedy and all it encompassed than that provided by Camus's journalistic texts, which were, of course, written on the spur of the moment.<sup>9</sup> In his last, unfinished novel as well as in two of the short stories collected in *L'Exil et le Royaume*, 'L'Hôte' and 'La Femme adultère', Camus elaborates on what he sees as the main problem of Algerian society: the impossibility of communication between the French and Arab populations, because they speak a different language and do not mix socially. "C'est toi le juge?" (TRN, 1618) ("Are you the judge?") the Arab prisoner in 'L'Hôte' asks the French schoolteacher, who has been obliged by the French authorities to guard him for the night. These four words contain the nightmarish situation in which the Arab prisoner finds himself caught, in his native land and yet in a social system that is utterly alien to him. As a writer, Camus reveals that he is aware of the anomaly of the system but – as the half-hearted attempt of the schoolteacher to save the prisoner at the end of the novel shows – he is unable to solve the problem. Therefore, one does more justice to Camus as a colonial writer by stressing his fundamental pessimism about the final outcome of the Algerian tragedy, in which the underprivileged Europeans of Algeria would be among the principal victims. In Camus's view, their fate was universal in the sense that they resembled all the other ethnic groups who, as a consequence of war and political conflicts, had been deprived of their native soil.

This is also the main theme of *Le Premier Homme*. In this novel, as we have seen, Camus tried to reconstruct the unknown history of his own forebears, the poor settlers from France, who, from their arrival in the colony during the nineteenth century, toiled and suffered, from one generation to the next, on what is presented as an inhospitable African soil. But in spite of the fact that they shared this life of hardship and poverty with the large majority of the Arab population, Camus also shows the deep rift that existed between the two races. The wary stand-off between them, as Christiane Chaulet-Achour has so rightly argued, could switch all of a sudden to bloody conflict.<sup>10</sup>

It is an irony that in 1957, as Camus was achieving worldwide recognition as the winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, he was becoming increasingly isolated from his fellow writers in France. Neither his anti-communism nor his refusal to back the cause of Algerian nationalism had made him popular with those who set the tone in Parisian intellectual circles at that time. His famous but awkward remark made to an Algerian interlocutor in Stockholm – 'Je crois à la justice, mais je défendrai ma mère avant la justice' (*Ess*, 1882) ('I believe in justice, but will defend my mother before

justice’) – dealt a final blow to his already damaged reputation as a progressive intellectual. What Camus had really meant to say was that, for him, there existed no excuse for acts of terrorism on any side. In an article published in *L’Express* on 23 July 1955, he had given a very perceptive analysis of the spiral of violence as it had developed and grown under French colonial rule in Algeria:

L’oppression, même bienveillante, le mensonge d’une occupation qui parlait toujours d’assimilation sans jamais rien faire pour elle, ont suscité d’abord des mouvements nationalistes, pauvres en doctrine, mais riches en audace. Ces mouvements ont été réprimés.

Chaque répression, mesurée ou démentée, chaque torture policière comme chaque jugement légal, ont accentué le désespoir et la violence chez les militants frappés. Pour finir, les policiers ont couvé les terroristes qui ont enfanté eux-mêmes une police multipliée. (Ess, 1868)

(Oppression, even if benevolent, and the lie of an occupation that always talked about assimilation without ever doing anything to bring it about, have given rise to various nationalist movements, which were ideologically weak but certainly audacious. These movements have been repressed.

Every instance of repression, whether measured or demented, every act of police torture, every legal judgement has increased the despair and the violence of the militants affected by them. In the end, the police have bred terrorists, who have in turn multiplied the number of police.)

But the time for peace negotiations of the kind Camus had wanted had long passed. Algeria was to obtain its independence in 1962, after a long and bloody battle, and about a million French were to leave the country immediately afterwards.

In the novel *La Chute* (1956), one can sense the feeling of isolation and loneliness that Camus as an intellectual experienced during the last years of his life. Clamence, the protagonist, is not to be identified with his creator, Albert Camus, of course, yet some of the reflections on his personal life seem close to Camus’s own: ‘Ah! mon ami, savez-vous ce qu’est la créature solitaire, errant dans les grandes villes? . . .’ (TRN, 1536) (‘Oh, my friend, do you know what it means to be a solitary figure, wandering around in our big cities? . . .’), asks the narrator, without even expecting an answer from his silent interlocutor. And he concludes his soliloquy with the observation that it is neither possible to ignore one’s very existence nor to escape from it: ‘Que faire pour être un autre? Impossible’ (TRN, 1550) (‘What does one do to be another? Impossible’).

In 1954 Camus received an invitation to give a lecture in Holland and on this occasion he also visited Amsterdam, which he would choose as the grey

and drizzily setting for Clamence's confession in *La Chute*. In his lecture, Camus spoke on the subject of 'The Artist and his Time', the text of which has only recently been rediscovered. Although written in French, the lecture was aimed at a non-French, non-Parisian audience. It was an opportunity for Camus, no doubt, to speak more freely about his own situation as an engaged intellectual. The writer should share the fate of his fellow men, he said, but should refrain from foretelling the future, sticking instead to that part of history he knows from personal experience; he must not be afraid to position himself in the midst of the public debate: 'The only peace that is attainable for an artist is the peace that resides in the heat of the battle. "Each wall is a door", as Emerson put it so rightly. Let us not seek a door or an exit, except in the wall that surrounds us.'<sup>11</sup>

In the decade that followed his death, Camus's intellectual heritage was considered out of date. The 1960s saw the spectacular rise of the social sciences in France. Leading intellectuals were no longer writers or philosophers like Camus or Sartre; they were to be found among anthropologists, psychoanalysts and social scientists. It was only after Marxism had definitively ceased to be a main point of reference within intellectual circles in France that a younger generation of French intellectuals, generally known as 'les Nouveaux Philosophes' (the 'New Philosophers'), turned to universalism again and started rereading Camus.

