

Chapter 1

Contexts

1 Biographical sketch

When *The Stranger* was published in 1942 Albert Camus was 29 years old. He was born a year before the outbreak of the First World War and his father was killed in the early battles. A semi-autobiographical essay recounts that Camus's mother kept a piece of the shell that had been taken from her husband's body and exhibited his medals in their living-room. Unsurprisingly, Camus grew up with a horror of war that led him to oppose French re-armament throughout the 1930s. The psychological effects of his father's death are harder to explain, but in his life Camus sought the friendship of older men like Jean Grenier and Pascal Pia, while in *The Stranger* the father makes one intriguing appearance.

The young Camus was drawn all the closer to his mother who brought him up in the working-class Algiers district of Belcourt where she earned her living cleaning houses. Uneducated, overworked and withdrawn, Catherine Sintès was a complex influence on her son. In his public statements Camus insisted on his attachment to her, declaring that he wished to place at the centre of his writing her 'admirable silence' (*Preface to Betwixt and Between*, OC 2,13). This silence was a sign of stoicism, a rudimentary form of the indifference that is a key concept in his writing, and a warning against the falsity inherent in literary discourse.

The same essay calls the silence of the mother 'animal' and depicts her as cold: 'she never caressed her son because she wouldn't know how to' (*Betwixt and Between*, OC 2,25). The denial of affection haunts the narrator who tells a disturbing anecdote about a mother cat eating her kitten. Conversely, the essay depicts an assault on

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the mother by an intruder, after which the narrator-son spends the night next to her on her bed.

A simple psychoanalytic reading would lead one to conclude that Camus was torn between an incestuous love for his mother and a hostility towards her coldness. Neither feeling could be avowed and each could inspire guilt. The mother is a problematic figure in his writing: in *The Stranger* she is, at least superficially, spurned, while in *The Plague* Rieux's mother replaces his wife. Camus's dealings with women were shaped by his mother and, although he moved out of their Belcourt flat before he left grammar school, the bond they shared endured until his death.

Poverty was associated with her and constituted another influence. Camus's family belonged to the poorer segment of the working class and most of his relatives were labourers or artisans. He was able to attend grammar school and university only because he obtained scholarships, and he did not need to read Marx in order to appreciate the importance of class. As a student, and later, he supported himself by giving lessons or by tedious office jobs. When he travelled he had to eat in the cheapest restaurants and buy excursion tickets that could not be used on the most convenient trains.

This too is reflected in his books. He has moments of tearful sentimentality when he depicts Salamano's dog in *The Stranger* or the figure of Grand in *The Plague*. But more frequently his working-class background inspires him with a caustic view of the universe: jobs are hard work rather than careers, while ideals are hypocrisy or veiled forms of oppression. *The Stranger* strips the legal system and the French state of their legitimacy.

Yet working-class life was also a source of happiness to Camus. It was carefree, and in Belcourt there was a comradeship which he missed years later when he was a Parisian celebrity. He loved Algiers streetlife: the swagger of the boys and the unashamed sexuality of the girls. In *The Stranger* Marie is very much the working-class woman in her enjoyment of her own body. Moreover, Camus saw a moral code in Belcourt: honesty, loyalty and pride were values that were lived rather than imposed.

In 1930 Camus had his first attack of tuberculosis. He never fully recovered and the disease returned regularly throughout his life. Characteristically, he rarely spoke of it, although it was all the graver

because it was badly understood at the time. Treatment consisted of injecting air into the damaged lung in order to collapse it and give it time to heal; Camus endured this as well as fits of coughing and spitting up blood. Tuberculosis must surely have sharpened his sense of death and, conversely, his appreciation of the human body as a fountain of strength and grace. It put an end to a promising career as a soccer player, although Camus continued to love sport and to spend long hours on the Algiers beaches.

One cannot help feeling that, despite the huge success he would enjoy after the publication of *The Stranger* and *The Plague*, Camus's life was a bleak one, and it was rendered still bleaker by his marriage while still a university student to Simone Hié. Beautiful, intelligent and from an unconventional family, Simone, whom Camus loved deeply, was a hopeless drug addict. During the two years of their married life together – 1934 to 1936 – she battled against her addiction and Camus, drawing on the courage he deployed against tuberculosis, helped her. It was to no avail and their separation caused him much distress.

Here again one must not exaggerate for, if Camus's life was a struggle, he won many victories. He emerged from the university with his degree and an additional 'diplôme d'études supérieures'; he had as mentor Jean Grenier, his philosophy teacher, who was an accomplished writer published by the house of Gallimard, and he had a wide circle of friends. Young people, mostly from the university of Algiers, usually interested in painting, sculpture or the theatre, flocked to him and were almost unanimous in accepting him as a leader. Women were drawn by his good looks as well as his blend of moral integrity and irony. Camus had a flair for being happy, and the reader recalls how memories of happiness come flooding over Meursault while he is in prison.

