
The Tragic Humanism Of Albert Camus: Book Review Of The First Man

is the world of North Africa, to which he feels his deepest belonging -- a world of wind and sand, open ranges and anonymity. The time he was writing the book coincides, moreover, with the turmoil of Algeria at war. There are the sounds of terrorists' bombs, glimpses of jets bristling with guns, the awareness that torture is a daily occurrence.

The title, 'The First man,' suggests archetypal patterns. The search for identity is linked to the search for the vanished father, a 'dead stranger,' as Camus puts it. When he visits his father's tomb at the military graveyard in Brittany, he confronts the fact that at the age of 40 he is older than his father was when he was fatally wounded in the head by shrapnel. Fatherless, he realizes that his father, too, had no fatherland.

The vocations of his childhood are gripping: the apartment that had no gas and only an alcohol stove, no newspapers, no books, not even a radio; the whippings administered by his grandmother when he damaged his shoes playing soccer during recess in school; the gentle smile of his mother, who worked long hours as a cleaning woman, whose vocabulary was limited to 400 words and who lived in mutual resignation. But there is humour, too, and evidence of a great capacity for affection, friendship and gratitude -- the most lasting of which went to his schoolteacher, a surrogate father who encouraged him to pursue his studies and coached him outside of class to compete successfully for a state scholarship to the lycée. The distance between the illiterate home and the world of books and ideas in which the young self-made intellectual excelled only increased his sense of strangeness. But Camus would never deny his humble background or feel ashamed about having grown up among the ignorant and the poor.

The notion of the self-made person lends further significance to the book's title. The 'first man,' the young Camus, had to bring himself up alone, without the authority and guidance of a father, without a heritage handed down. He had to work out his own truth and morality. But the title has broader implications as well, for it refers to Algeria itself, living in a vacuum, forgetful of its past, a 'land of oblivion where each one is the first man.'

Self-creation implies self-examination. But does it mean self-knowledge? The final chapter of the book is entitled 'A Mystery to Himself.' By way of the boy he remembers having been, Camus catches glimpses of his more lasting traits. Little Albert (named Jacques in the book) loathes conventional gestures and behavior; he is hot-blooded, rambunctious and capable of foolish acts; he adapts easily to all kinds of people and loves to try out roles; he has a will to be courageous that may be more precious than courage itself. His ravinous appetite for life is rooted in his early knowledge of death. The blind stirrings and dark fire he felt as a boy remain buried in him, and inform his intensely poetic perception of the world.

Camus is generally not at his best when trying to be an abstract thinker. His richest perceptions are sensual and poetic. His vocations of Algiers and Algeria are precise and suggestive: brief twilights, the change of seasons, the departure of the swallows, labyrinths of vegetation, ravines full of scents, summer days when the sun grinds plaster and stone into fine dust and the sky is grey with heat. The tumbling quarters of Algiers are madly vivid, with their narrow arcaded streets,

p?ddl?rs' stands, workshops, food stalls and int?rmingl?d ?thnic and r?ligious groups. Camus not?d on th? manuscript that h? want?d this book to b? 'h?avy with things and fl?sh.' H? also succ??d?d in b?stowing a mythical dim?nsion on th? physical landscap?, as wh?n h? compar?s th? 'holy dr?ad' f?It wh?n th? North African ?v?ning d?sc?nds on th? s?a to th? ?ff?ct ?xp?ri?nc?d on th? slop?s of D?lphi's mountain, with its n?arby t?mpl?s and sanctuari?s.

Th? d?vic? of th? third p?rson allows Camus to apply an ironic p?rsp?ctiv?. Th?r? is at tim?s a Faulkn?rian quality to th? syntax and th? d?lib?rat? blurring of past and pr?s?nt. Mr. Hapgood's translation d?als skillfully with th? lit?rary d?vic?s at work, capturing th? ton? of Camus: dir?ct, und?rstat?d, occasionally aphoristic, sustain?d by subdu?d lyricism and a nostalgic att?ntion to d?tail.

