

CAMUS IN THE UNDERWORLD

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Memory is not what we remember, but that which remembers us.

Octavio Paz, *Eagle or Sun*

Herbert R. Lottman, *Albert Camus: A Biography*, Garden City: Doubleday, 1979, pp. xii + 753.

The biographer must begin his or her task under the searing vision of Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*; under the injunction to "Hear me. For I am such and such a person. Above all, do not mistake me for someone else." For Nietzsche knew the funeral rites that negate lives, transforming them into the accomplished facts of the past as witnesses to history, to psychology, to God and to biography itself.¹ Above all each trying to forget the "testimony" that removes the veil of otherness, of strangeness to make "one become what one is."

It is this testimony that is so lacking in the modern period as René Char reminded France in his World War II resistance journal which he later dedicated to Albert Camus. "Our inheritance was left to us by no testament."² The "heroes" who in former times were the authors of the deed which created the testimony now go unrecognized. As Char says of his own journal it "might well have belonged to no one."³ This anonymity forces the biographer back into our inheritance; to the world of Homer where the nature of this testimony becomes apparent. It will be recalled that Odysseus travelled wearing the mask of "nobody" as he states in his encounter with Polyphemus, the Cyclops, or as his arrival in the palace of Alcinous, king of the Phoenicians, demonstrates.⁴ Yet the mask is transcended at the Phoenician court where Odysseus still unrecognized hears his own story and is moved to tears. For that fleeting moment at the hands of an unwitting biographer the testimony that René Char envisages becomes apparent. Odysseus is given renewed life, for the recounting of his story brings him to state his name which then sends him again on his way to Ithaca.⁵

Ithaca stands as the central symbol in Camus' work for a life beyond the "underworld" where Camus felt events of the modern world had consigned

CAMUS IN THE UNDERWORLD

us.⁶ Hence the task of re-imagining the voyage to Ithaca while entering the labyrinth of political action. This adventure is the theme of Camus' principal theoretical work *The Rebel*. *The Rebel* is itself a reflection of the problems of the *Iliad*, of power and its transcendence, directed, as Camus informs us, towards the choice of Ithaca. "We shall choose Ithaca, the faithful land, frugal and audacious thought, lucid action, and the generosity of the man who understands."⁷ We also know that Camus, like Odysseus, began his voyage as unrecognized, or, to use Camus' own phrases, as an outsider or one who is in exile. And from the compendium of Camus' characters it is clear that this unrecognized is that of the modern world: of the petty official Grand from *The Plague*, or of the clerk Meursault in *The Outsider*. As Camus often pointed out, it is here that one finds heroes if one cares to look.

Now we have the framework to approach Nietzsche's injunction. The biographer must tell the story of Camus' voyage to Ithaca cognizant of Camus' awareness that he was travelling unknown in a world without epic heroes. The guide one finds along the path is in the first instance the record of Camus' life; that constant din of facts which, to anticipate my comments on the biography before us, is splendidly laid open by Lottman. But of more importance, beyond this existential white noise, are Camus' own testimonials: his essays, his plays, his short stories and his novels. These works rise above the all-consuming facts that feed — to quote William Blake — the "printing house in hell," carrying with them the forgetfulness necessary to escape the underworld, and to "become what one is" at the hands of the imaginative biographer.

Lottman's biography of Camus begins at the correct point — with Camus' own words from his *Notebooks*: "A première vue la vie de l'homme est plus intéressante que ses oeuvres. Elle fait tout obstiné et tendu. L'unité d'esprit y règne. Il y a un souffle unique à travers toutes ces années. Le roman, c'est lui. A revoir évidemment."⁸

It is my contention that Lottman's failure as a biographer is evident in his misunderstanding of the last sentence in the above quotation that Camus virtually takes for granted. The literary texts are central to the life of a writer, but their centrality is only evident if they are re-read. One must see again the novels and plays not as attempts at autobiography through a "fictional screen" as Lottman suggests (p. 23). Rather the texts should illuminate the praxis of life.

Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* notes that one knows nothing of an actor's life if one sees him or her only on the stage. Yet after seeing many performances there is a sense for the audience that the actor is in part the character portrayed.

It is certain that apparently, though I have seen the same actor a hundred times, I shall not for that reason know him any better personally. Yet if I add up the heroes he has

DAVID COOK

personified and if I say that I know him a little better at the hundredth character counted off, this will be felt to contain an element of truth. For this apparent paradox is also an apologue. There is a moral to it. It teaches that a man defines himself by his make-believe as well as by his sincere impulses.⁹

Lottman in contrast gives the reader many detailed accounts of Camus' off-stage life. Yet to this reader Albert Camus begins to recede as the biography continues yielding in the end not to the artist but to his shadow.

