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ALBERT CAMUS, MILITANT

by JUSTIN O'BRIEN

On the anniversary of Camus' death, a friend and translator and eminent scholar of French letters recalls the man whose art and journalism combined to affect the age.

Perhaps the rapid, sweeping fame of Albert Camus was a compensation granted him by fate, which knew in advance, of course, that he was to have but forty-six years of life. If his career was to be complete and his renown universal, everything had to move swiftly, and the world had to accept him at once. His tragic death in an automobile accident on 4 January 1960 at the height of his creative life fits the growing legend of the man who once said: "I have too much youth in me to be able to speak of death." And yet, throughout his work he constantly returned to the contemplation of death; he was a death-haunted man.

The agents of fate who speeded Camus' worldwide reputation were legion: friends and publishers, translators from Norway and Finland to Yugoslavia and Portugal, from Poland to Japan. Most likely, he couldn't even have pronounced most of their names properly. Now that Camus is dead and his second posthumous work is to be published in America in my translation, I am urged to look upon myself as one of those myriad agents—a minor one because I didn't begin to translate his work until four of his books were available in English. But having frequented Albert Camus in all sorts of circumstances—on a lecture platform during his first visit to this country; in a speeding jeep crossing Paris, with André Gide in flowing cape on the front seat turning round to talk to us perched behind him; at a lunchtable in Paris where the late American novelist Richard Wright was his other guest; in his office as an editor of the Gallimard publishing house; on a Parisian stage where he was rehearsing a cast of actors in *Caligula*—I early succumbed to the warmth, simplicity, and straightforward charm of the man who has been snatched from us. In his person as in his writings, he established at once a fraternal relationship with those he was addressing and no one could remain impervious to his boyish smile.

That smile is uppermost in my memory, which now sees Camus most frequently as a young visitor to our shores, quite simple and unaffected, leaning on the mantelpiece at Columbia's Maison Française, or in my apartment in Greenwich Village with a cigarette in his hand, answering questions thrown at him by a group of eager-eyed students sitting at his feet. Like an astute politician, he was ever particularly interested in youth, for he knew that the future lay in them. Besides—despite the weight of his experience, so different from any we had known—he seemed so young himself.

But my first personal contact with Albert Camus, even before seeing him in such intimate surroundings, took place in March 1946, very shortly before Knopf published the first Camus

book here. I say "personal contact" because as an American officer in Paris in October 1944, I had first heard of the young novelist-dramatist-philosopher of whom all Paris was talking. His books were already *épuisés* and *introuvables* but, knowing that the Gallimard firm always kept a certain stock in the cellar, I managed to come home with copies. Then, in early 1946, almost simultaneous announcements spoke of *The Stranger* to appear here and of Camus' first visit to America.

No American Francophile could remember any lecture in French that had ever drawn an audience of more than three hundred in New York. Yet, on the evening of 28 March 1946, we were to be at least four times that many in the huge auditorium at Columbia University known as McMillin Theater. To be sure, it was the first such manifestation, as the French say, since the war, and the three lecturers were named Vercors, Thimerais, Albert Camus.

The Silence of the Sea, published here by Pantheon in French and in English, and variously attributed to all the great French writers from whom we had felt so dreadfully cut off for four years, had established overnight the reputation of the pseudonym "Vercors." "Thimerais" remained unknown, for the *Editions de Minuit,* which had clandestinely published and circulated in 1943 his moving essay entitled *La Pensée patiente,* had not yet reached us.

But many already knew that Albert Camus, at the age of thirty, had brought out a novel *(The Stranger)* that was greatly admired in France, an essay with a very strange title, and two plays. A few Americans in uniform had come back with copies of the newspaper *Combat,* of which Camus was said to be one of the founders.

This was about all that New Yorkers knew about the three young Frenchmen who were to speak on the 28th of March. But everyone was eager to hear French spoken again and to see in flesh and blood some survivors of the black years of the Occupation. M. Claude Lévi-Strauss, Cultural Counsellor of the French Embassy at the time, had the idea of holding the meeting under the patronage of an inter-university committee, and, inasmuch as I had just shed my uniform to resume duties as an associate professor of French at Columbia, he named me chairman of the committee.

