

Narrative, Geography and Interpretation

Whenever a great intellectual and moral presence like Raymond Williams suddenly disappears from his habitual place among us it is natural at first to restore him by various ceremonies and activities of commemoration.* The sense of loss and bereavement that was felt immediately after Williams's death in 1988 has been an instigation not only for public observances of grief and respect but also for our many private acts of recollection and retrospective admiration. I knew him mainly from his immensely grand but directly appealing *oeuvre*. Certainly the handful of times that I had met him came to mind with all sorts of poignant emphases as, along with many others, I reconstructed from our intermittent meetings the vital personality of his engaging and thoughtful human presence. He was someone many of us listened to—the sound patterns of his direct communication to audiences as speaker, conversationalist and lecturer are discernible in everything he wrote—and from whom all of us quite literally learned a great deal of what is important about modern Western culture.

In time, however, vivid recollections of the man we miss are evident as anchored in something deeper and more reliable than personal memory. For of all the great critics of the twentieth century Raymond Williams is, in my opinion, the most abiding, the most organically grounded in the profound and sustaining rhythms of human life. And as the actual date of his death slowly recedes one finds oneself taking stock of what in the solid foundations of social life his work depends on so finely, so scrupulously, so resolutely. Who more than he rooted his observations and analyses of English literature in the actual lived life not just of poets, novelists and dramatists but of city and country folk, workers, families, peasants, gentry, young people, adventurers, pamphleteers, teachers, children, technicians, policemen, and bureaucrats? And who more than Williams nourished his literary work with the generative and regenerative processes by which human life produces itself locally, nationally, regionally?

Text and Community

I would like to begin by elucidating the connection in Raymond Williams's work between the literary text and the lived life of knowable social groups—a connection brilliantly refined and mapped in *The Country and the City*—and then go on to develop and otherwise to rediscover it in one major instance not discussed by Williams. Just as Williams, when he is read, enables us to move directly beyond what he called the ideological capture of the *text* and into the life of communities, so too does his work posthumously and over time enable us to perceive the generous perspectives on other literatures and societies afforded and made possible by his approach to English literature and society.

In his books Williams was powerfully focused on the British Isles, so much so that he appeared to be, as in his own description of Cobbett returning to England in 1801, 'in close contact with the country and political system' that so many other English men and women had only idealized. *The Country and the City* gets much of its force from its direct and unflinching look at the land itself, the struggles to possess it, to speak on its behalf, to build or colonize on it and in its name, to dispossess, ruin, maim and distort the lives of many, all in the cause of land. Property, as Williams demonstrates with extraordinary skill, authorizes schemes, establishes discourses, founds ideologies, many of them leading back to the earth, 'England's green and pleasant land' for some, 'the heart of an immense darkness' for others. In Williams's dialectical vision of it English culture was not a single stable object to be venerated and celebrated, but rather a remarkably varied set of structures deriving from the land, over and on which rights and ideas dispute each other, as also of course do classes and individuals. Thus the country-house poems of the 17th century are taken back by Williams to the dispossession of peasants and the programmatic manufacture of a scene from which only artificial serenity and grace have not been excluded.

⁹ This article is the text of the Raymond Williams Memorial Lecture, delivered in London on 10 October 1989.

The conception of Britain that underpins Williams's work is in a quite radical sense a geographical one, geography understood here as the science of the earth, its physical, political, historical, social and ideological features contributing each in its own way to the culture of which Williams was so distinguished a critic and participant. And exactly because Williams was such a remarkable writer on that complex of nations to which he belonged we can now retrospectively begin to discern all around his Britain, those other nations of the world without which any true geography of the historical adventure of mankind would be incomplete. There is a paradox here that we should not mute. Because Williams's Anglocentrism is so pronounced and stubborn a theme in his work, *because* of that we can distinguish and differentiate the other ethnocentrisms with which his work in geographical and historical terms interacts contrapuntally.

