

Albert Camus – Novelist and Philosopher for Our Time

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Albert Camus died on 4 January 1960 when the car in which he was a passenger slid into a tree after running off a road in the French countryside outside the small village of Villeblevin in Burgundy. He died instantly. Even though at 46 he was far too young, what he had achieved by then was quite remarkable. Several novels, including *The Outsider* and *The Plague*, as well as a number of plays, and many essays on literary, philosophical and political issues. And during the war he had edited the Resistance newspaper, *Combat*. He had a work in progress, on him when he died, posthumously published as *The First Man*, which even in its unfinished form is a wonderful work, written with a stony, harsh, unsentimental clarity that is simply unforgettable. Clearly, he was at the height of his powers, even though at the time of his death he had become an isolated figure in the intellectual circles of his adopted Paris because of his anti-communism and his unwillingness to support the forces struggling for the independence of his native Algeria from colonial France. And then in the years that followed his death his influence diminished further as philosophy turned away from literature towards linguistics, psychoanalysis and the social sciences, and as the tide of political events turned increasingly against the colonialism of which Camus had been a supporter, or so it was thought.

Yet Camus endures; and 50 years on we get a better sense of the extent of his influence. *The Outsider* and *The Plague* are both masterpieces, and stand as canonical references in twentieth-century European literature. There is no better characterisation of the absurd predicament of human existence than that which he gives us in his philosophical works, *The Rebel* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*. And while his uncompromising humanist position on revolution, terrorism and injustice were unfashionable amongst French intellectuals of his day, his political writings and social commentary are a salutary reminder of the ease with which cruelty and violence can find an alibi in a ‘cause’ or in an ideology.

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At a colloquium on Camus at Deakin University in October 2010 academics from philosophy and literary studies gathered to discuss Camus today, his relevance to our times, those dimensions of his philosophy beyond the familiar philosophy of the absurd, and why his philosophical and literary stature continues to grow. The contributions at this colloquium form the basis of this special edition of *Sophia*.

Jean-Philippe Deranty, in 'The Tender Indifference of the World: Camus' Theory of the Flesh', argues that the other side of Camus' absurdist philosophy is an ontological and political position that advocates a unique kind of sensualism that is more Algerian than French, more Mediterranean than Parisian. It is a sensualism that links ontological and literary perspectives in an indissoluble bond. Deranty compares Camus' vision with that of Merleau-Ponty, equally a French philosopher of the flesh, in order to bring out how sharp the contrast is between the two, and discusses the philosophical perspective in relation to perhaps the most literary, certainly the most famous, of Camus' novels, *L'Étranger*.

Alistair Rolls, on the other hand, offers a textual analysis of Camus' *L'Étranger* in 'Camus's Algerian in Paris: A Prose Poetic Reading of *L'Étranger*' which makes a vivid contrast with Deranty in the emphasis it places on how Camus's novel is linked to a particular Parisian literary tradition for which it instantly became the model of modernity. Rolls also argues that while the textuality of the work continues a tradition of poetics dating back to Charles Baudelaire, the desert of Algeria thematically functions in the novel as an allegory for the self-alterity of Paris, thus reclaiming for the novel its place in a pantheon of French literature.

Ashley Woodward's article, 'Camus and Nihilism', responds to Camus' critical judgement of Nietzsche, whose 'absolute affirmation' of existence was, *prima facie*, congenial to Camus' own philosophy. Camus' fundamental criticism was that in principle Nietzsche's philosophy can provide us with no moral objection to the practice of murder. While Woodward defends Nietzsche on the grounds this is a misreading, the virtue of Camus' position, he claims, is to 'democratise' Nietzsche's response to nihilism, placing it within the reach of the average person and not just of exceptional individuals. This democratisation of the problem of nihilism is achieved through literature, and it is a task to which Camus' literary work continues to contribute.

Matthew Lamb, in 'Philosophy as a Way of Life: Albert Camus and Pierre Hadot', finds in Camus an advocate of a particular practice of ascesis, which he compares with a similar practice in the philosophy of Pierre Hadot. Further, Lamb detects in both Camus and Hadot an attempt to overcome obstacles to this ascesis. Whereas Camus locates this ascesis in the tragedy of ancient Greece, Hadot is more inclined to see in Platonism a privileged form of ascetic practice.

Matthew Sharpe's 'The Invincible Summer: On Albert Camus' Philosophical Neoclassicism' argues that Camus' philosophy of the absurd represents a systematic sceptical method like Descartes', resulting in a point of certainty from which 'nihilism' can be defeated – a nihilism from which Camus' political claims follow. Camus' post-war ethos of moderation, or *juste mesure*, combines with a renewed Greek and Mediterranean naturalism to make Camus' voice one of the most unusual in twentieth-century ideas and so worth reconsidering today for standing against the seductions of totalitarian excess.

Russell Grigg notes in 'The Trial of Albert Camus' that the fiftieth anniversary of Camus' death in 2010 was largely ignored in his native Algeria. This reflects the

critical response to Camus' writings, not only in Algeria but elsewhere, that sees in Camus a colonialist writer and apologist for the French domination of his native Algeria. It is a critique that inculpates Camus' readers and admirers in Western countries where his colonial attitudes are hidden and reinforced by a European attitude that reads him as an author of absurdity and nihilism, writing about the human predicament and existential isolation. Grigg points out that this alleged insensitivity in his fiction to native Algerians sits ill with his journalism, and shows an Algerian closely identified with the destiny of all the peoples of his birthplace. Grigg argues that by placing *L'Étranger* in the concrete situation of Camus' Algeria, it is apparent that the Arab has the precise status of outsider.

Camus is almost exclusively read as a novelist these days, his philosophy ignored or misunderstood because he remains, even today, in the shadow of the existentialist movement in which, as we now know, he sat so uncomfortably. For those interested in his philosophy Camus is rarely Camus; he is more often 'Camus *avec* Sartre', which is to misread and distort a genuine philosophical orientation of his own, albeit one that cannot be separated out from his literary *œuvre* in any way. We hope that the articles in this collection demonstrate the need for a return to this philosopher-novelist for our time.