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Introduction

Albert Camus was a writer who emerged from social obscurity to become a best-selling author and post-war icon in France and beyond, winning the Nobel Prize for literature in 1957. His premature death in January 1960 – he and the publisher Michel Gallimard were killed in a car crash at Villeblevin, south of Paris – did nothing to diminish that iconic status. Yet behind this tidy, poverty-to-celebrity-to-tragedy narrative, a more complex life story and body of writing beckon. In his Nobel acceptance speech at Stockholm in December 1957, he points out that his life story is part of the collective history of his generation, which has lived through 'une histoire démentielle' ('an insane history'), one that has had to contend with 'le mouvement destructeur de l'histoire' (*Ess*, 1072, 1074) ('the destructive movement of history'). Born on the eve of the First World War, Camus continues, he and his contemporaries reached adulthood as Hitler obtained power and as the first of the revolutionary trials got under way in the Soviet Union. And just to round off the education of his generation, a string of confrontations follow – with civil war in Spain, the Second World War and the concentration camps. Meanwhile the children of this generation face the spectre of nuclear destruction. Camus's conclusion is that a death instinct is at work in the collective history of his times as tyranny's 'grands inquisiteurs' (*Ess*, 1073) ('grand inquisitors') hold sway.

In addition, however, Camus's Europeanness and more particularly his Frenchness was in an important sense atypical, skewed by the fact that he was born into the working-class poor of colonial Algeria, thereby joining the ranks of the so-called *petits colons* or small-time colonisers. This marginal position – adrift not only from metropolitan France but also from the French colonial bourgeoisie who ruled Algeria and an under-class of native Algerians whose plight he nevertheless highlighted[1] – was to remain central to his sense of identity. A French colony since 1831, Algeria had been declared French national territory by the French government of the 1848 revolution. In demographic terms, it was to become France's most French colonial possession,

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so that by 1936 there were a million Europeans living there, mostly French but also Spanish, Italians and Maltese. By the beginning of the Algerian War of Independence in 1954, Europeans made up about one-ninth of the overall population. As a contested social site, Algeria was to provide the setting for the unfolding of complex cultural tensions that manifest themselves in Camus's own life, in his public pronouncements and positions and in his fictional creations. Significantly it was specifically as a French Algerian that he chose to designate himself when thanking the Nobel Committee for their recognition of his work (*Ess*, 1892).

Camus was also, then, a child of empire, of what French colonial culture had learned to call 'la plus grande France' or greater France. These two dimensions in Camus's life, captured by Conor Cruise O'Brien in his suggestive book-title, *Albert Camus of Europe and Africa*, were to remain inseparable.[2] They generate tensions and dilemmas that go to the heart of his work and that shape and energise readers' varying responses to it. Certain events were crucial in bringing these tensions into acute focus. The Algerian War of Independence was an obvious example. Well before that, in May 1945, we find another troubling point of intersection on the European and North African axes. While the defeat of Nazism was being celebrated in France and much of Europe, Algeria saw an unleashing of French military repression in the form of the Sétif massacres, the French colonial army inflicting massive casualties on native Algerians in retaliation for the killing of Europeans by Algerian insurgents. Faced with these events, Camus appeared unable to appreciate that colonial structures themselves were fundamental to the problem. Wedded to a policy of benign colonial assimilation, he believed that the solution lay in the implementation of democratic French republican structures. His formulations of that belief were sometimes couched in a language that was uncomfortably close to the triumphal language of empire: 'L'Algérie est à conquérir une seconde fois' ('Algeria is to be conquered a second time') was how he exhorted French metropolitan readers of *Combat* a week after the massacres. In fairness, what he meant when he said that this second conquest would be even more difficult to achieve than the first (that is, the military conquest of Algeria in the nineteenth century) was that delivering wholesale political and economic reform would be a tall order. Yet his calls for social amelioration remain within the colonial paradigm and he appears unable to think his way beyond it: 'En Afrique du Nord comme en France, nous avons à inventer de nouvelles formules et à rajeunir nos méthodes si nous voulons que l'avenir ait encore un sens pour nous' ('In North Africa as in France, we must come up with new formulae and update our way of doing things if we wish to ensure that the future has a meaning for us').[3] Consistent with his urging of reform, Camus remains outspoken in

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his opposition to metropolitan French voices who call for what Camus condemns as 'une répression aveugle' ('a blind repression').[4] Ultimately, then, Camus's sincerely held reformist beliefs failed to encompass the sheer scale of social polarisation and colonial militarism signalled by the massacres in Sétif. Nevertheless, as Conor Cruise O'Brien forthrightly observed, for many North Africans, French Algeria was every bit as 'repugnant as the fiction of Hitler's new European order was for Camus'.[5] Yet as O'Brien concedes, Camus was most probably oblivious to any such analogy, as were many left-wing intellectuals at the time. Camus was most likely still a communist in 1937 when he developed a conception of Mediterranean culture which to all intents and purposes legitimised the French domination of Algeria.[6] In the longer term and particularly in the mid to late 1950s with the Algerian War of Independence in full spate, Camus remained fundamentally ill equipped to adapt to the nascent postcolonialism in the country of his birth. Indeed, he failed to give any credence to the logic of anti-colonialism.