Consider the possibilities now offered to Anglophone studies, to take an example very near at hand. There are the colonial relationships, first of all, between the Britain of the seventeenth through twentieth centuries, and places like Ireland, Africa, India, the Caribbean, the Americas, Australia and New Zealand. The kind of interpretation offered by Williams allows for the emergence of various structures of feeling involving those places, structures fashioned from within Britain as the imperial, metropolitan centre. The themes of emigration and banishment in the colonies, the relationship between the novel's narrative form as realized in *Robinson Crusoe* and the colonial expansion of Britain, the whole idea of imperial domination and with it the specific issues of subject races, racial types, indirect rule, national destiny as intrinsic to the late nineteenth and twentieth-century cultural archive of Britain: these major topics surely emerge from the reconsiderations of English literature begun by Williams and continued by many of his able students. Yet, secondly, there is also the vast and burgeoning literature of the former colonies, in which a sustained reaction and response to the metropolitan literature of the British centre plays a very important decolonizing role. Think of the importance of *The Tempest* to Caribbean writers, or of Kipling to Indian writers, of Conrad to Africans. What used to be the citadel of an English literature composed of great stonelike slabs, the masterpieces that constitute the canon or great tradition, has been transformed into sites of intersection, where class, racial and gender interests form not only the actual texts but the reading of texts in highly determinate ways, many of which we are only just beginning to understand.

In the late twentieth century, therefore, 'English' has become not just the linguistic possession of one people but a world language, distending beyond recognition the tidy and relatively discrete map of Britain on which such fields as English studies have always been based. For not only do we have to take account of the particular North American extensions of 'English' but we must also, as Williams so often did in both his early and late research, take account of the new media networks, the technological revolution in communications, and the remarkable multi-national economic and political schemes that have re-distributed the old imperial patterns in alarmingly familiar

contemporary ensembles. Yet despite its scope and richness, the English map that secured the landscape from local to international horizons has always had other national competitors. France, Germany, Russia, Holland, Belgium during the nineteenth century, and today such intercontinental configurations as Islam, Japan, the Third World vie with each other to mobilize as well as organize numerous cultural practices that are often adversarial and defensive. If one adds to this mix the radical passions evoked by what I can only call the nativist predilection, in which Englishness and Frenchness jostle *négritude*, the Judeo-Christian tradition, and many of the fundamentalist essences more and more regularly invoked by disadvantaged, or disenfranchised groups at one end, and at the other end, by ruling elites badly in need of foreign devils for the conduct of national policy, we will get a startlingly dramatic sense of the insistent identities clamouring for notice everywhere we look.

Post-War World Culture

To pierce this welter in search of something comparable to and as certain as England's geography is a task of considerable difficulty. But it is a task provoked by the example of Raymond Williams, whose unmatched explorations of England and its various conflicting cultures raise the question of how and *where* one might proceed in that way today if (a) one is not to be limited to England and (b) the genuinely internationalist dimensions of the changes in post-war world culture are taken seriously. Besides—if I may be allowed a personal confession—the power of Williams's work is intrinsically at one with its rootedness and even its insularity, qualities that stimulate in the variously unhoused and rootless energies of people like myself—by origin un-English, un-European, un-Western—a combination of admiring regard and puzzled envy. What, we say to ourselves, is there in it for us, given that we can emulate neither his belongingness nor his native vision? How does Williams's work in and about England help us to address some of the related aesthetic, political and cultural problematics that we can find in locales and texts far less English and European than Williams's? And how, in their own way, do these other formations depend no less on a concrete geography than does, say, *The Country and the City*?

