

2013-11-04

The Outsider With a Mission : an Irishman's Diary

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Recommended Citation

Maher, E., "An Irishman's Diary", The outsider with a mission, The Irish Times, 4th November, 2013.

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The outsider with a mission

Eamon Maher

Last Updated: Monday, November 4, 2013, 17:38

Whenever I think of Albert Camus, it is North Africa that springs to mind, and particularly the ancient city of Tipasa, so wistfully evoked in a remarkable essay from the prose collection, *Nuptials*. The first line transports us to an Edenic world: "In spring Tipasa is inhabited by gods and the gods speak in the sun and the scent of absinthe leaves, the silver-armoured sea, the blue glare of the sky, the flower-covered ruins and the light in great bubbles among the heaps of stone".

This epiphany-like experience would shape Camus's destiny and ultimately instil in him a Mediterranean sensibility: "There is only one love in the world. Embracing a woman's body also means holding in your arms this strange joy that descends from sky to sea. In a moment, when I throw myself down among the absinthe plants to bring their scent into my body, I shall know [. . .] that I am fulfilling a truth which is that of the sun and which will also be that of my death".

One can detect an almost pagan worship of nature in these lines. However, one of Camus's most prescient critics, Jean Onimus, once wrote that the heart of the problem in Camus is "religious" if one uses this term to refer to the central issues dealt with by religions: existential anguish, a sense of guilt, the horror of death, the atrocious experience of the absurd. While this is definitely true, Camus was also a believer in the grandeur of humankind and in our capacity for good as well as for evil. His literary universe is inhabited by people who, like himself, take joy in their bodies and luxuriate in the splendours of the physical landscape.

At a crucial point in *The Plague*, Dr Rieux, who devotes himself tirelessly to developing a serum that will provide an antidote to the disease that is ravaging the city of Oran, makes the following observation to his friend Tarrou: "I feel more solidarity with the vanquished than with saints. I have no real regard for heroism or sanctity. What interests me is to be a man". In some ways, these words sum up Camus's philosophy of life. Like Rieux, he displayed genuine humility about his many achievements and was committed primarily to the task of delving into the mysteries of life in the hope of finding some ray of light that might help people to live.

His father, a *pied-noir* farm labourer, died at the Battle of the Marne in 1914, and his mother, in dire financial straits, was forced to move with her two young sons to Algiers, where she worked as a cleaner. Being from such a poor background meant that Camus had to win scholarships if he wanted to attend the French lycée in Algiers. His literary success was achieved against massive odds, which may explain his close identification with outsiders and misfits of all sorts and his deep commitment to social justice. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1957, at which point he had published a string of masterpieces that included *The Outsider*, *The Plague*, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *The Fall* and *The Rebel*. When he died in a tragic car crash in 1960, at only 46 years of age, Camus was mourned throughout the world.

In spite of becoming a celebrity in the intellectual circles of Paris, of all the success he would enjoy as a writer, Camus's attachment to Algeria never waned. It was his home, the place where he learnt his trade and felt most comfortable. In his acceptance speech at the Nobel Prize ceremony in Stockholm, he underlined how a writer is duty-bound to be at "the service of truth and the service of liberty". He continued: "Whatever our personal weaknesses may be, the nobility of our craft will always be rooted in two commitments, difficult to maintain: the refusal to lie about what one knows and the resistance to oppression".

His experience of extreme poverty during his youth and early manhood taught Camus that justice mattered; it showed him that "being a man" brought with it duties and responsibilities that could not be shirked. In the war-scarred surroundings of post-war Europe, Camus's belief in the inherent decency of human beings was unwavering. The words of Rieux at the end of *The Plague* encapsulate the conviction of his creator, namely, "that there is more in men to admire than to despise".

This year marks the centenary of Camus's birth in Mondovi, Algeria. One hundred years on, his star continues to

shine as brightly as the Mediterranean sun that moulded his character and shaped his writing.

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