Camus's rootedness in Frenchness was deep. He was, if we are to heed the semantic charge of the French term for a war orphan, a child or ward of the French nation, a 'pupille de la nation'. Belonging to the ranks of countless orphans of parents killed in the First World War (his father died from wounds received at the Battle of the Marne), he and his brother Lucien were placed, as it were both symbolically and, in a very restricted sense, economically, under the protection of the nation.[7] His conception of Frenchness was strongly coloured by historical memory of the service his French Algerian antecedents had paid to the nation. His unfinished novel, *Le Premier Homme* (*The First Man*), posthumously published in 1994, is a eulogy both of those nineteenth-century, small-time colonial settlers who uprooted and moved to North Africa and of the settlers' descendants (as well as indeed their Algerian Arab contemporaries), who in 1914 crossed the Mediterranean to fight in defence of France. By preserving the memory of these loyal predecessors, Camus implicitly shows his distaste for France's programme of post-war decolonisation. Indeed, he saw French equivocation in respect of Algeria as a form of betrayal. Camus remained deeply sensitive to the patriotic discourse that evoked memories of earlier struggles. He was both inspired and troubled by the memory of military sacrifice in the First World War. In the pages of *Le Premier Homme*, we are offered, as an exemplary tale of that sacrifice, Roland Dorgelès's patriotic war novel, *Les Croix de bois* (*The Wooden Crosses*), from which the primary school teacher Monsieur Germain (to whom Camus incidentally dedicated his Nobel Prize address) reverently reads to his pupils (*PH*, 139; *FM*, 114). In this way, the lessons of patriotism and the French educational system were mutually reinforcing.

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As a ward of the nation, so to speak, Camus had entitlement to a school bursary. French colonial culture was such that his academic formation was that provided by the national lycée system and Toby Garfitt sets out in detail the nature of the education Camus received (chapter 2). Reading about Camus's literary tastes in his brief essay on the aesthetics of the novel, 'L'Intelligence et l'Echafaud' (1943) – his enthusiasm for Mme de Lafayette, the Marquis de Sade, Stendhal and Proust – we could be forgiven for forgetting that his background was very unlike that of bourgeois, metropolitan France. Yet in his fiction, life as a *petit colon* is central. It is actively celebrated in the pages of *L'Etranger*, where the young shipping clerk Meursault, working in the port of Algiers, is unexcited by his boss's plans to open up an office in Paris and have Meursault work there. The reason Meursault gives is that 'toutes (les vies) se valaient et que la mienne ici ne me déplaisait pas du tout' (*TRN*, 1156) ('one life was as good as another and . . . I wasn't at all dissatisfied with mine here' (*O*, 44)).

Yet notwithstanding Meursault's stay-at-home, *petit colon* ways, for decades many readers saw in Meursault not, to put it crudely, a specific by-product of European colonial rule in North Africa but rather a largely innocent, indeed martyr-like figure falling foul of an unjust, Absurd world. As Danielle Marx-Scouras points out (chapter 10), Meursault became the rebellious hero of the post-war and Vietnam eras. Not surprisingly, given the resonance enjoyed by the text and the accompanying 'literature of the Absurd' tag, Camus tended to become synonymous, for many readers, with his Absurd fictional progeny, Meursault. If the runaway success of the novel largely obscured the cultural seedbed from which *L'Etranger* emerged, Peter Dunwoodie crucially restores the French Algerianist backdrop in his examination of the origins of Camus's literary formation (see chapter 11).

On the back of the success of *L'Etranger*, Camus became a cult figure whose reputation came to be entwined with an array of conditions, causes and concerns: the world of youth, impulsiveness and rebellion; existential angst and the struggle with evil; the deadening impact of social hypocrisy, the dread of conformism, and the individual's struggle to locate himself in society. But if one of the challenges in this *Companion* is to account for and situate historically the iconic status that Camus's work acquired for millions across national boundaries during his lifetime and after, our situation of his work needs to assume other dimensions too. We need to understand not just the adulation but also the acrimony his work aroused, particularly in the last decade of his life and in the era of postcolonialism. This entails a repositioning of Camus's work, the hope being that we will open up new ways of reading and contextualising the corpus.