The attractive and relatively logical alternative is to cross the Channel and look at writing that engages Britain's historical imperial rival, metropolitan France, whose postwar struggle over its North African colonies surely makes up one of the most compelling issues in French life and letters. In trying to formulate a combination of comparison and contrast with Williams's work about contemporary England, one name and one *oeuvre* has seemed to me especially significant, that of Albert Camus and his several narratives set in, but only occasionally about, Algeria. Why Camus is important in the ugly colonial turbulence of France's decolonizing travail is fairly obvious, but what makes him acutely interesting is his retrospective relationship with George Orwell, who was of course a figure given important and controversial attention by Williams. Like Orwell Camus became a well-known writer around issues highlighted in the thirties and forties: fascism,

the Spanish Civil War, resistance to the fascist onslaught, issues of poverty and social injustice treated from within the discourse of socialism, the relationship between writers and politics, the role of the intellectual. Both were famous for the clarity and plainness of their style—we should recall Roland Barthes's description of Camus's style in *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* (1951) as *écriture blanche*—as well as the unaffected clarity of their political formulations. Both also made the transformation from the debates of the thirties and forties to the period of the Cold War with less than happy results. Both, in short, are posthumously interesting because of narratives they wrote which now seem to be about a situation that on closer inspection seems really to be another and quite different one. Orwell's fictional examinations of British socialism have taken on almost prophetic quality (if you like them, symptomatic if you don't) in the domain of Cold War polemic; Camus's narratives of resistance and existential confrontation, which had once seemed to typify standing up both to mortality and to Nazism during the Occupation, can be read as part of the bitter debate about colonialism.

There are more political and cultural connections between them that I would like to dwell on a moment longer. Despite Williams's rather powerful critique of Orwell's social vision, Orwell is regularly claimed by intellectuals on the Left and Right because of his political positions as well as his human virtue. Was he a neo-conservative in advance of his time as Norman Podhoretz claims, or was he, as Christopher Hitchens more persuasively argues, really a hero of the Left? Camus is today somewhat less available to Anglo-American concerns, but he has begun turning up as critic, political moralist, admirable novelist in recent discussions of terrorism and colonialism. The striking parallel between Camus and Orwell is that both men have attained the status of exemplary figures of their respective cultures, figures whose significance derives from but nevertheless seems to transcend the immediate force of their native context. The note is perfectly struck near the end of Conor Cruise O'Brien's brilliant demystification of Camus, in a book that in many ways resembles (and belongs to the same series as) Raymond Williams's *Modern Masters* study of Orwell. O'Brien says:

Probably no European writer of his time left so deep a mark on the imagination and, at the same time, on the moral and political consciousness of his own generation and of the next. He was intensely European because he belonged to the frontier of Europe and was aware of a threat. The threat also beckoned to him. He refused, but not without a struggle.

No other writer, not even Conrad, is more representative of the Western consciousness and conscience in relation to the non-Western world. The inner drama of his work is the development of this relation, under increasing pressure and in increasing anguish.¹

'Western Consciousness'

Having shrewdly and even mercilessly exposed the connections between Camus's most famous novels and the colonial situation in

¹ Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Albert Camus*, New York 1970, p. 103.

Algeria, O'Brien lets him off the hook at the end: Camus as representative of 'Western' consciousness and conscience, along with Conrad. There is even a subtle act of transcendence in O'Brien's notion of Camus as belonging 'to the frontier of Europe', whereas in fact anyone who knows anything about France, Algeria and Camus's relationship with the North African colony—O'Brien is certainly one of the ones who know a lot—would not characterize the essence of the colonial tie as one between the European mainland and its frontier. Similarly Conrad and Camus are not merely representatives of so relatively weightless a thing as 'Western consciousness' but rather of Western dominance in the non-European world. Conrad makes the abstract point with unerring power in his essay 'Geography and Some Explorers'. He celebrates British exploration of the Arctic in the first two-thirds of the essay and then concludes with an example of his own 'militant geography', the way, he says, by 'putting my finger on a spot in the very middle of the then white heart of Africa, I declared that some day I would go there.'² Later of course he does go there, and rehabilitates the gesture in *Heart of Darkness*. The point about the Western colonialism that O'Brien and Conrad are at such pains to describe is, first, that it is a penetration *beyond* the European frontier and *into* the heart of another geographical entity, and second, that it is specific not to an ahistorical 'Western consciousness in relation to the non-Western world'—most African or Indian natives considered their burdens as having less to do with 'Western consciousness' than with concrete French, British or Belgian colonial practices like slavery, land expropriations, murderous military campaigns, etc.—but to a whole laboriously constructed relationship by which France and Britain identified themselves as 'the West' while subservient lesser peoples were relegated to the status of a largely undeveloped and inert 'non-Western world'.³