Though Lottman makes modest claims for his work, it is impossible to write a biography without an interpretation of that life. Lottman views Camus' life from the perspective of the past. Lottman is a "passéiste," seeing Camus' career as trapped within the situation of his Algerian upbringing, and as inevitably turning back towards this experience in his later life to re-work out his "family dramas." "His last novel [The First Man] would have explored [his family's specific dramas] more deeply, and art might then have given his Belcourt childhood a form which would have allowed the author to put it out of his mind" (p. 19). Putting aside the naive cathartic view of literature expressed by Lottman in the above quotation this view of Camus' life tends toward raising Camus to the unchanging heights of, in this case, the tragic myth. While Lottman avoids the worst aspects of critics such as Albert Maquet who also treat Camus' life and work as a case of arrested development,¹⁰ Lottman's rejection of historical change blunts any critical insight that his subjectivism might have.

Nevertheless, within the limits of Lottman's theoretical perspective his biography does provide a valuable contribution to the understanding of Albert Camus. The work traces the events of Camus' life in chronological order divided into five periods, beginning with his upbringing in Algeria which is described for the first time in great detail. Lottman then turns, in the second period, to Camus' activities in the War years leading to his growing fame in France as an author at Gallimard — which comprises the third period. The fourth period of Camus' life concerns the years of sickness and despondency as Camus' fame grew, culminating in the Nobel Prize. Finally, in the last period, Lottman suggests that Camus was embarking again with confidence on his work at the time of his death. Lottman draws together a massive amount of information in this study, most of which was generally known, but which Lottman has expanded. Outside of this valuable service of collecting known facts, Lottman discovers new facts in three important areas: Camus' ancestry, his political activities in Algeria and his final works left unfinished at his death. It is unfortunate that in each case the significance of these new facts escapes Lottman.

CAMUS IN THE UNDERWORLD

At the outset of the study Lottman quite legitimately focuses on Camus' ancestry. The question of his origins is of prime importance, for it is often an area virtually unknown and yet one which will never be adequately discovered. Prior to Lottman's exacting fact finding, it was the accepted belief that Camus' paternal grandfather came from Alsace or Lorraine whereas the file demonstrates that the "first recorded Camus" lived in Bordeaux and emigrated to Algeria a generation before the conventional date used in Camus scholarship. A similar confusion exists with Camus' paternal grandmother whose ancestry leads back to the Ardèche region in the south of France.

Lottman uses this new fact as the core around which he interprets Camus' as yet unpublished, incomplete last novel *The First Man*. There is no attempt to see through Camus' ancestry the development of Camus' life from a psychological vantage¹¹ nor from the vantage of the history of French colonialism,¹² nor from the intellectual perspective employed in this review. One is grateful for what Lottman tells us of this last novel, yet the fact that it treats of an Algerian setting similar to Camus' childhood home is not sufficient reason to call it "a growing up novel," nor is it sufficient to make the assumption that "*The First Man*, then, was the first generation French Algerian" (pp. 6 - 7). It is incumbent on the biographer to listen to the author. Camus always played with a number of titles for his works before choosing one. In this case the manuscript was entitled "The First Man" but, as Lottman tells us, Camus thought of calling this book "Adam" (p. 8). If the novel takes the reader back to Camus' origins it does so not only in the physical sense, but also in the intellectual sense. The origins of the Western tradition in the classical past and in the Christian myth were ultimately of greater importance to Camus than his family dramas. Camus' involvement with the Christian myth is evident in his earliest writings such as in the 1933 fragment "Dialogue de Dieu avec son Ame,"¹³ as well as a few years later in his thesis prepared for the Diplôme d'Etudes Supérieures under the title "Métaphysique Chrétienne et Néoplatonisme."¹⁴ What form this involvement took is rarely even hinted at by Lottman despite the fact that the question of Camus' religious views is the subject of much of the secondary literature.

The secondary literature is itself marred by a similarly narrow, but opposing, perspective. Of the studies focusing on Camus' "religious" thought the most complete is James Woelfel's study *Camus: A Theological Perspective*.¹⁵ Yet even this work treats Camus' relation to Christianity while excluding his central concern with the non-religious symbolized by Ithaca. As a systematic examination of the early works demonstrates, the two universes were not unrelated for Camus.¹⁶ The dominance of the Lord over the sinner was analogous in structure for Camus to the master-slave relation of the secular world. These two perspectives lead in Camus' later work to his concept of action.