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Camus continues to attract critical attention, both negative and approbatory. As Ieme van der Poel reminds us in chapter 1, Bernard-Henri Lévy, writing in 1991 against the backdrop of the decline of communism, accords Camus a special place in his account of French intellectual history; by contrast, Edward Said, writing around the same time, sees in Camus's work a strong exemplification, indeed a 'clarification', of the culture of empire.[8] In postcolonial Algeria, as Charles Forsdick and Debra Kelly both demonstrate, forty years on from the acrimonious War of Independence, a new generation of Algerian Francophone women writers, alienated by post-independence violence, has reclaimed Camus as an adoptive brother. These fluctuations in the reception given to his work provide their own period-specific and situation-specific cultural barometers. Likewise, the varying perspectives on Camus collected in this volume necessarily reflect modes of analysis and appreciation operating at a particular historical juncture.

By the same logic, if we wind back rapidly to the generation of the 1940s in France, we find a different set of circumstances and a contrasting reception. In that particular decade, which was dominated by the Second World War and the bleak post-war period, the young Camus was seen as the embodiment of a mindset, an outlook that he branded 'the Absurd'. At the heart of the Absurd lay what Camus saw as the confrontation between the human desire for a rational account of the world and a world that resisted any such explanation. Humanity craves clarity, Camus argues in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, and the world appears gratuitous and irrational. While the term enjoyed prominence particularly in French intellectual life, the Absurd came to suggest more a widespread feeling of human malaise than of any tightly argued philosophical system.

Camus was writing in a context of crisis in twentieth-century values prompted by the loss of religious belief, by totalitarianism and by war being waged on a global scale. As David Carroll explains in chapter 4, the mood in France (which Camus saw at first hand and wrote about) was one of abject desolation and hopelessness after national defeat and collaboration with the Nazis. For Camus personally, it was also a time of serious illness. Yet however urgent the term's application in that particular set of circumstances, the 'Absurd' label has come to be no less dated, no less historically specific than the events of the war itself. As Carroll demonstrates, Camus himself asserted in the mid 1950s that the Absurd was a phase which, however important, he had by then worked beyond. As with many forms of intellectual packaging or badging, the Absurd tag has persisted. It leaves us with a vestigial reminder of 1940s gloom. Yet if we overplay it, we risk obscuring not only the evolution in Camus's writing career but also, no less importantly, contrasting generational responses to his works. The progressive interpretations

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of Camus's output have led to a mythologisation of his work that has delivered both ringing endorsement and hostile critique. Thus exegesis of his work provided by French Camusians has been broadly accommodating and sometimes even hagiographic. In an Anglophone context, on the other hand, postcolonial readers of French literature often gravitate towards Camus (his language, characterisation and fictional settings) in their search for an exemplary incarnation of the colonial mindset. The complexity and internal contradictions of his work would suggest it can usefully be read in nuanced ways that neither adulation nor demonisation can adequately account for.

A high-profile opinion-former in war-torn France, Camus also played a central role in post-war cultural and political debate. As an internationalist, he was able to look well beyond metropolitan France and French Algeria. He engaged powerfully with issues such as dictatorship in Franco's Spain and other forms of totalitarianism, both fascist and communist, elsewhere in Europe. In an outspoken editorial published in *Combat* two days after the bombing of Hiroshima on 6 August 1945, Camus vigorously attacked the seductive presentation of the atomic bomb as a triumph of scientific genius in the French, American and British press. Rejecting as especially objectionable the 'picturesque literature' used to prettify and obscure the horror of atomic destruction, Camus concluded that a 'mechanical civilisation' had reached its point of ultimate savagery.[9] In a post-war France where communist influence was strong, he became increasingly sceptical, especially when news began to emerge of brutal Stalinist repression. He remained unconvinced by revolutionary ideology, arguing from a position of social reformism. As Martin Crowley draws out (chapter 7), Camus placed the figure of the human at the heart of a fundamentally moral politics; such a politics would work, to use Camus's terminology, in the service of man.