The quite considerable elision and compression in O'Brien's otherwise tough-minded analysis of Camus comes in fact as O'Brien deals with Camus as individual artist, anguished over the difficult choices he must face. Unlike Sartre and Jeanson, who were right but for whom, according to O'Brien, a correct choice of sides during the Algerian war was comparatively easy, Camus was born and brought up in Algeria; his family remained there after he began to live in France, and his involvement in the struggle with the FLN seemed to him to be a matter of life and death. One can certainly agree with this much of O'Brien's claim. What is less easy to accept is how Camus's difficulties are collectively elevated by O'Brien to the symbolic rank of 'Western consciousness', that is, of a receptacle emptied of all but its capacity for sentience and reflection.

O'Brien further rescues Camus from the embarrassing situation he had put him in earlier in the book by stressing the privileged

² Joseph Conrad, *Last Essays*, ed. Richard Curle, London 1926, pp. 10–17.

³ The later O'Brien, with views noticeably like these and different from the gist of his book on Camus, has made no secret of his antipathy for the lesser peoples of the 'Third World'. See his extended disagreement with Said in *Salmagundi* 70–71, Spring/Summer 1986.

quality of his individual experience. With this tactic we are also likely to have some sympathy. Whatever the unfortunate collective nature of French *colon* behaviour in Algeria, there is no reason at all to burden Camus with it, he a writer whose entirely French upbringing in Algeria (well described in the Herbert Lottman biography⁴) did not prevent him from producing a famous pre-war report on the miseries of the place, most of them due to French colonialism.⁵ O'Brien, and indeed anyone who reads Camus's fiction, is understandably susceptible to his quandaries, those of a moral man in an immoral situation. But Camus's focus is not on the whole of Algeria but on the predicament of the individual in a social setting: this is as true of *L'Etranger* as it is of *The Plague* and *The Fall*. What Camus evidently prizes is self-recognition, that combination of disillusioned maturity and moral steadfastness in the face of a bad situation.

Questions of Method

Here, however, a set of serious methodological points needs to be raised. The first is to question and deconstruct Camus's choice of geographical setting for *L'Etranger* (1942), *The Plague* (1947), and his extremely interesting group of short stories collected under the title *Exile and the Kingdom* (1957). Why was Algeria a setting for narratives whose main reference (in the case of the first two) has always been construed as being France generally, and more particularly, France under the Nazi Occupation? O'Brien goes further than most in noting that the choice is not an innocent one, that much in the tales (e.g. Meursault's trial) is either a surreptitious or unconscious justification of French rule or an ideological attempt to prettify it.⁶ But in trying with perfect justification to establish a continuity between Camus as an individual artist and French colonialism in Algeria, we need to ask whether or not Camus's narratives themselves are connected to, and derive advantages from, earlier and more overtly imperial French narratives of Algeria. Only in widening the historical perspective from Camus as an attractively solitary writer in the 1940s and '50s to the century-old French presence in Algeria would it be possible to understand not just the form and ideological meaning of Camus's narratives, but also the degree to which his work further inflects, refers to, and in many ways consolidates and otherwise renders more precise the nature of the French enterprise there.

A second methodological point concerns the type of evidence necessary for this wider optic. There is also the related question of who does the interpreting. A European critic of historical bent is very likely to see Camus as representing a tragically immobilized French consciousness of the *European* crisis near one of its great watersheds; after all, independence came in 1962 and although Camus seemed to have regarded *colon* implantations as rescuable and extendable past

⁴ Herbert R. Lottman, *Albert Camus: A Biography*, New York 1979. Camus's actual behaviour in Algeria during the colonial war is best chronicled in Yves Courrière's *La Guerre d'Algérie II: Le temps des léopards*, Paris 1969.