Consequently, Vercors, Thimerais (whose real name, Léon Motchane, is better known among physicists and mathematicians than among literary people), and I picked up Albert Camus in midtown to arrange for the symposium. It was already announced as "The Crisis of Mankind" and the title must certainly have been Camus'. The day before the big show at Columbia, the four of us went up to Camus' room in one of those mothy hotels on upper Broadway. I shall never forget the utter simplicity and the smile, reminiscent of a Paris street-urchin, that distinguished the youngest among us, nor the admiring glance cast at him by an attractive girl in the elevator. The moment we were in his room and the athletic young man had stretched out on the bed with a few notes in front of him, he easily dominated the group.

And the following evening, however eloquently the two others spoke, Camus easily dominated the debate. Making no distinctions between victors and vanquished in the war, he rapidly sketched a horridly debased conception of man that was, he said, the legacy of World War II. Had not *all* of mankind, forgetting ancient ideals, descended to the very vilest means in its intramural strife? But with his conviction, and with his unassuming, youthful manner, the moment he launched into his unflattering subject—which permitted examples drawn from Algiers, Auschwitz, the streets of Paris and Madrid—it became apparent that he was in fact defending human dignity and asking justice for all. When he told us that, as human beings of the twentieth century, we were all of us responsible for the war, and even for the horrors we had just been fighting (the concentration camps, extermination by gas), all of us in the huge hall were convinced, I think, of our common culpability. Then Camus—who was never one to castigate without embodying an affirmative suggestion in his sermon—told us how we could contribute, even in the humblest way, to re-establishing the honesty and dignity of men.

Just then, one of our students passed up to the stage a note saying that thieves had stolen the receipts, intended for war-orphans in France. After Camus' moving remarks, I could do nothing but announce that the "Crisis of Mankind"

was at the door and that our charitable endeavor would be of no benefit to French orphans. Fortunately, a man of good will rose in the middle of the audience and proposed that on the way out everyone pay his entrance-fee a second time. At once the two girls from whom the little black box had been stolen rushed out to the lobby and set up their box-office again.

No one was surprised to learn the next day that the second "take," the only one left, amounted to far more than the first one. After all, Camus had spoken meanwhile and everyone had left under the spell of his persuasive words. One of the other speakers, back in Paris, told the story to the *Figaro*, which published a half-column about it—all to the glory of America, the land of gangsters and of generous hearts.

And it is quite appropriate that Albert Camus should have first addressed his American public, or what was to become his American public, on such a subject. He was at the time still editor-in-chief of *Combat*, which had introduced a new purity and vigor into French journalism. In one of his early editorials he had opposed humanity to mediocrity as if it were quite natural to define mankind by what is not mediocre. And in all of his editorials he had militantly defended the dignity of man and man's aptitude for greatness. "The Camus of *Combat*," writes Etiemble, "showed that a journalist can distinguish himself by character while distinguishing the language, making of an editorial or of the humblest article a work of art."

One of the best photographs of Camus shows him standing at the imposing stone in the printing plant of a newspaper. With a pencil in his right hand and the ever-present cigarette in his left, he is correcting one of his editorials while an attentive printer stands beside him ready to run off another proof. Camus looks confident and happy, although working under pressure. Did he not say in the last year of his life that there were two places where he had been supremely happy? One was on stage either acting or directing a company of actors and the other was a newspaper composing-room. In both places he belonged to a team working in harmonious effort toward the realization of a specific aim. And in both situations he was likely to be the moving spirit.

Unfortunately, Camus the journalist and polemicist is still inadequately known in America. And yet, throughout his too-short and most active life, he never abandoned the journalism that had been his introduction to writing. In Algiers in 1938, at the age of twenty-five, he had joined the staff of *Alger-Républicain*, and the following year his forthright reportage on the misery of the Kabyle tribes of Algeria had caused a sensation and incurred the wrath of the government. He was even then working on his play *Caligula* and already planning his first novel, *L'Etranger*. Unable to find work in Algiers because of the official distrust of him, he had gone to Paris, early in the Occupation years, to work for *Paris-Soir*, one of the biggest dailies. Now beyond doubt a professional journalist, he may even then have dreamt of one day having his own newspaper marked with his personal stamp. The opportunity came after he joined the powerful resistance movement known as "Combat" in 1942 and helped found the clandestine newspaper of the same name, of which he became editor-in-chief. Despite his postwar position as an editor in the Gallimard publishing house, despite his growing fame from the publication of *L'Etranger* and *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* and the staging of his plays, *Le Malentendu* and *Caligula*, he continued to edit *Combat* until 1947. There it was that he could exert his most direct influence. As one of his young associates, Roger Grenier, wrote of that period: "The whole administrative staff of the newspaper, the whole team of printers, all those who approached him, even if they had not read his books and were far removed from the world of books, realized fully who Camus was and were comforted and enriched by contact with him."