Lottman's failure to appreciate Camus' intellectual life directs his biography

DAVID COOK

towards the fragmentation typical of a newspaper. Stories appear side by side without any apparent connection. A specific example, the most insightful instance of his investigative reporting, concerns Camus' early political activity, and his relation with the communist party. Camus' activity in this sphere remains a mystery for Lottman as he did not appreciate the growing entanglement in Camus' mind amongst concerns that eventually became rebellion; specifically his rejection of Christian metaphysics as a metaphysics of the master-slave, his desire for a practical end to colonial exploitation, and his interest in the role of art as a critical tool and guide. Within the context of these, Lottman's description of Camus' trial and expulsion from the Algerian Communist Party (PCA) leads to much greater understanding of Camus' later positions.¹⁷

Camus had been recruited by the party to an "intellectual cell" and had led the party's cultural activities through the Maison de Culture, a front organization, and his Théâtre du Travail (pp. 149-50). He was also given the task of "recruitment in Arab circles" (p. 149). Here one has all the elements necessary to sketch Camus' expulsion. The events preceding Camus' trial begin with the Stalin-Laval pact in May 1935. This set in motion a series of gradual splits in the anti-colonial alignment of the left movements in Algeria. What is often not stressed in descriptions of this period of Camus' activity is the significance of the very marked gap between the official communist position which was indirectly supportive of France and hence of colonialism, and the increased activity of Moslem nationalists. Camus, by supporting Messali Hadj's Etoile Nord-Africaine or Messali's later Parti du Peuple Algérien, was challenging the PCA's rather uncomfortable rejection of Messali. Even Camus' support of the mild electoral reforms of the Blum-Violette bill was viewed suspiciously, as a result of Camus' rejection of the communist's alliance with the Radical Socialist Party (p. 156). The result was his expulsion by the PCA. There are two important considerations arising from Camus' relation to the PCA.

The first relates to the controversy that has surrounded Connor Cruise O'Brien's accusation in his *Albert Camus* that Camus held a colonial attitude toward Moslem culture, and that he implicitly supported the "myth of French Algeria."¹⁸ Camus has been defended by Germaine Brée in her *Camus and Sartre: Crisis and Commitment*¹⁹ to which one could add additional facts from Lottman indicating that at the very least O'Brien underestimated Camus' contact with and support of the Arabs.²⁰ Camus never denied that his own cultural background was French. The knowledge that his ancestors arrived in Algeria at the beginning of the nineteenth century would only have strengthened his resolve.

The second consideration helps bring into focus the later attack in *The Rebel* on communist movements. The general consensus, which is starkly expressed in the celebrated article by Francis Jeanson in the *Les Temps Modernes* review²¹ of

CAMUS IN THE UNDERWORLD

The Rebel, is that Camus was narrowly anti-communist. Camus' response to this charge provoked Sartre who entered the debate which ended, as is well known, in the split between them. In retrospect, with the advantage of the further information that Lottman provides, it is clear that Camus' attitude to communism evolved out of his early political activity, and his early intellectual development. The rejection of Camus by the PCA was a rejection of the activities he was engaged in: on the one hand, the fight against colonialism; and on the other hand, the form of cultural activity expressed most directly in his theatre work. This led Camus to a view of history markedly different from Sartre's. Camus saw political action as involving the rejection of absolutist claims which he associated with both Christianity and the communism as he experienced it, and which brought to the fore the importance of art and literature in providing the metaphysical basis for action. The structure of *The Rebel* reflects this twin concern of a critique of the political thought which legitimized revolutionary action, the so-called "historical rebellion," and the critique of metaphysical rebellion which accompanied historical rebellion as expressed through literature. It is one of the greatest disappointments of Lottman's book that his description of the debate with Sartre (chap. 37), as well as the earlier encounters with Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Arthur Koestler (pp. 405, 440), are both fragmentary and devoid of theoretical understanding.

These debates were important in light of the rediscovery of Hegel through Alexandre Kojève's lectures²² or as Camus experienced it through Jean Hypolite's *The Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of the Spirit*, and the subsequent impact of the Stalinist trials and labour camps in the Soviet Union. Camus' early discovery of this negative side of communism went unrecognized, yet this experience placed him in many ways in advance of the editors of *Les Temps Modernes* whose own questioning and rejection came later. Yet Camus' experience of communism did not lead him to jettison the centrality of overthrowing the master-slave relation. This is an area which calls for a subsequent examination of the theoretical issues involved, for few if any critics have seriously regarded Camus' views on the master-slave relation.

