

Counting Peas in Camus's *La Peste*

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Because the subject of Camus's *La Peste* (1947) is the human community, the main character is the besieged city of Oran.¹ At the epidemic's height, treated in section three of the novel, the distinctions of the individual inhabitants are blurred by the metaphysical reality that confronts them. The plague, Camus says, reduces the diversity of human experience to a common destiny. The formation of sanitary squads is thus no heroic art, as the narrator carefully points out. It symbolizes instead an essential truth of man's existence: that all are equally threatened by death.

In this attempt to portray the underlying unity of experience, *La Peste* appears to depart from Camus's thematic concerns in both his earlier and later fiction. *L'Étranger* (1942), in both theme and technique, focuses on the isolated figure of Meursault. *La Chute* (1956), though it traces the archetypal fall from innocence, presents, through dramatic monologue, the "confession" of Jean-Baptiste Clamence. Actually, however, Camus's vision is hardly contradictory. If as humanist he affirms in *La Peste* the identity of all men, he also as humanist commits himself to their individuality. The novel is more than an image of the walls that separate the self from an arbitrary and meaningless universe. An important part of its meaning is developed by a gallery of individual characters whose various reactions to a common threat are presented as illuminating exempla within the fabric of the controlling argument. The despair of exile, the impossibility of love, the loss of both future and past, all the symptoms exhibited by the population at large are carefully outlined by the narrator. They are not problematical, merely historical. But characters at the novel's center, such as Tarrou, Cottard, and Grand, are enigmatic. Criticism of *La Peste* has generally taken account of their complex and ambiguous responses to the disease.² The thematic importance of a minor character, however, has been as yet largely unconsidered. Unlike his fellow citizens, the asthmatic patient of Dr. Rieux does not involve himself with the evil confronting Oran. He thus represents the contemplative alternative in a world otherwise defined, so it seems, by action. His life deliberately excludes "doing." His one "activity," passing peas from one pot to another, does no more than mark the passage of time. Yet he is fully conscious of life, eager to live to a ripe old age, despite his abandonment of the content around which men, especially in Oran, structure their existence. Camus's double focus on community and individual, of course, establishes a dialectic between solipsism and a larger truth. More than any other character, however, the hermit, who survives the epidemic despite his indifference to it, calls into question that truth. Is the *vita contemplativa*, a life of self-imposed isolation, simply another way, equally valid? Can man truly ignore the ties that bind him to others? Since the issue, I think, is central to the interpretation of *La Peste*, it is necessary to begin with a brief discussion of the novel's place within Camus's work as a whole.

¹Albert Camus, *La Peste* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947). All subsequent page references to this edition will appear in the text after the abbreviated title *LP*.

²See Roger Quilliot, *La Mer et les Prisons: Essai sur Albert Camus* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), pp. 166-94; Pol Galliard, *La Peste: Camus* (Paris: Hatier, 1972), pp. 50-55; Donald Lazere, *The Unique Creation of Albert Camus* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1973), pp. 173-82; Germaine Brée, *Camus* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1959), pp. 115-27.

While *L'Étranger*, Camus avers, was intended to present "la nudité de l'homme en face de l'absurde,"³ it is clearly limited in this ambitious design by its very structure. Meursault's indiscriminate sensitivity to the givens of physical existence; his ignorance or disregard of social values; the unwillingness he demonstrates during the trial to have his life viewed as a whole of cause and effect; in short, all the qualities that mark him out as the "stranger" in our midst circumscribe his ability to present, like some newer Everyman, the moral dilemmas of life on earth.⁴ Despite Sartre's enthusiastic reception of him as such, he is hardly the fictional embodiment of Camus's Sisyphus, the archetypal absurd man who sees an enduring value in the never-ending repetition of the empty forms of existence.⁵ The novel, moreover, restricts itself to Meursault's point of view. It is properly a "récit" rather than a "roman." Thus the unique responses of the "stranger" to the absurdities of social and temporal existence are the only commentary on the bizarre events which bring him to the scaffold. If an undisputed success as a piece of fiction, *L'Étranger* fails as the morality play Camus thought it to be as he reflected on its composition and looked forward to the writing of a very different novel. In *La Peste* the main theme is the absurdity of life, not an individual reaction to absurdity. Camus abandons the "strangeness" of Meursault for the epidemic that threatens us all. The "récit," a form suited to the limitations of vision in Camus's first novel, gives way to the objective reportage of the "chronique." The task of the narrator, who reveals himself at the end as Dr. Rieux, is, like the historian, to act as a witness to events: it is simply to affirm that "'Ceci est arrivé,' lorsqu'il sait que ceci est, en effet, arrivé, que ceci a intéressé la vie de tout un peuple, et qu'il y a donc des milliers de témoins qui estimeront dans leur coeur la vérité de ce qu'il dit" (*LP*, p. 8). Only on this larger canvas could Camus faithfully depict the nakedness of man before the absurd.