For several years after 1947, Camus held no regular position in journalism—partly because of uncertain health and partly because his income was then assured by his position with Gallimard and by the royalties from his growing shelf of bocks and plays. Yet he continued, through occasional articles and speeches, to take a stand in those causes that were dear to him. Then in the autumn of 1955, when the weekly *Express*, for which he had frequently written, became a daily with the impressive collaboration of such as François Mauriac, Pierre

Mendès-France, and François Mitterand, he returned to regular journalism, contributing to *L'Express* at least two articles a week. It was then that his statements on the North African problem reached the widest possible public. After *L'Express* again became a weekly, Camus tended to avoid journalistic commitments that would tie him down to frequent deadlines. Still, his name continued to appear irregularly among the by-lines of numerous Parisian weeklies. Until his death in January 1960, Camus was never completely divorced from the career he had begun in Algiers as a youth.

By setting an example of lucidity and courage in facing and answering the questions that torment us, Albert Camus did leave behind a model of superior journalism. Whether read in the newspapers for which he wrote them or in the three volumes in which he collected them under the modest title of *Actuelles* (1950, 1953, and 1958), his articles gave the postwar generation the moral guidance it seemed to need. The very independence of mind that put him on the governmental black-list in 1939 allowed him to attack simultaneously Russian labor camps and American support of Franco. In facing squarely the anguishing problem of Algeria from 1938 to 1958 (one whole volume of *Actuelles* is properly devoted to this) he saw steadily, as only an Algerian Frenchman could, both the point of view of the Arabs and that of the more than a million French in Algeria. And his stirring series of articles on the Hungarian revolt of 1956, the most forthright to appear in France, allowed him to repeat and to document his memorable statement that "None of the evils that totalitarianism claims to remedy is worse than totalitarianism itself." The longest essay in the entire collection is the now famous "Reflections on the Guillotine," in which he vividly and convincingly marshals all the arguments for abolition of the death penalty. But even those pages, with their balanced appeals to reason, to sentiment, and to the senses, are no more moving than the brief evocation of his co-worker in the Resistance, the young poet René Leynaud, executed by the Germans for his patriotic activity.

"The era of chairbound artists is over," Camus once wrote. And, although he did not invent the now-popular term *engagé*, he personified for our time the committed writer. He achieved in his personality as in his work a delicate equilibrium between commitment and aloofness, between the state of solidarity and the state of solitude. As he said in "The Artist and his Time:"

> Even if, militants in our lives, we speak in our work of deserts and of selfish love, the mere fact that our lives are militant causes a special tone of voice to people with men that desert and that love. I shall certainly not choose the moment when we are beginning to leave nihilism behind to stupidly deny the values of creation in favor of the values of humanity, or vice versa. In my mind neither one is ever separated from the other and I measure the greatness of an artist (Molière, Tolstoy, Melville) by the balance he managed to maintain between the two. Today, under the pressure of events, we are obliged to transport that tension into our lives likewise. This is why so many artists, bending under the burden, take refuge in the ivory tower or, conversely, in the social church. But as for me, I see in both choices a like act of resignation. We must simultaneously serve suffering and beauty.

Obviously Camus' polemical and journalistic articles helped him maintain that personal equilibrium, without which his novels and plays would not be the consummate works of art they are. And yet, as he implies, the same tone of voice is in everything he wrote.

Indeed, the journalistic writings show once again, as does the first novel, that, from the start of his career, Albert Camus wrote with the assurance that belongs to maturity. And the Camus of *Actuelles* (for, despite having translated these pieces, I can see them and their title only in French) will always make me think of that evening in March 1946 when the young Pascal, or La Bruyère, or Voltaire stood up on the platform and told us off in our smugness and righteousness. It matters little by which of these names we call Camus, because he so obviously belongs among the moralists, with whom the French tradition abounds.

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Justin O'Brien is chairman of the French department at Columbia University and has translated numerous works by André Gide and Albert Camus, including the forthcoming volume of Camus' essays entitled Resistance, Rebellion, and Death *(Knopf) and the play* Caligula.