

Albert Camus, An Existentialist and a Modern Diogenes

by

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Albert Camus (1913-1960) wrote “The Stranger” (1942), “The Plague” (1947) and “The Fall” (1956). These were serious novels that made readers think. Reflections about God, freedom, slavery, death, love and immorality in these novels were inspired by conversations in “The Brothers Karamazov” and “The Possessed” by Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Comments about love, marriage, politics, and religion in “Moby Dick” and “Pierre of the Ambiguities” by Herman Melville resonate in the despairing attitudes of the unnamed narrator, Dr. Bernard Rieux, Jean Tarrou and Raymond Rampart in “The Plague”; Meursault in “The Stranger”; and Jean Baptiste Clamence in “The Fall.”

Camus could not convey characters well. They epitomized disembodied abstractions rather than flesh and blood figures. He was better at sketching oppressive atmospheres and desolate places in Algiers, Oran, Paris and Amsterdam. His cumulative descriptions of the effects of the plague in Oran were as gradual and as horrifying as those described by Daniel Defoe in “Journal of the Plague Year” (1663) or Thomas Mann in “Death in Venice” (1912). Camus thought God had no bearing on the human condition. To say that he was an atheist is therefore irrelevant. He wrote a book condemning the death penalty, “Reflections on the Guillotine” (1957), in which he cynically concluded, everybody is a murderer.

More than most of the existentialists, Camus was unflinchingly honest which may be the reason why he was endemically unhappy. To understand Camus’ conviction that life is meaningless and yet still worth living, one must read his novels and philosophical writings, particularly “The Myth of Sisyphus” (1941). Sisyphus, King of Corinth, put death in chains for which deed the gods punished him by compelling him to roll a huge boulder to the top of a mountain, from whence the boulder rolled down, thus forcing Sisyphus to begin the task all over again. Such Camus reasoned are the futile and meaningless actions of man.

Camus was not an ideologue. Unlike many intellectuals in France, like Jean Paul Sartre, he did not approve of the Communist party nor did he, like Teilard de Chardin, embrace the mystical consolations of religion. Nor did he despise the naiveté, conformity and ignorance of the bourgeoisie. Inhabitants of Oran in “The Plague” are dull people, but they fought the plague and when it was over many of them were the better for it. Camus agreed with Dante Alighieri that the only way people can get to heaven is by way of hell. In “The Fall,” Clamence, the unappealing anti-hero, soliloquizes interminably within a cocoon spun from his own failings. Camus may not have read Nathaniel Hawthorne, who wrote “Ethan Brand,” but the two authors knew well the paranoia tormented people get themselves into.

Before the war Camus defended Muslims in Algeria against French exploiters. While France was occupied by German invaders, he joined the Resistance. He was, however, a cerebral writer, not a physical fighter. He supplied activists with verbal rationalizations and stiffened their resentment against those who would enslave and tyrannize by means of false propaganda, brutal force, and pie-in-the-sky dogmas. Camus' blasphemous statements ignited the conscience of his readers. They represent the thoughts of a man who held that nothing matters even as he tried to escape from his pessimistic prognostications. See the negative spaces—the unexplored but subjective ramifications—that surround his following abrasively objective sentences:

“Maman died today, or maybe it was yesterday.” (From “The Stranger”)

“Can one be a saint if God does not exist? That is the only concrete problem I know of today.” (From “The Plague”)

“A single sentence will suffice for modern man: he fornicated and read the papers.” (From “The Fall”)

Even when Camus claimed life was absurd, he gave it purpose.

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