This volume attempts, then, to give a full account of Camus's situation socially, politically and culturally. At the same time, it seeks to guard against any exclusive focus on the circumstantial. For Camus's appeal as a writer draws us back to, but also takes us beyond, the conditions in which he lived and worked. He did not conceal his claim to be a writer of the human condition. His appeals to a mythological figure such as Sisyphus, a deranged ancient ruler such as Caligula, a dehistoricised type such as Don Juan, show that he did not restrict himself to fictional situations couched in mid twentieth-century actuality. In *L'Homme révolté*, he dismisses the revolutionary interpreters of Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit* who argue that in a reconciled social order there would no longer be a need for art since – in Camus's disbelieving formulation – 'la beauté sera vécue, non plus imaginée' (*Ess*, 658) ('beauty will be lived and no longer only imagined' (*R*, 220)).

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Likewise, he refuses to accept Marx's thesis that art is determined by the epoch in which it is produced and that it expresses the privileged values of the dominant class (*ibid.*). In the same essay, perhaps with Sartre, the exponent of the idea that literature has to be understood in terms of its social situation, also in his sights, Camus delights in telling the story about Balzac, who remarked at the end of a long conversation about politics and the fate of the world that it was now time to get down to serious business, by which he meant talking about his novels (*Ess*, 663; *R*, 226).

The reader repeatedly senses Camus's urge to get beyond constricting political and social circumstance. In negotiating the connection between the world and art, he regularly prefers to foreground acutely personal dilemmas. If life's circumstances for the individual are often conveyed as being restrictive and sordid, emotions as overwhelming, grief as disabling, Camus encourages his reader to see art, by contrast, as a form of compensation, of correction. Appealing to what he characterises as a tradition transcending historical periods, Camus writes enthusiastically about Madame de Lafayette's seventeenth-century novel, *La Princesse de Clèves*. Here, the princess's crippling if ultimately successful struggle against the temptation of adultery has disastrous consequences for her and her husband. Camus heaps praise on the husband prince who, even though he will die of grief, uses a contained, measured language that does not entertain despair and madness. Camus is mesmerised by this exercise of control. He sees the greatness of the French classical novel lying in its obdurate containment of life's miseries, in its refusal of what he terms 'bavardage' or chatter (*TRN*, 1896): 'Aucun de nos grands romanciers', he asserts, 'ne s'est détourné de la douleur des hommes, mais il est possible de dire qu'aucun ne s'y est abandonné et que par une émouvante patience, ils l'ont tous maîtrisée par les règles de l'art' (*TRN*, 1902) ('None of our great novelists has turned away from human suffering but it could be said that none of them has given way to it, that, by exercising a moving patience, they have dominated it through the rules of art'). Camus draws these same characteristics into his own fiction, where, be it Meursault's self-containment, the resignation of the mother in *Le Premier Homme* or of Sisyphus, or Rieux's understatement in *La Peste*, a premium is put on stoic detachment, on an acceptance of one's destiny.

If in Camus's estimation the containment of intense suffering is a key attribute of the French classical novel, he sees other ways too in which art works against life. As he conceives of it, art is a form of utopia, to the extent that it appeals to and placates the human desire for unity. Be it art, crime or religion, Camus argues, each responds to human kind's 'désir déraisonnable' ('unreasonable desire'), which is to 'donner à la vie la forme qu'elle n'a pas' (*Ess*, 666) ('give life a form it does not have' (*R*, 228)). The novel, then,

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corrects the world by providing finality: its characters run, in Camus's image, to their meeting with destiny, thereby experiencing a resolution, a completion that in real life remains unavailable. In delivering a sense of unity, the work of art responds, in Camus's judgement, to a metaphysical need (*Ess*, 668; *R*, 229).

The aesthetic preferences that Camus is voicing here connect with the humanist perspective which holds at its centre the affirmation of human endeavour as ultimately affirmative. But like the volume more generally in which they appear, *L'Homme révolté*, these views would be subject to contestation. Thus post-humanist readings of Camus have mapped out a different critical terrain in which his often unapologetically moralising accounts of the creative life are often viewed with suspicion. More broadly, European humanism's socio-cultural legacy was itself called into question with the emergence of postcolonialism. In particular, Europe's failure to export to its colonies the humanist value-systems on which it prided itself is a leitmotif of postcolonial contestation. Notwithstanding Camus's own campaigning on behalf of Algerian rights in *Misère de la Kabylie*, for example, his position and work have come to be the objects of close scrutiny.[10]