Lottman's approach to *The Rebel* curiously turns Camus' involvement with the central problems of politics into an involvement solely with himself: "In every way, *L'Homme révolté* was a personal statement, despite its disguise as a treatise of political philosophy ..." (p. 49). Lottman here deprives Camus of substance almost completely. While the political philosophy expressed in *The Rebel* is not in the end without its flaws²³ it was central to Camus' life. It is precisely through this understanding that the disguise is removed. Regrettably Camus' literary work is also deprived of substance by Lottman. For example, *The Plague* is turned into a reflection of Camus' exile from his Algerian friends (p. 279).²⁴ There is a similarity here between the attitudes behind the quarrels that ended so bitterly for Camus and Lottman's attitude. Each of the actors in the drama seems not to be able to take what Camus says seriously. The outsider

DAVID COOK

wore the mask given to him by society, a mask that only occasionally was Albert Camus.

Thus, there is a certain irony in considering the final projects on the theme of nemesis that Lottman informs us Camus was planning. The approach Camus took to this project gives the reader a more precise understanding of how he re-interpreted his past than does the approach implicit in Lottman's interpretation of *The First Man* referred to earlier. In a report of a conversation with Jean Grenier, Camus' old teacher, Lottman informs us that the theme of the projected "Le Mythe de Némésis" would return to treat the question of "Christianity and Hellenism" (p. 492). This is precisely the theme of Camus' Diplôme. Further on Lottman states the following facts. "There were six detached sheets of aphorisms on buff paper with the title 'Pour Némésis,' a reference to the long planned book-length essay ... notes for what Camus called 'my return to pre-Socratism' *i.e.*, intuitive poetry, a fusion between poetry and philosophy" (p. 657).

The beginnings to which Camus was returning were the beginnings of Western tradition. The movement back towards that "fusion of poetry and philosophy" of the pre-Socratics was surely back to the Homeric pursuit of Ithaca. This journey was interrupted, though not without leaving us a few final signs as to its direction. In the most moving part of Lottman's biography we learn of the circumstances surrounding Camus' fatal car accident. One fact stands out which is in some sense Camus' last testament. In the wreckage was found Camus' briefcase containing the incomplete draft of *The First Man*, a copy of Shakespeare's *Othello*, and one of Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*. The imaginative eye must surely see in the blending of Shakespeare's powerful unmasking of Iago with Nietzsche's "gay science" — itself the poetic philosophy of the "south"²⁵ — the path towards nemesis, that last form of justice which Camus sought. Here we see the continuation of Camus' final published works, especially the short story "The Renegade" in *The Exile and the Kingdom* and the novel *The Fall* where the master-slave dialectic founders in a duplicity that is at the core of Christian and political use of guilt for Camus. The characters in both *The Fall* and in "The Renegade" suffer from the negation at the core of society which renders them "nameless." It is, of course, only speculation as to whether *The First Man* would for Camus honour Adam's task in Genesis of giving names to God's creatures.

Camus returned to the themes he considered as a young man. Lottman's final words are directed to the most elegant of these themes; the ruins at Tipasa. But Camus understood — Lottman does not — that the ruins are never the same upon each visit. Camus wrote two essays concerning Tipasa — in 1936 and 1952.²⁶ Each has its own wisdom. Camus notes that Sisyphus, having enjoyed a chance to return to earth, desired to escape the underworld.²⁷ Camus, if given a similar chance, would return again to Tipasa. It is there that

CAMUS IN THE UNDERWORLD

Camus "becomes what he is" amongst the Phoenician ruins that serve as his memorial — and as a reminder of Odysseus' encounter at the court on his way home. The biographer must bring Camus again to this place. To do so one must know the meaning of such returns. Regrettably, Lottman leaves Camus in the underworld.