⁵ 'Misère de la Kabylie' (1939), in Camus, *Essais*, Paris 1965.

⁶ O'Brien, op. cit., pp. 22–28.

1960 (the year of his death), he was quite simply wrong on historical grounds, since the French did in fact cede possession of Algeria a mere two years later. Insofar as his work clearly alludes to contemporary Algeria, Camus's general concern was the actual state of Franco-Algerian affairs, and not their history or dramatic changes in their long-term destiny. Yet to an Algerian, 1962 would more likely be seen as the end of one long and grossly unhappy epoch in Algerian history, and the triumphant beginning of an entirely new phase. A correlative way of interpreting Camus's novels, therefore, would be to see them as interventions in the history of French efforts at being and staying in Algeria rather than as novels whose chief value is that they tell us something about their author's state of mind. Moreover, Camus's incorporations of and assumptions about Algerian history would have to be compared with revisionist histories of the period written by Algerians *after* independence. For it would be correct to regard Camus's work as affiliated historically both with the French colonial venture itself (since everything he wrote assumes it as immutably given) and with outright opposition to Algerian independence. What an Algerian perspective might afford is a vision necessarily unblocking and releasing things either hidden or denied by Camus.

Lastly, there is a crucial methodological value in detail, patience, insistence with regard to Camus's highly compressed texts written in French for a metropolitan audience. The tendency is too often for readers rapidly to associate Camus's novels principally with French novels about France, not only because of their language and the forms they seem to take over from noble antecedents like *Adolphe* and *Trois Contes*, but because Camus's choice of Algeria seems incidental to the pressing moral material at hand. Almost half a century after their appearance, his novels are thus readily transmuted into parables of the human condition. True, Meursault kills an Arab but this Arab is not named and seems to be without a history, let alone a mother and father; true, Arabs die of plague in Oran but they are not named either, whereas Rieux and Tarrou are pushed very far forward in the action. So, we are likely to say (as, for instance, readers of Ben Jonson's poems are likely to say before reading *The Country and the City*) one ought to read the texts for the richness of what is there not for what, if anything, has been excluded. But I would insist, to the contrary and against the grain, that what is mainly in Camus's novels is what they appear to have been cleared of—that is, the detail of that very distinctly French conquest begun in 1830 and continuing into the period of Camus's life and into the composition of his texts themselves.

The Political Geography of Algeria

This restorative interpretation is not meant vindictively. Nor do I intend after the fact to *blame* Camus for hiding things about Algeria in his fiction that, for example, in the various pieces collected in the *Chroniques algériennes* he was at pains to explain laboriously. What I want to do is to let Camus's fiction emerge as an element in the methodically constructed French political geography of Algeria that took many generations to complete, the better to see his work as providing for an arresting summary account of the political as well as

interpretive contest to represent, inhabit and possess the territory itself.

I shall use as *locus classicus* an episode near the end of *The Adulterous Woman* when Janine, the protagonist, leaves her husband's bedside during a sleepless night in a small hotel in the Algerian countryside. A formerly promising law student, he has become a travelling salesman; after a long and tiring bus journey the couple finally arrive at their destination where he makes the rounds of his various Arab clients. During the journey Janine has been impressed with the silent passivity and incomprehensibility of the native Algerians; their presence seems like a barely evident natural fact, taken scant notice of by her in her emotional trouble. When she leaves the hotel and her sleeping husband, Janine encounters the night watchman who speaks to her in Arabic, a language she appears not to understand. The climax of the story is a remarkable, almost pantheistic communion between Janine, the sky and the desert. Clearly, I think, Camus's intention is to present the relationship between woman and geography in sexual terms, that is, as an alternative to her now nearly dead relationship with her husband; hence the adultery referred to in the story's title. The relevant passage is worth quoting:

She was turning with them [the drifting stars in a sky, Camus says, that was 'moving in a sort of slow gyration'], and the apparently stationary progress little by little identified her with the core of her being, where cold and desire were now vying with each other. Before her the stars were falling one by one and being snuffed out among the stones of the desert, and each time Janine opened a little more to the night. Breathing deeply, she forgot the cold, the dead weight of others, the craziness or stuffiness of life, the long anguish of living and dying [*le poids des êtres, la vie démente ou figée, la longue angoisse de vivre et de mourir*]. After so many years of mad, aimless fleeing from fear, she had come to a stop at last. At the same time, she seemed to recover her roots and the sap again rose in her against the parapet as she strained toward the moving sky; she was merely waiting for her fluttering heart to calm down and establish silence within her. The last stars of the constellations dropped their clusters a little lower on unbearable gentleness, the water of night began to fill Janine, drowned the cold, rose gradually from the hidden core of her being, rising up even to her mouth full of moans [*l'eau de la nuit... monta peu à peu du centre obscur de son être et déborda en flots ininterrompus jusqu'à sa bouche pleine de gémissements*]. The next moment, the whole sky stretched over her, fallen on her back on the cold earths.⁷

The effect intended is that of a moment out of time in which Janine escapes the sordid narrative of her present life and enters the kingdom of the collection's title; or as Camus put it in a note he wanted to insert in subsequent editions of the collection, 'to the kingdom [which] coincides with a free and unvarnished life that we have to rediscover in order to be finally reborn.'⁸ Thus her past and present drop away from her, as does the actuality of all other beings (*le poids des êtres*, symptomatically mistranslated as 'the dead weight of other people' by Justin O'Brien). In this passage therefore Janine 'comes to

⁷ Camus, *Exile and the Kingdom*, New York 1958, pp. 32–33.

⁸ Camus, *Essais*, p. 2039.

a stop at last', motionless, fecund, ready for communion with this particular piece of sky and desert in which, echoing Camus's explanatory note designed as a later elucidation of the six stories, the woman—*pie'd noir* and *colon*—discovers her roots. What her real identity is or may be is judged later in the passage when she achieves what is an unmistakably sexual climax: Camus speaks here of the '*centre obscur de son être*', which suggests both her own sense of obscurity and ignorance, and Camus's as well. The point seems to be that her specific history as a Frenchwoman in Algeria does not matter, for she has achieved an immediate and direct access to that particular earth and sky.

With one exception—a garrulous and unaffecting parable of Parisian artistic life—each of the stories in *Exile and the Kingdom* deals with the exile of people with a specific non-European history (four tales are set in Algeria, one each in Paris and in Brazil) which is revealed to be deeply, even threateningly unpleasant, and with the precariousness of trying to achieve a moment of rest, idyllic detachment, poetic self-realization. Only by analogy with what takes place in the Brazilian story, in which through sacrifice and commitment a European is received as a substitute for a dead native in the circle of intimacy by other natives, is there any suggestion that Camus allowed himself to believe that there could be a sustained and satisfactory identification of Europeans with the overseas territory itself, as in *The Adulterous Woman*. In *The Renegade* a missionary is captured by an outcast southern Algerian tribe, has his tongue torn out (an eerie parallel with Paul Bowles's story *A Distant Episode*), and becomes a super-zealous partisan of the tribe, joining in an ambush of French forces. This is as if to say that going native can only be the result of mutilation, which in turn produces a diseased, ultimately unacceptable loss of identity.