Lov? of sun and s?a, a n??d for fri?ndship and gam?s, a passion for socc?r, th?s? w?r? only normal for th? schoolboy ?ag?r to ?scap? th? grim confin?m?nt of his hom?. Mor? t?lling is his ?arly ?nthusiasm for th? world of artisans, th?ir d?dication and solidarity. Camus d?scrib?s his visit to th? coop?rag? wh?r? his uncl? work?d and wh?r? h? would watch with fascination th? pounding on hoop-driv?rs and th? boist?rous danc? of hamm?rs. It is this kind of r?sp?ct for th? dignity of work that s?parat?s Camus from th? Parisian int?ll?ctuals who m?r?ly th?oriz?d about th? prol?tariat.

Larg?r th?m?s acquir? n?w m?aning in th? autobiographical p?rsp?ctiv?. Camus's loathing for viol?nc? go?s back to a childhood fistfight, wh?n h? inflict?d a black ?y? on a classmat? and th?n r?aliz?d that 'vanquishing a man is as bitt?r as b?ing vanquish?d.' His lif?long av?rsion to capital punishm?nt was, it would s??m, th? only concr?t? bond with th? d?ad strang?r, his fath?r. H? had b??n d??ply impr?ss?d by th? story of how his fath?r att?nd?d th? public ?x?cution of a criminal and r?turn?d hom? chok?d with naus?a and horror. If Camus b?cam?, so to sp?ak, th? consci?nc? of his tim?, it is b?caus? h? r?fus?d all his lif? to sid? with th? ?x?cution?rs, ?v?n wh?n th? victims w?r? guilty.

D?ath is a constant pr?s?nc? in th? lif? of Camus, who, as an adol?sc?nt, spat blood and lat?r had r?curr?nt bouts with tub?rculosis. But so is th? joy of conval?sc?nc? and h?alth. His lov? of th? human body and of its b?auty is n?v?r oblivious of its fragility. Camus r?m?mb?rs with int?ns? pr?cision how h? and his fri?nds play?d on th? grounds of th? Hom? for Disabl?d V?t?rans, wh?r? th? moth?r of on? of his schoolmat?s was chi?f laundr?ss. Th? pr?s?nc? of th? cripl?s l?nt a sp?cial poignancy to th?ir gam?s and to th? raptur? of th? fragrant v?g?tation. Loss and r?tri?val ar? at th? cor? of Camus's p?rsonal mythology, and th?y illumin? th? notion of ?xil? to which h? r?turns so oft?n. For ?xil?, as h? mak?s cl?ar in 'Th? Plagu?', is not so much an ?xist?ntial cond?mnation as a pot?ntially r?d?mptory awar?n?ss of an inn?r void that n??ds to b? fill?d -- a longing for som?thing lost or larg?ly forgott?n, and at th? sam? tim? a forward qu?st.

Camus's voic? has n?v?r b??n mor? p?rsonal than in 'Th? First Man.' It sp?aks dir?ctly to a s?ns? of d?c?ncy, r?fus?s to b?com? th? accomplic? of ?v?nts, ?xtols n?ith?r th? h?ro nor th? saint and proclaims that th?r? is no sham? in happin?ss, that a lov?l?ss world is a d?ad world. This is not to say that Camus is ?v?r indiff?r?nt to th? r?aliti?s of history. But h? knows that 'history' can b?com? a tyrannical ?ncroachm?nt, an oppr?ssiv? justification or ?v?n a w?apon for th? id?ologu?s of this world.

CAMUS'S r?sistanc? to political and philosophical abstractions is b?st summ?d up by two stat?m?nts from ?arli?r works. Th? first com?s from th? pr?fac? to an ?arly coll?ction of ?ssays:

'Poverty prevented me from judging that all was well under the sun and in history; the sun taught me that history was not all.' The other, from one of his 'Notes,' elaborates on a pronouncement by Dostoyevsky: 'One must love life because loving its meaning, says Dostoyevsky . . . yes, and when love of life disappears, no meaning can console us.'

The tragic humanism of Camus is not to be confused with pessimism. Camus knew that war, not peace, is normal; that Cain will always murder Abel -- just as Dr. Rieux in 'The Plague' knows that the deadly bacillus will not disappear. Hence the need for permanent vigilance. There can be no armistice in our struggle against suffering. The lesson Camus teaches is that we must learn to love that which is impermanent. This love must extend to loving that which is inevitable. Camus's allegiance to life, the life he lost so suddenly and so early, was from the start joyful and desperate.

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