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Notes

1. See Jean Genet's *Funerel Rites*, trans. Bernard Frechtman, New York: Castle Books, 1969. Genet attempts to avoid the loss of the memory of those who fought in the resistance — a theme that he shares in common with Camus and René Char.
2. René Char, *Hypnos Waking*, Random House: N.Y., 1956, pp. 108-109. Hannah Arendt quotes this aphorism in her preface to *Between Past and Future*, New York: Viking, 1968, p. 3. I have employed Arendt's translation here. The importance of René Char to Camus' life is correctly emphasized by Lottman — an importance which almost all other critics have failed to recognize.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
4. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, New York: Herder and Herder, 1972, Horkheimer and Adorno point out that "both the hero and Nobody are possible connotations of the name Udeis" that Odysseus gives to Polyphemus in book 9 of *The Odyssey*, (p. 60).
5. The failure to recognize, or to state, one's name is an important theme in Camus' writing. See for example "The Misunderstanding" in *Caligula and Three Other Plays*, New York: Vintage, 1958, where the son's inability to be recognized by his family after a long absence ends in his murder.
6. See for example Camus' short story "Prometheus in the Underworld," in the collection *Summer*, published in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, New York: Vintage Books, 1970.
7. Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. A. Bower, New York: Vintage Books, 1956, p. 306.
8. Lottman, p. vi. Lottman leaves the quote untranslated. The Justin O'Brien translation is as follows: "At first sight a man's life is more interesting than his works. It constitutes an obstinate, taut whole. Unity of mind dominates. There is a single inspiration through all those years. He is the novel. To be rewritten obviously." *Notebooks 1942-1951*, New York: The Modern Library, 1965, pp. 14-15. The last sentence is more appropriately translated: "To be re-read obviously."
9. *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien, New York: Vintage Books, 1955, p. 9.
10. See Albert Maquet, Albert Camus: *The Invincible Summer*, London: John Calder, 1958.
11. Lottman even seems unaware of any of the literature in this area. See for example the summary of the psychological literature found in Donald Lazere's *The Unique Creation of Albert Camus*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973.

DAVID COOK

12. Cf. Connor Cruise O'Brien, *Albert Camus*, London: Fontana, 1970 and related remarks in the body of my text.
13. Collected by Paul Viallaneix in *Cahiers II: Le premier Camus suivi d'Ecrits de jeunesse d'Albert Camus*, Paris: Gallimard, 1973, pp. 235-239.
14. Camus' *Diplôme* is reprinted in the second volume of the *Pléaide* collection of his work entitled *Essais*, Paris: Gallimard, 1965.
15. James Woelfel, *Camus: A Theological Perspective*, New York: Abingdon Press, 1975.
16. See the unpublished doctoral thesis by David Cook entitled "The Political Thought of Albert Camus," University of Toronto, 1978.
17. Critics have generally dealt inaccurately with the question of whether Camus resigned from the PCA and when this occurred. Critical inaccuracy stems in part from Jean Grenier's account in his *Albert Camus: Souvenirs*, Paris: Gallimard, 1968. The fact that Grenier, Camus' former teacher and friend, did not know of the events surrounding Camus' expulsion indicates that Camus valued highly his private life. Lottman shows no interest in speculating on the privateness, yet it clearly indicates that some caution must be employed in relying as heavily as Lottman does on personal interviews.
18. Cruise O'Brien, p. 14.
19. New York: Delta Books, 1972.
20. See Lottman, pp. 567-577 for a discussion of Camus contact with the FLN. On p. 591 Lottman gives a brief description of Camus' meeting with Mohamed Lebjaoui who was for a period at the head of the FLN. Finally Lottman provides some details of Camus' later interventions with the French government on behalf of individuals such as Amar Ouzegane. Many of these interventions were made without any publicity (p. 693). The reader might also have expected a discussion of Camus' resistance activities in this context. Lottman provides one, but does not add anything significant to our knowledge of Camus' activities.
21. Francis Jeanson, "Albert Camus ou l'âme révoltée," *Les Temps Modernes*, #79 mai, 1952.
22. Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, New York: Basic Books, 1964.
23. See Cook.
24. The reader of Lottman's chapter 20, entitled "*La Peste*," will undoubtedly note that the chapter has little to do with the novel. The few comments that appear of importance are found in the next chapter. This kind of confusion is found throughout the book, perhaps indicating the chapter headings were an afterthought.
25. See Walter Kaufmann's introduction to his translation of Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*, New York: Vintage, 1974, p. 6, where Kaufmann interprets the meaning of the title in terms of the contrast of the artistic philosopher of the "south" with the heavier German scholars of the "north." It is clear that Camus' own thought followed Nietzsche's in this vein.
26. The essays are reprinted in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*.
27. "[Sisyphus] obtained from Pluto permission to return to earth in order to chastise his wife. But when he had seen again the face of this world, enjoyed water, and sun, warm stones and the sea, he no longer wanted to go back to the infernal darkness." *The Myth of Sisyphus*, pp. 88-89.