The Gathering Crisis

A matter of months separates this late (1957) book of stories (the individual publication of each of the stories is interlaced with the appearance of *The Fall* in 1956) from the contents of the later pieces in Camus's *Chroniques algériennes* published in 1958. Although some passages in *Exile* are a throwback to the earlier lyricism and controlled nostalgia of *Noces*, one of Camus's few atmospheric works on life in Algeria, the stories are filled with anxiety about the gathering crisis. Here we should bear in mind—and I shall have more to say about this other history a little later—that the Algerian Revolution was officially announced and launched on 1 November 1954; the Sétif massacres had occurred in May 1945, and the years before that (when Camus was working on *L'Etranger*) were filled with events fuelled by Algerian nationalism in its long and bloody resistance to French colonization. Behind that was the invasion and incorporation of Algeria by France, which began in 1830 and was definitively resumed and consummated a decade later. So even though, according to all his biographers, Camus grew up in Algeria as a *French* youth, he was always surrounded by the signs of Franco-Algerian struggle most of which he seemed either to have evaded entirely or, in his last years, openly translated into the language, imagery and geographical apprehension

of a singular French will contesting Algeria against its native Muslim inhabitants.

That these things are yet to be noted even by appreciatively severe critics of Camus like Conor Cruise O'Brien is therefore unsurprising, since to take account of them one would not only have to situate Camus in all (as opposed to a part of) his actual history but one would also have to rely on his true French antecedents, as well as the work of post-independence Algerian novelists, historians, sociologists, political scientists. For there remains today a readily decipherable (and stubbornly persisting) Eurocentric tradition of interpretatively blocking off what Camus blocked off about Algeria all of his life, and what both he and his fictional characters blocked off in the narratives. When in the last years of his life Camus publicly and even vehemently opposed the nationalist demands put forward for Algerian independence he did so in the same way he had represented Algeria from the beginning of his artistic career, although now his words (in *Algérie* 1958⁹ written, I gather, during the Battle of Algiers) resonate depressingly with the accents of official Anglo–French Suez rhetoric. His comments about ‘Colonel Nasser’, Arab and Muslim imperialism and the like are therefore familiar to us, but the one uncompromisingly severe political statement about Algeria he makes in the text suddenly appears as an unadorned political summary of his image of Algeria for which all his previous writing prepares us:

En ce qui concerne l'Algérie, l'indépendance nationale est une formule purement passionnelle. Il n'y a jamais eu encore de nation algérienne. Les Juifs, les Turcs, les Grecs, les Italiens, les Berbères, auraient autant de droit à réclamer la direction de cette nation virtuelle. Actuellement, les Arabes ne forment pas à eux seuls toute l'Algérie. L'importance et l'ancienneté du peuplement français, en particulier, suffisent à créer un problème qui ne peut se comparer à rien dans l'histoire. Les Français d'Algérie sont, eux aussi, et au sens fort du terme, des indigènes. Il faut ajouter qu'une Algérie purement arabe ne pourrait accéder à l'indépendance économique sans laquelle l'indépendance politique n'est qu'un leurre. Si insuffisant que soit l'effort français, il est d'une telle envergure qu'aucun pays, à l'heure actuelle, ne consentirait à le prendre en charge.⁹

This helps us to see clearly what Meursault, Janine, Rieux and Tarrou enact, especially at those privileged moments when Camus represents a native bond between French *colons* and the physical geography of Algeria. Despite the fact of an overwhelming Arab majority, he says that there can be no allowances made for an Algerian nation, which

⁹ Camus, *Essais*, pp. 1012–13. *Ed. trans.*: ‘As far as Algeria is concerned, national independence is a formula driven by nothing other than passion. There has never yet been an Algerian nation. The Jews, Turks, Greeks, Italians or Berbers would be as entitled to claim the leadership of this potential nation. As things stand, the Arabs alone do not comprise the whole of Algeria. The size and length of the French settlement, in particular, are enough to create a problem that cannot be compared to anything else in history. The French of Algeria are also natives, in the strong sense of the word. Moreover, a purely Arab Algeria could not achieve that economic independence without which political independence is nothing but an illusion. However inadequate the French effort has been, it is of such proportions that no other country would today agree to take over the responsibility.’