This *Companion to Camus* is designed to convey something of the energy, variety and generic range of Camus's work and to counter the narrowing of his corpus that has tended to follow on from the iconic Camus. It seeks to explore the circumstances of his life and writing career, to gauge his literary achievements, and to examine the exposure to public controversy that he attracted. Aiming not to fall into Camus worship, it picks up on the unevenness in his published work, acknowledging how his literary achievements helped preserve corners of his writing that might otherwise have fallen from view. The celebrity Camus secured on the strength of successes such as *L'Etranger*, *La Peste* and *La Chute* – landmarks of twentieth-century world literature that have sold in their millions of copies and been translated around the world – was indeed considerable. But as Jeanyves Guérin points out (chapter 6), critical interest in his journalism, for example, persists largely as a derivative of that literary success. Likewise, and even allowing for Camus's keen commitment to the theatre, his plays, as Christine Margerrison demonstrates in chapter 5, have had mixed success. Certainly they have not enjoyed collectively the sustained resonance and impact of the work of a contemporary such as Samuel Beckett, whose more accomplished technical dramatisation of an absurd human condition has attracted justifiably fuller critical attention. Nevertheless, as Danielle Marx-Scouras argues in chapter 10, Camus's puzzling over competing ethical imperatives feeds centrally into the debate about justice and love in *Les Justes*.

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The first two of the three chapters of Part I combine biographical overview and an account of the cultural and intellectual influences that shaped Camus's outlook. Chapter 3 complements these by exploring Camus's early collection of essays *L'Envers et l'Endroit* and gleaning evidence of the author's cautious moves towards autobiographical writing. Part II begins by exploring the generic range to be found in the corpus: his ambiguous engagement with philosophy and the cult of the Absurd in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (chapter 4); his work in the world of theatre (chapter 5); his increasingly high-profile work as a journalist, writing and often campaigning in the hard-edged circumstances of colonial life in Algeria, the Second World War and that war's aftermath (chapter 6). The section then moves on to explore Camus's very public and sometimes controversial contributions to ethical and political debate: chapter 7 looks at Camus's attempt to articulate a pragmatic theory of meaningful social responsibility in an age of genocide and global conflict; chapter 8 addresses the temptation of violence that Camus wrestles with through fictional protagonists such as Caligula, Meursault and Kaliayev; and chapter 9 re-evaluates an emblematic moment in Cold War cultural debate in 1950s France, namely the quarrel between Camus and Sartre in the wake of Camus's controversial essay which attacked both fascist and communist forms of totalitarianism, *L'Homme révolté*. Chapter 10 explores the love/justice paradigm in Camus and considers specifically how fictional heroines such as Janine and Dora work for a reconciliation of spheres that are deemed irreconcilable in Western political thought, namely the private and the public. The four chapters in Part III, finally, are devoted to the fictional texts that are central to Camus's literary legacy and reputation: chapter 11 charts the cultural genesis of Camus's fiction, taking the reader through some of the early prose work, principally *Noces* and *L'Etranger*; chapter 12 explores the incremental accumulation of meaning in *La Peste*; chapter 13 unpacks the complex baggage of evasiveness and garrulousness that makes up *La Chute*; and chapter 14 approaches Camus's last text, *Le Premier Homme*, in the light of concerns about legacy and collective memory.

NOTES

1. See chapter 6, where Jeanyves Guérin discusses Camus's reporting on famine in Kabylia in 1939.
2. Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Albert Camus of Europe and Africa* (New York, The Viking Press, 1970).
3. *Camus à 'Combat'*, ed. Jacqueline Lévi-Valensi (Paris, Gallimard, 2002), p. 501. For a sense of the scale of the French army reprisals against local Algerians, see Olivier Todd, *Albert Camus: une vie* (Paris, Gallimard, 1996), pp. 378–9.
4. *Camus à 'Combat'*, p. 502.

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5. Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Camus* (Glasgow, Collins (Fontana), 1970), p. 48.
6. See *ibid.*, p. 13. For a detailed consideration of Camus's conception of Mediterranean culture, see Peter Dunwoodie's discussion in chapter 11.
7. See Todd, *Albert Camus: une vie*, p. 24. The status of 'pupille de la nation' entailed a modest entitlement to medical care and a school bursary.
8. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London, Vintage, 1994), p. 224.
9. *Camus a 'Combat'*, pp. 569–71.
10. Frantz Fanon, for example, writing in *Les Damnés de la terre* (*The Wretched of the Earth*), complains: 'Cette Europe qui jamais ne cessa de parler de l'homme, jamais de proclamer qu'elle n'était inquiète que de l'homme, nous savons aujourd'hui de quelles souffrances l'humanité a payé chacune des victoires de son esprit' ('This Europe which never stopped talking about man and proclaiming that man was its sole, anxious concern, we know today with what sufferings humanity has paid for each of the victories of the European mind'), Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre* (Paris, Gallimard, 1991), p. 372.

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