Aware from his adolescence that he wanted to be a writer, Camus tried his hand at philosophy, essays, fiction and the theatre. From 1936 on he had his own theatre group which put on plays that he directed. Like many mainland French artists, he felt that the French theatre was in the doldrums, ruined by bedroom comedies and well-made plays that left the audience amused but otherwise unmoved. Camus's productions were designed to jolt the spectator, alternatively drawing him into the work and isolating him from it.

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In an adaptation of André Malraux's book *The Time of Scorn* the audience became the spectators at the trial of the German Communist Thälmann and at the end they were persuaded to join in the singing of the *Internationale*. In *Asturian Revolt*, co-authored by Camus but never performed in full because it was banned by the right-wing municipality of Algiers, the audience became the crowds on the street during an uprising by Spanish miners. Conversely, during Aeschylus's *Prometheus in Chains* the actors wore masks to prevent the audience from identifying with them, while a loudspeaker poured forth philosophical discourse. This time the break with theatrical convention made the spectators brood on the concept of revolt.

It is possible to detect in this an echo of Bert Brecht's theatre with its emphasis on what is often called 'alienation effect'. Camus was fascinated by the edge of distance that the actor brings to his role and, when he played Ivan in a production of Dostoyevsky's *Karamazov*, he was remote and silent while the other actors scampered frenetically around him. In general, however, Camus did not think highly of Brecht's methods and preferred the opposite pole of greater audience involvement. The scenery for his productions was stylized to create a mood, while the lighting and sound effects were over- rather than under-stated.

It is nonetheless intriguing that Jean Grenier, who had seen these productions, should recognize in *The Stranger* a 'distance' which he had perceived in Camus's theatrical experiments (Jean Grenier, 'A work, a man', *Cahiers du Sud*, February 1943, p. 228). Moreover, the chapter on acting in *The Myth of Sisyphus* deals with the actor's awareness that he is pretending to be what he is not. Camus's first and best play, *Caligula*, was first drafted for his group, and its hero displays both a frenzy of emotion and the knowledge that he is acting out a part for the city of Rome.

Asturian Revolt had a political dimension because Camus was an energetic left-wing militant who was active in the anti-Fascist struggle. In 1935 he joined the Communist Party, which was then expanding and moving towards the policy of the Popular Front. His task was to organize cultural activities with a political slant: at the Algiers House of Culture he showed Russian films, ran debates and supported Arab protest movements. He found an audience drawn

from students, trade union supporters and the left-wing segments of the middle classes.

In 1937 Camus left the Communist Party for several reasons, the chief of which was the party's failure to defend Arab nationalists who had been jailed by the French government. This should not, however, lead one to suppose that Camus – or any other French-Algerian – supported Algerian independence. His criticism of the party was more moral than political: it had not extended a hand to friends who needed help. Camus remained an active left-winger and in October 1938 he started work as a journalist for *Alger-Républicain*, a newspaper that was founded to support the Popular Front and that had as editor the fiercely independent Pascal Pia.

By now he had begun writing *The Stranger*, but before discussing the development of the novel one might turn to the history of the period, which would shape both the book and the way it was received. One must glance at French literary and political history and then at the very different situation of Algeria. Indeed the special traits of *The Stranger* emerge from the contradictions between the two sets of contexts.

2 Historical contexts

Jean Grenier encouraged Camus to immerse himself in the writing of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*. Proust, Gide and others had dominated the 1920s, Gallimard had become the leading literary publishing house and the *NRF* the leading magazine. In so far as it is possible to define in a few lines a complex body of writing, the *NRF* group may be said to uphold the integrity of inner life. Gide maintained that man could liberate himself from family, tradition and a morality of self-interest in order to discover his other, more sincere self. From Proust's novel one might draw the lesson that, if human experience is fragmentary, there are moments when involuntary memory or intuition creates a totality. Similarly Paul Claudel's version of Catholicism emphasized that, if man was miserable and incomplete, he could transcend himself by taking up the dialogue with a God who was jealous and severe but not absent.

By the 1930s some of these tenets were coming under fire. The slaughter in the trenches had undercut Gide's view of life as an

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adventure, while the depression and the rise of Fascism strengthened the mood of pessimism. Individual psychology seemed less important than the general human condition, the theme of death took brutal forms, and freedom became an urgent need to act. Politics entered writing and the debate about commitment was keen.