La Peste, however, must be seen within the evolution of Camus's ideas as well as within the changing nature of his art. As he awaits execution, Meursault becomes aware that life, in and of itself, is to be prized; but the value he perceives in existence is grounded solely on an ethic of quantity: "C'était toujours moi qui mourrais, que ce soit maintenant ou dans vingt ans. À ce moment, ce qui me gênait un peu dans mon raisonnement, c'était ce bond terrible que je sentais en moi à la pensée de vingt ans de vie à venir."⁶ Such thinking represents an advance in Meursault's consciousness. Before the murder he lived with the passivity of an automaton. But this awakening to the value of one's own existence is merely the first step in the process that leads to an understanding of the bonds of human brotherhood. The "cris de haine" that he hopes will accompany his execution will affirm that even in death he remains a stranger to society. In *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942) Camus's pursuit of absurdism's final consequences leads also to an ethic based on quantity. Since Camus finds truth only in the perception of absurdity, no "leap of faith" nor any act that affirms a value outside existence can be accepted. The imperative to live in the absence of other values demands an ethic of quantity. Four patterns emerge in response to this morality that demands the fullest exploitation of the possibilities existence presents. In the portraits of Don Juan, the actor, the conqueror, and the artist a Romantic heroism unrestricted by social convention predominates.

³From Camus's *Carnets* for 1942. Quoted by Pol Galliard, *La Peste: Camus*, p. 75.

⁴See Donald Lazere, *The Unique Creation of Albert Camus*, pp. 151-55.

⁵See Germaine Brée, *Camus and Sartre: Crisis and Commitment* (New York: Dell, 1972), pp. 120-55.

⁶Albert Camus, *L'Étranger* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942), pp. 166-67.

The ethic of quantity, however, should not be considered Camus's final prescription for living in a world devoid of meaning. Even in the *Mythe de Sisyphe* traditional notions of morality are not laid completely aside. Camus notes rather enigmatically in passing that "tout est permis ne signifie pas que rien n'est défendu."⁷ The introduction to the essay postulates that the absurd, "pris jusqu'ici comme conclusion," is here rather considered as a "point de départ" (MS, p. 11). The later *L'Homme Révolté* (1951) moves us further along the same track. It examines the relative merits of actions whose only equivalence lies in their ultimate consequences. This essay presents a somewhat tangled if emotionally convincing argument that the perception of absurdity *ipso facto* endorses the value of human life. From this premise Camus develops an absurdist humanism in which the fraternal bonds that unite all men in the face of an alien universe are said to limit and moderate their existential freedom. The Sisyphean view of absurd man thus becomes merely a negative prolegomenon to the portrait of the rebel whose revolt insures the community of all. An ethic of quality replaces the ethic of quantity.

