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Eamon Maher

Technological University Dublin, eamon.maher@tudublin.ie

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CAMUS' MEURSAULT

The only Christ that modern civilisation deserves?

Eamon Maher

I have long been fascinated by the figure of Camus' anti-hero, Meursault, who dominates his novel, *The Outsider*. In his preface to this novel, Camus stated that Meursault is condemned in a court of law, not necessarily for the crime of killing an Arab under a blinding North African sun, but rather because he refuses to play the game. He remains aloof from the preoccupations of those who are judging him; he is incapable of lies and deceit and he remains on the margins of respectable society. He is different to social standing and prestige, gets pleasure from nature and hedonistic activity, shows no remorse for his crime even when the magistrate tries to convert him by dramatically drawing his attention to the figure of the crucified Christ. The main way in which Camus' hero is radically different from the mass of men and women is in his insistence on telling the truth even when diplomacy suggests he should pretend to feelings he does not have. For example, at his mother's funeral he doesn't show an acceptable level of grief; or when Marie, his girlfriend, asks him if he loves her, he simply responds, "No". Refined society is not used to such brutal honesty and would tend to react in an adverse manner to people so unwilling to play the game by the rules of convention.

However, Camus' statement, which is meant in a slightly ironical way, that Meursault is the only Christ that modern civilisation deserves is worthy of examination in this article. He is careful not to say that Meursault is a modern Christ which would be blasphemous, as he is about as far removed from the lofty position as you could get. Rather, the criticism inherent in his comment is aimed at a society which has stubbornly tried to conceal its nastier side and which chooses instead to live by appearances. The significance of the date of the publication of *The Outsider* (1942) should not be overlooked, no more than the involvement of Camus in the French Resistance. France's collapse during the Second World War caused many to question its moral fibre. The collaboration of so many French citizens with the Nazi regime was another proof, if one were needed, of how far the nation had slipped into apathy. Camus realised that it was only by stripping away the unessential that man could live in an authentic manner. He is irreligious, if one understands by religion the sense of the divine, or the dogmas and myths that frequently surround the term. However, as Jean Onimus so correctly points out:

But there is in him the trace of a scar, even an open wound, precisely that which occurs in every lucid consciousness in the wake of 'the death of God'. The 'heart of the problem' in Camus is

'religious' if one refers by this term to what is at the origin of religions: existential anguish, the sense of guilt, the horror of death, the atrocious experience of the Absurd¹.

Camus had a sense of the sacred, an ability to see through appearances and he possessed a soul that in constantly in quest of a higher reality and a reason to go on living. Organised religion as he saw it being practised around him did not supply anything other than the aspect of a void, an absence. Like this hero, Camus was a man who responded to vigorous physical activity, to living the present moment to the full². God did not play any formal role in his existence. At the same time, he was aware of the broad outlines of the Christian faith and he often referred to Catholicism in his works. There is a superb depiction of the Jesuit priest, Fr. Paneloux, in *The Plague*, who maintains that disease and death have been visited on the city of Oran because its population has turned its back on God. Camus' depiction of Paneloux does not reveal a highly-developed anti-clericalism. At times, there is even a hint of admiration for the priest. Doctor Rieux, who is struggling with the havoc being generated by the plague, refuses to love a universe in which children are tortured. At Paneloux's invitation, and although he has no religious convictions, he attends a Mass and is impressed, in spite of himself, by the priest's sermon in which he argued:

The difficulty began when we looked into the nature of Evil, and amongst things evil he included human suffering. Thus we had apparently needful pain and apparently needless pain; we had Don Juan cast into hell, and a child's death. For while it is right that a libertine be struck down, we see no reason for a child's suffering³.

Even though there are obvious differences between them, Rieux and Paneloux acknowledge that they are both engaged in the same fight against evil and death that their task at times seems hopeless. Camus doesn't simply criticise religion on dogmatic grounds but more particularly because it doesn't supply the answers he's looking for. Meursault, we will see, views as arbitrary and artificial the codes with which we hide the mysterious obscurity of life. Camus uses his character to shake us out of our complacency and to make us see the futility of the lives the majority of us live. We didn't deserve the real Jesus Christ; maybe Meursault is a more fitting model for us. It is not acceptable, in Camus' view, to exist in a passive way; rather, man needs to critically examine the nature of the life he leads and to discover how meaningful it is. It should not surprise readers that Camus received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1957 for 'his important literary production, which was clear-sighted earnest illuminates the problem of the human conscience of our time.' Certainly this writer of Algerian origin makes us sit up and question what we are about in this world. A brief study of some key elements of *The Outsider* I will show how Camus was disgusted with a universe inhabited by people who were oozing with self-satisfaction and complacency at a time when totalitarian regimes of the right and left were reducing the individual to nothingness and which were capable of

justifying the most terrible massacres in the name of vague value systems. Like all prophets, he possessed the ability to see the reality that surrounded him and to depict it in a poetic way.