The two writers who most influenced the generation of Camus and Sartre were André Malraux and Louis-Ferdinand Céline. Malraux's *Man's Fate* (1933) expounded the view that man must confront his mortality and give meaning to his existence by engaging in political action. The new hero is 'Bolshevik man' – the band of Chinese revolutionaries in the novel – who has fewer rights than duties. His duty lies to the revolution, which is depicted as a struggle that transforms the militant's life by letting him participate in a movement that not merely liberates the working class, but assures him some sort of immortality.

Camus was an admirer of Malraux, who had been friendly with Jean Grenier and who would be one of the readers when *The Stranger* was submitted to Gallimard. But if Camus drew from Malraux the concern for values such as courage, lucidity and virility, the differences between the two men are also great. The chapter on conquest in *The Myth of Sisyphus* may be read as a critique of the mystique of revolution that is found in *Man's Fate*.

Céline exerted no influence on Camus and one may note only that, while his attempt to construct a new language based on Parisian slang, obscenities and lyricism is light-years from the concision of *The Stranger*, it is a very different solution to the same problem. Where the NRF had believed – albeit not simplistically – in language and in the integrity of the work of art, Céline and Camus criticize traditional literary discourse and the notion that the novel creates a harmonious universe.

Diverse foreign influences were present in the 1930s. Nietzsche remained important as he had been since the turn of the century, and so did Dostoyevsky. German phenomenology was a more recent import and Sartre studied Husserl – who is also discussed in *The Myth of Sisyphus* – in an attempt to combat what he perceived as the shallow rationalism of the Cartesian tradition. This was the period when American novelists such as Faulkner, Dos Passos and Hemingway

were translated, although the question of their direct influence is complex, and attempts to link *The Stranger* with Hemingway may be misleading.

So the concepts of the absurd and of Existentialism, which came into French writing in the late 1930s and which are associated with the names of Camus and Sartre, draw on a mood of nihilism. The parallels and – more importantly – the differences between the two men are discussed in Chapter 3, but here one may note that coming from very different backgrounds they arrived at a similar critique of traditional values. Sartre was in flight from his middle-class, educated family and excoriated pretension. As Simone de Beauvoir puts it, he and his friends ‘derided every inflated idealism, laughed to scorn delicate souls, noble souls, all souls and any kind of souls, inner life itself . . . they affirmed that men were not spirits but bodies exposed to physical needs’ (Simone de Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (Paris: Gallimard 1958), p. 335).

From his working-class upbringing Camus learned to be similarly suspicious of ideals, to be sceptical of reason and introspection, and to believe that the coherent self and the coherent work of art were fabrications. Along with this went the realization that life was to be lived rather than dreamed about or mulled over. Man existed, so Existentialism maintained, among or *against* others in a brutal adventure, to which he must by his actions give meaning.

Camus and Sartre would not have exerted such influence if they had not been flanked by other writers, each different but sharing common themes. Francis Ponge’s poetry offers parallels with Sartre in its treatment of objects; Maurice Blanchot’s concept of anguish may be compared and contrasted with Camus’s sense of the absurd; the arguments about language were foreshadowed in the work of Jean Paulhan, the editor of the *NRF*, and would soon be taken up by Roland Barthes.

The mood of pessimism was encouraged by political developments. Camus was not 20 when Hitler came to power in Germany; he then lived through Mussolini’s invasion of Abyssinia (1935), Hitler’s remilitarization of the Rhineland (1936) and Franco’s rebellion in Spain (1936). If these were good enough causes for gloom, they also galvanized the Left. The riots of February 1934, when right-wing extremists seemed to be attempting a coup d’état in France, helped

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unite the French Left and led to the Popular Front victory in the elections of April 1936.

As the decade wore on, the Left's defeats grew more numerous: Léon Blum, the Popular Front's prime minister, fell from power in June 1937; in September 1938 came the Munich agreement, and the next year the Republicans were defeated in Spain. This was a painful blow to Camus, who was proud that his mother's family was Spanish. By now the drift towards war was apparent, even if Camus fought stubbornly against it.

The mood of malaise and drifting, as well as the sense of having no guidelines except those one could invent for oneself, finds its way into Camus's early writing, which has usually been read as a reflection of the conflicts in France and in Europe. But the other context was making itself felt: French-Algeria was going through torments of its own.

When Camus was 17 French-Algeria celebrated its centenary and it seemed to everyone, including Camus, that the conquest was safe for ever. Certainly there were only 900,000 Europeans alongside 6 million Arabs, but open Arab revolt had ended in the previous century and the military parades for the centenary emphasized French power. However, economic difficulties increased in the 1930s because of the agricultural slump, and many Arab farmers lost their land. They came flooding into the cities and Camus noted an increase of them in his own Belcourt.