La Peste embodies this development in Camus's thinking. The shift in point of view from "récit" to "chronique" and the new focus on community crisis both reveal a deepening humanism. In contrast to *L'Étranger*, the novel presents an encyclopaedic view of human nature. Such variety, however, as we said earlier, however, is deceptive. Like Dante, Camus constructs a gallery of characters from what are for him the essential facts of human nature. By the operation of the plague, each is stripped of his rational and emotional structures, what Camus terms "habitudes," and is made to affirm metaphysical truth. The disease, after all, is the great leveler. It reveals, Camus comments, "L'équivalence profonde des points de vue individuels en face du même absurde."⁸ On the novel's deepest level, the actions and thoughts of those trapped by the epidemic are limited and controlled by the same forces, thus share the same value. But this determinism can be seen another way. As it discovers the lack of meaning in the human condition, the plague also exposes a system of value according to which the different human responses can be judged. During the epidemic, men are reduced to common denominators, but they are free to respond in three different ways. The disease may be fought; it may be transcended; or it may be seen as an ally. Only the first of these is the choice made by the rebel who, while recognizing he lives without appeal, still endorses the value of his own life and commits himself to the value of all human life. He must combat the plague because it is opposed to human life and happiness. In his situation, he can hardly be called heroic, for the will to resist proceeds from a recognition of truth. As the narrator states, this simply means affirming that "deux et deux font quatre" (LP, p. 107). *L'Étranger* relates the encounter between a human consciousness and the walls that limit its freedom. But *La Peste* traces the path man must follow once he has seen the situation he finds himself in for what it is.

Within the novel this moral scheme is enforced by the disease. On the literal level, of course, death by plague results from the arbitrary and impersonal workings of the universe. These are beyond man's control and understanding. Metaphorically, however, the epidemic challenges the very basis of human life. Failure to take up the challenge brings about the demise of a consciousness made possible only by revolt. Consider, for example, the case of Father Paneloux, the Jesuit preacher. His death is a direct consequence of his final, desperate endorsement of a purposeful and benevolent God even in a world

⁷Albert Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942), p. 94. All subsequent page references to this edition will appear in the text after the abbreviated title MS.

⁸From Camus's *Carnets* for 1942. Quoted by Pol Galliard, *La Peste: Albert Camus*, p. 75.

where innocent children suffer agony worse than crucifixion. Cottard uses the epidemic to protect himself from punishment and to line his pockets through the black market; he is therefore unable to survive the disease's disappearance. Tarrou searches for a freedom from guilt beyond the moral capacity of the human spirit. His attempt to transcend evil brings not the innocence of a "re-perfected" nature, but death. Rambert, Grand, and Rieux survive not only because they struggle against the plague's onslaught (this Tarrou does as well), but because they see clearly, as he does not, the inevitable hopelessness of the fight.

The plague does leave Oran, but for Rieux, the physician whose contest with death must always end in defeat, the "victory" is only provisional since "le bacille de la peste ne meurt ni ne disparaît jamais" (*LP*, p. 247). To endure in the world assaulted by forces inimical to human happiness requires, then, the recognition of two truths superficially contradictory. The true rebel sees that human life is finally without meaning, that death is not to be avoided. He realizes at the same time, however, that human life does have value and that, inextricably bound to man's world, he must join the never-ending fight to save mankind from the unjustified sentence of death passed upon it. This moral imperative, discussed at length in *L'Homme Révolté*, lies at the intellectual center of *La Peste*.

One major function of the old hermit, however, is to demonstrate that these ethical prescriptions are not completely black and white. His presence on the sidelines has an ironic effect; it prevents the novel from becoming a simple *roman à thèse*, a testimonial to a "heroism" disavowed by both Rieux and the author. But the character's role is more complex than merely to disarm the book's didactic thrust. And to understand it fully we must take a closer look at what he is and what he does.

Confined to bed by will not disease, the old man does not raise a finger in Oran's defense. But his attitude toward the plague is not indifference. Like Cottard, he takes some pleasure in its outbreak because it reduces the human community from which he has voluntarily alienated himself to the same state of exile. Like Father Paneloux, he speaks of Oran as a community in which he has no part; his "vocation" has created a world of one. The growing seriousness of the situation makes everyone but him aware of the rigorous equivalence of the human condition. In his second sermon even Paneloux is forced to use "nous" rather than "vous" in his desperate explication of the epidemic. The hermit, in short, remains unchanged throughout the novel in his antipathy toward man. The ominous death of the rats is everywhere met with horror and alarm, but "seul le vieil Espagnol asthmatique continuait de se frotter les mains et répétait: 'Ils sortent, ils sortent,' avec une joie sénile" (*LP*, p. 16). Summer's heat makes Oran's inhabitants feel like prisoners of the sun; for the old man, however, it is a cure: "Seul, le vieux malade de Rieux triomphait de son asthme pour se réjouir de ce temps" (*LP*, p. 28). When the situation necessitates official action, he looks forward to bureaucratic discomfort: "En tout cas, dit le vieux très surexcité, ils y vont fort, hein, les grosses têtes!" (*LP*, p. 51). The rats return at the plague's passing, and it is the hermit who welcomes them back. Looking forward to the death of his contemporaries, he assures Rieux that "je sais vivre, moi" (*LP*, p. 246). In his isolation the old man endorses one value alone: life itself.