The Outsider is a short novel and one that is full of intensity and drama. It opens with the news that Meursault's mother has died. The home in which she was staying sent a telegram to her son to let him know that the funeral would take place the following day. The reader's first contact with Camus' protagonist paints a rather unfavourable picture. There is no apparent grief on his part at the news of the death. In fact, while following his mother's funeral procession to her burial place, Meursault notes: 'I caught myself thinking what an agreeable walk I might have had, if it hadn't been for Mother'⁴. Comments such as these are commonplace in the book. The first person narration reinforces the impact of Meursault's apparent indifference to events that most of us would consider to be of immense import. He doesn't pretend to be devastated by his mother's death and really is keen that the ceremony be concluded as quickly as possible so that he can get back to the city. The day after the burial is a Sunday and Meursault heads off for a swim and meets Marie, with whom he had once worked and who accompanies him to a comic film that evening. Later they sleep together. Much will be made of this fact at Meursault's trial. How could anyone entertain the thought of going to a film by Fernandel the day after burying his mother? And then sleep with a woman with whom he had just begun a relationship; this type of behaviour is unthinkable. Meursault is portrayed as being some kind of monster. In his preface to the novel Camus noted:

I simply wished to state that the hero of this book is condemned because he won't play the game. In this sense he is an outsider in the eyes of the society in which he lives. He wanders about, always on the margins, because of a private life which is both solitary and sensual, alien to the people who live at the centre.

People like Meursault make others feel uncomfortable because of the way they openly flout convention and live instinctively. They are a breed apart, exiles in a world where appearances dominate at the expense of authenticity. The consistency with which Camus' character repeats his vision of life, his love of the sea and of the sounds of the city, his apathy with regard to the norms that govern most people's lives, condemns him before he ever pulls the trigger of a gun. From that point of view the structure of the book is very deliberate. The details that are described in the first section of the book return in the final section as a means to convict Meursault of murder. He is on trial as much for being outwardly indifferent to his mother as for shooting an Arab⁵. The events leading up to the crime are described in some detail so that the reader can make up his own mind about whether or not this act is calculated and deliberate. The only possible conclusion one can reach is that it is not. The fierceness of the sun that is beating down on him, his languid movements as he wanders back to

the rock behind which is situated the spring, give us the impression that Meursault's actions are those of a sleepwalker:

The small black lump of rock came into view far down the beach. It was rimmed by a dazzling sheen of light and feathery spray, but I was thinking of the cold, clear stream behind it, and longing to hear again the tinkle of running water (p.62).

It is a day, we are reminded, very similar to that of his mother's funeral. One of the Arabs with whom Raymond had earlier had a violent row with is situated in the shade and, on seeing Meursault's approach, takes out his knife which gleams in the sunlight. The hero's head is spinning and he is no longer in control of his actions and suddenly the revolver he had earlier taken from Raymond is in his hand and a shot rings out. The Arab falls to the ground:

But I fired four shots more into the inert body on which they left no visible trace. And each successive shot was another loud, fateful rap on the door of my undoing. (p.64)

The offshoot of this action is clear from the last lines of the section. 'Why', the defendant will be asked so many times 'did you shoot the Arab four times when he was lying defenceless on the sand?' Like Christ, Meursault is silent in the face of such accusations. Equally, he is not completely guilty of the crime of which he is accused. We are led to believe that had he reacted differently in court, had he broken down when describing the murder, or shown remorse at the death of his mother, that he would have been exonerated. (Arabs, in a French court, were perceived very much as being second-class citizens). The court scene evokes many aspects of the last judgement of Christ as Meursault can find nothing to say to defend himself. He is responsible for his act to a certain extent but it is not for any criminal offence that he is sentenced to death. No, he is portrayed as being some kind of unfeeling ogre who is devoid of emotion. He can sense the hatred the people in the court room when, in reply to question as to whether he regrets what he has done, he says: 'After thinking a bit, I said that what I felt was less regret than a kind of vexation - I couldn't find a better word for it.' (p. 74). His fate has been sealed by this admission. What would have been necessary was a statement to the effect that he truly regretted what had happened, that he wasn't in control of his faculties at the time, that he had acted out of a sense of fear. But Meursault has difficulty communicating his feelings: his words betray and condemn him. The magistrate who had brandished the crucifix in front of him and asked him if some part of him did not believe in God, cannot accept the prisoner's spiritual apathy. Similarly the prison chaplain, who visits him before he is executed, hopes that he can convert him *in extremis*. Finally there is some emotion on Meursault's part as he engages in an invective against the priest. He doesn't want the prayers of someone who isn't even a proper man, who doesn't know what it is to be alive. Could he just be left alone. After the outburst comes some sort of acceptance of his fate. He thinks of his mother:

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With death so near, Mother must have felt like someone on the brink of freedom, ready to start life all over again. And I, too, felt ready to start life over again. It was as if that great rush of anger had washed me clean, emptied me of hope, and, gazing up at the dark sky spangled with its signs and stars, for the first time, the first, I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe.
(p.120)

Meursault is not nearly as indifferent as he appears to the world, nor to the events that happen around him. At various moments he makes reference to his mother in a way that convinces us that he had at least some feelings of affection for her. He doesn't want to die, but he is prepared to do so strengthened by the memories of the happy moments he has lived: the smell of Marie's hair or the pretty dresses she wore, the freedom to walk in the streets and to observe the daily routine of life, the rays of the sun reflecting off the sea. The above quotation shows that Camus' hero has achieved something approaching catharsis. He realises that the universe is indifferent to his fate, that life will carry on after he has gone. Death is a reality that has to be faced up to sooner or later, so why not sooner? This stoicism and courage in the face of death is most admirable in one who possesses no obvious religious beliefs. Were he a believer, we might speak of grace. It is probably appropriate to call it thus in any case. The readers see that Meursault is as good a person, if not better, than any of those who sit in judgement of him. He refuses to lie, to dissimulate in any way, to compromise. Hypocrisy is foreign to him. When saying that his outsider was the only Christ that we deserved, Camus was not casting any aspersions on his protagonist or on Christ. No, he was merely pointing out that contemporary civilisation was not capable of accepting what it didn't understand and that it chose to condemn both the messenger and the uncomfortable message that he brought with him. The reader's sympathies lie squarely with the one who is viewed as a 'monster' by all those who refuse to see that there are many different ways of living your life and dealing with your emotions.

Although it deals largely with the absurdity of the human condition, *The Outsider* is not a profoundly pessimistic novel. We have seen how Meursault realises a kind of liberation at the end of his journey. But what lies ahead of him remains uncertain. We know that he hopes 'that on the day of my execution there should be a huge crowd of spectators and that they should greet me with howls of execration' (p. 120). This is not a very optimistic picture and we are left in the dark about what message the book is trying to convey exactly. Camus, no more than his protagonist, will not supply his readers with any simple answers. Rather, he pushes us to re-examine our lives in the light of what we have read and what we have experienced. The quest only really begins for Meursault before his death. Those who wish to enter into communion with the insights he has must be prepared to place themselves on a limb and to view

their existence with eyes that have been cleansed of prejudice. Good literature has to make us think differently and force us to question accepted truths - in this is it not in many ways a continuation of the Word? Certainly, I find *The Outsider* to be a provocative and spiritual work and I believe that Camus has much to teach the believer and the non-believer alike. His deliberate linking of Meursault to Christ in his Preface was a daring ploy and one which bears fruit. His character is often referred to as 'Mr. Antichrist' by the magistrate after the latter has been unsuccessful in his mission of evangelisation. Who is the real Antichrist is the question the reader is forced to ask her/himself? And is modern civilisation even deserving of a Christ such as Meursault?

Eamon Maher lectures in French at the Tallaght Institute of Technology, Dublin.

Notes

- ¹ J. Onimus, *Albert Camus and Christianity*, Translated by Emmett Parker, Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1970, p.4.
- ² Oliver Todd's excellent biography, *Albert Camus; A Life* (London:, Chatto & Windus, 1997), highlights Camus' passion for sport which was severely hampered by his problems with tuberculosis. In 1930, he summed up his state of health in the following terms: "Fatigue from too much sports and too much sunbathing resulted in spitting blood." (p.17)
- ³ *The Plague*, translated by Stuart Gilbert, Penguin Books, 1960, p.183.
- ⁴ A. Camus, *The Outsider*, Translated by Stuart Gilbert, Penguin Books, 1963, p.21. All refernces to the book will be from this edition.
- ⁵ Oliver Todd observes in this regard: "He went on trial, where his indifferences about his mother absurdly had more effect on the judge and jury than the murder he committed." (*Albert Camus: A Life*, op. cit., p.146).