This was a source of tension, and Arab protest grew. Islam was a rallying point, and the ulemas or Moslem doctors offered a stricter, purified version of their religion. Arab politicians pressed for reforms within the context of French rule and of the ideology of assimilation. The absurdity of assimilation was apparent: officially Arabs were equal and were eventually to enjoy all the rights of French citizenship; however, in the meantime they were treated like a conquered population. Yet the Popular Front included in its platform the Blum – Violette plan to widen – very moderately – the Arab franchise. After the Front's failure to enact the plan, a radical group of Arabs led by Messali Hadj edged towards nationalism. An ex-Communist who had believed the party line that the colonial struggle was part of the international struggle of the proletariat, Messali was making a change of great significance.

The depression did not spare the French-Algerian or pied-noir community and heightened its contradictory view of France. French interests lay less in developing industry in Algeria than in exporting raw materials to be processed in France. Standards of living were lower in Algeria than in France, so the pied-noir's need for the protection of the French army jostled with his economic recriminations. This mixture of dislike and admiration is a theme in *The Stranger*, where Meursault and Marie have sharply differing attitudes towards Paris. The conflict between mother country and colony overlapped with a tension within the colony between the wealthy businessmen and farmers and the mass of the population.

In all this the crucial element was the pied-noir working class which was most threatened by cheap Arab labour and hence in greatest need of French protection, but which also suffered most from the existing economic order. This is the key group in *The Stranger*, the group to which Meursault belongs and from whose viewpoint he undermines the legitimacy of French institutions. At the same time the incident where he kills the Arab without understanding what he is doing is surely an expression of the violence that lay beneath the surface of assimilation.

Similarly *The Stranger*, which may be read in the context of the absurd and of Existentialism, is also a piece of pied-noir writing. Camus drew on the ways in which the French-Algerians depicted themselves; the myths they invented recur and are scrutinized in his novel.

Through French-Algerian writing and popular culture runs the motif of the pieds-noirs as a new nation. Half-European and half-African, they are a frontier people; they are pagans as well as un-intellectual barbarians; the men are virile and the women sexy; they live through their bodies and are devoted to sport; temperamentally they oscillate between indolence and frenzied emotion. Camus elaborates on this view in the essays, *Nuptials* (1939), where he writes of Algeria: 'There is nothing here for the man who wishes to learn, get an education or improve. This country offers no lessons. It does not promise or hint. It is content to give in abundance . . . you know it as soon as you start to enjoy it' (OC 2,67).

In this it is easy to recognize the figure of Meursault, who shuns introspection and is devoted to sensuous experience. Equally obviously

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Camus has deepened the concept of indifference, which in Meursault is an unexplained mixture of inability to feel and protest against inauthentic emotion.

The murder of the Arab may also be placed in this context. French-Algerian portrayals of the Arab dissolve the colonial relationship into the brotherhood of pied-noir and Arab as fellow frontiersmen, or into the Mediterranean medley of French, Spanish, Maltese and Arabs living together on the fringes of Europe and Africa. The Arab intrigues the colonizer: he is nomadic, steeped in Islamic fatalism, different from the European and hence akin to the pied-noir. Once more Camus draws on previous depictions in *Betwixt and Between*, where the reflections on the mother, which have been quoted already, take place in an Arab café while the narrator sits alone with the owner. Silent, crouched in a corner and ‘seeming to look at my now empty glass’ (OC 2,24), the Arab incarnates indifference. He is thus linked with the mother, whose special indifference haunts Camus and is the origin of Meursault’s indifference in *The Stranger*. In the novel Camus criticizes the pied-noir view by showing how violence can emerge from the kinship that the French-Algerian chooses to discover between himself and the Arab. Meursault and the Arab are rivals as well as brothers.

Camus dealt with Arab issues in the pages of *Alger-Républicain*. He campaigned for a French civil servant who had got into trouble for protecting Arab farmers, and he defended an Arab spokesman accused of murder. His best-known articles depicted the agricultural crisis in the Kabylia mountains and attacked the inadequacy of French social policy: the lack of schools and medical care. Camus called for government spending to build roads and provide water; then, entering the dangerous political arena, he demanded more self-government for local Arab communities. At this point he could go no further, because the next question would be why the French authorities did so little to help Kabylia and the only answer would be that, to the government and especially to French-Algerians, local self-government for Arabs interfered with colonial exploitation. The striking feature of Camus’s articles is that they lead so clearly to this conclusion, which he does not draw.

For those who believe that biography is of any use in interpreting a novel, it is hard to imagine that the author of these pieces could