Bernard-Henri Lévy gave Camus a special place in his essay on French intellectual history, *Les Aventures de la liberté* (*The Adventures of Freedom*) (1991). Lévy not only praises Camus for his humanist stance, but also considers him to be one of the first opponents of colonial rule in France. Around the same time, Edward Said, writing in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), defended an attitude that was radically opposed to that of Lévy. Said characterised Camus as one of the last colonial writers whose writings consolidate an imperialist vision of the relationship between the Orient and the Occident. However, given the fact that France has only just begun to come to terms with its colonial heritage, in particular with the traumatic years of the Algerian War of Independence, we are only beginning to gauge the full significance of French colonial rule and its legacy.

#### NOTES

1. Olivier Todd, *Albert Camus, A Life*, trans. Benjamin Ivry (New York, Carroll & Graf, 2000), p. 4.
2. Maïssa Bey, 'Femmes au bord de la vie', *Albert Camus et les écritures algériennes. Quelles traces?* (Aix-en-Provence, Edisud, 2004), pp. 127–33.
3. Emile Temime, *Un rêve méditerranéen* (Arles, Actes Sud, 2002), p. 140.

4. Jean-Pierre Biondi, *Les Anticolonialistes (1881–1962)* (Paris, Laffont, 1992), p. 216.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 228.
6. Todd, *Albert Camus, A Life*, pp. 90–4.
7. See Jacqueline Lévi-Valensi's comments in *Camus à 'Combat'*, ed. J. Lévi-Valensi (Paris, Gallimard, 2002), pp. 42–5.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 59–60.
9. See Ieme van der Poel, 'Albert Camus, ou la critique postcoloniale face au "rêve méditerranéen"', *Francophone Postcolonial Studies* 2.1 (Spring/Summer 2004), 70–9.
10. Christiane Chaulet-Achour, *Albert Camus et l'Algérie* (Algiers, Barzakh, 2004), p. 98.
11. Albert Camus, 'De kunstenaar en zijn tijd', trans. Liesbeth van Nes, *Raster* 108 (2004), 154–70 (169).

What would be the point of living if you thought that life was absurd, that it could never have meaning? This is precisely the question that Camus asks in his famous work, *The Myth of Sisyphus*. He says, "There is only one really serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide." Like Camus, he thought that life was devoid of intrinsic meaning. But he thought we could give it a kind of meaning by embracing illusion. That's what we have to learn from artists, according to Nietzsche. We need to have an honest confrontation with the grim truth and, at the same time, be defiant in refusing to let that truth destroy life. At the end of *Myth*, Camus says that we have to "imagine Sisyphus happy." Perhaps my imagination is limited, but I'm not sure I find that thought comforting. A confession that life is not worth living or suicide, (which is the origin of the thoughts like nothing matters, or why am I alive). A leap of faith or a belief in the supernatural or some religious order. (This according to Camus is a philosophic suicide). Both physical and metaphysical suicide ought to be rejected and we should strive for freedom from the absurd, which can be attained through acceptance. Hence, Camus is accessible only through the portals of his life experiences. See: *Camus: A Life*, by Olivier Todd. *Camus: A Critical Study, His Life and Work*, by A. McCarthy. He was inclined to be a communist but only in Algiers. He was not inclined to slide into the existentialist fold and pointedly disavowed being associated with it despite contrary labelling by others. Camus' love life was a mess. He was a total cad who slept with his friend's wives. He lived up to his gag-reflex-inducing Don Juan-philosophy-of-love from his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*. He juggled marriage and kids with several lifelong mistresses and endless flings. His doting and vulnerable wife suffered one mental breakdown after another. This is enough to make anyone reconsider their answer to the old question "If you could live in a certain time and place, that was some supremely enjoyable dirt. On with the gold now." *The Cambridge Companion to Camus*. *Camus: a life lived in critical times*. *The Cambridge Companion to Camus*. *The Cambridge Companion to Camus*. Camus was born on 7 November 1913, on the eve of the First World War, in the little village of Mondovi near Constantine, one of the major cities of what was then French Algeria. His mother was of Spanish origin, his father a so-called pied-noir, a Frenchman born in the colony and whose family had lived there for several generations. In his last and unfinished work, the autobiographical novel *Le Premier Homme*, Camus claims that his forebears had fled from Alsace after the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-1. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest "whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories" comes afterwards. These are games; one must first answer. And if it is true, as Nietzsche claims, that a philosopher, to deserve our respect, must preach by example, you can appreciate the importance of that reply, for it will precede the definitive act. These are facts the heart can feel; yet they call for careful study before they become clear to the intellect. If I ask myself