He thus serves as a thematic link with *L'Etranger* and *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. His elementary absurdist viewpoint marks him out as a Sisyphian caricature,

the *reductio ad absurdum* of the ethic of quantity. Since he clings only to life's most basic, sustaining truth, the old man likewise represents innocence. In his search for secular sainthood, for a life that avoids siding with the forces of evil, Tarrou finds the old man an interesting case. "‘Est-ce un saint?’ se demandait Tarrou. Et il répondait: ‘Oui, si la sainteté est un ensemble d’habitudes’" (LP, p. 95). Tarrou's observation is revealing. He sees the old man's existence for what it is: form without content, structure without inner meaning, the *vita contemplativa* in a godless world. The old man lives like a pious anchorite. And this reflects ironically on Tarrou's desire for guiltlessness, a gift only God's blood can bestow. The old man's innocence comes at a high price. Like St. Anthony, he was never a part of this world. "Rien, en effet, ne l'avait jamais intéressé, ni son travail, ni les amis, ni le café, ni la musique, ni les femmes, ni les promenades" (LP, p. 95). He is a stranger to human pleasures and pursuits. His decision at fifty to abandon the world is thus hardly surprising. Detesting clocks since they are a necessary adjunct of social engineering, he tells time by passing peas from one bowl to another. It is not hard to see in this an ironic reflection of the prayers that regulate religious routine and of the rosary beads that measure devotions. For the old man, of course, the pea counting is the empty repetition of a gesture with no meaning exterior to itself. But it does fill time. In God's world this paradox is validated; the monastic *regula* fills to overflowing an existence that denies the world. For the hermit, however, secular sainthood refuses the only commitment that gives existence value. Sainthood on these terms is little more than a great denial. As Tarrou admits, such guiltlessness becomes at least a benevolent diabolism.

The old man, however, does know life. He realizes, for example, that the plague "c'est la vie, et voilà tout" (LP, p. 246). This symbolic reading of the disease is central to the novel's moral scheme, for the powers that oppose man are not all exterior to him. Life and consciousness are not only gifts. They are curses as well. The physical nature in which man finds pleasure carries within the seeds of its own destruction. The old man sees the truth, but does not despair. He takes pride in his *savoir vivre*, looks forward with pleasure to an old age devoted to his *métier*. The hermit thus maintains the dialectic advocated in the *Mythe de Sisyphe*: he sees life and the world for what they are, but continues to live nonetheless. His occupation, moreover, is itself an instructive reduction of the daily routines that constitute the "habitudes" of most men, those at least who live without revolt. An ethic of quantity motivates his joy in the endless reprise of a meaningless action. Counting peas, rolling a rock up a mountain from which it always rolls back down, these two actions identically affirm life as a sequence of inconsequences.

Sisyphean man, however, can only function in *La Peste* as a caricature. Here the absurd life proves no longer sufficient to the demands of value which existence, in and of itself, places upon man. Man must fight for his happiness even though he knows defeat is certain. In *L'Étranger* the reader finds no moral scheme to judge Meursault; human justice and reason interpret his life badly and Camus is otherwise silent. *La Peste*, however, eschews such solipsism. The underlying motivation of each character is moralistic. And the main function of the pea counter is to pass judgment on Camus's earlier vision of human life. The old man sees with lucidity that life has no meaning. He fails to see, however, that existence may possess any more than a rudimentary value: self-perpetuation. He has, like Sisyphus, his happiness. But in the city besieged by plague, as Rambert says, "il peut y avoir de la honte à être heureux tout seul" (LP, p. 166).