has never existed. Even if the presence of Berbers, Turks, Italians and Jews in Algeria is neither equivalent nor reducible to all the other non-Arab presences there, Camus's point holds because 'l'effort français', to say nothing of 'l'ancienneté du peuplement français', outranks everything else about the place. The irony is that wherever in his novels or descriptive pieces Camus tells a story, the French presence is either rendered (the way Janine is) standing outside narrative as an essence subject neither to time nor to interpretation, or it is presented as the only history worthy of being narrated as *history*. Hence the blankness and absence of background in the Arab killed by Meursault; hence also the sense of devastation in Oran that is implicitly meant to depend not mainly on Arab deaths (which, demographically speaking, are the ones that really matter) but on French consciousness.

It would be accurate to say therefore that Camus's narratives lay absolutely severe and ontologically prior claims to Algeria's geography. For anyone who has even a cursory acquaintance with the extended French colonial venture there that ended in 1962, these claims have much the same preposterously anomalous quality as the declaration in March 1938 by French Minister Chautemps that Arabic was 'a foreign language' so far as Algeria was concerned. Such claims are not Camus's alone, although he gave them a semi-transparent currency and helped to ensure that they have resonated up to the present. Camus inherits and uncritically accepts them as conventions shaped in the long tradition of colonial writing on Algeria, all of it forgotten today, or unacknowledged genealogically by readers and critics of Camus, most of whom find it easier to interpret his work as limited existentially to 'the human condition'.

The Terrain of Domination

Just because only one side of a contest appears relevant, or because the full dynamic of colonial implantation and native resistance seems embarrassingly to detract from the humanism of a major European text, this is no reason to go along with the prevalent interpretative current. I would go so far as saying that *because* Camus's most famous fiction incorporates, intransigently recapitulates and in many ways depends on a massive French discourse on Algeria, his work is *more* and not less interesting. For Camus's clean style, the anguished moral dilemmas he lays bare, the harrowing personal fates of characters like Meursault and Rieux that he treats with such fineness and regulated irony—all these draw on and, when they are read unflinchingly against the background of French domination of Algeria, in fact revive that history with circumspect precision and a remarkable lack of remorse or compassion.

Once again the interrelationship between geography and the political contest pitting French colonialism against Algerian natives has to be reanimated exactly where, in the novels, Camus covers it with a superstructure celebrated by Sartre as providing 'a climate of the absurd'.¹⁰

¹⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Literary Essays*, p. 32.

Both *L'Etranger* and *The Plague* are about the death of Arabs, deaths that highlight and silently inform what difficulties of conscience and reflection the French characters go through. Moreover the structure of civil society vividly presented by Camus—the municipality, the legal apparatus, hospitals, restaurants, clubs, French and Spanish entertainments, schools—is entirely French, although it too in the main administers the non-French resident population as well. So what the novels and short stories narrate is the result of a victory won over a pacified and, from the time of the initial conquest in 1830, a vastly reduced Muslim population whose rights over the land, Algeria's geography, have been severely curtailed. Thus in confirming and consolidating French priority, Camus neither disputes nor in the slightest way dissents from the campaign over sovereignty waged by French colonialism against Algerian Muslims for over a hundred years.

At the centre of the contest stands the military struggle, whose first great protagonists are Marshall Theodore Bugeaud and the Emir Abdel Kader, the one a ferocious martinet whose thoroughgoing patriarchal severity toward the Algerian natives begins in 1836 as an effort at discipline and ends a decade or so later with a policy of genocide and massive territorial expropriation, the other a Sufi mystic and relentless guerrilla fighter, endlessly regrouping, reforming, rededicating his troops against a far stronger and more modern invading enemy. To read the documents of the time, whether found in a collection of Bugeaud's letters, proclamations and dispatches compiled and published at about the same time as *L'Etranger*, or in a recent edition of Abdel Kader's Sufi poetry edited and translated into French by Michel Chodkiewicz,¹¹ or in a remarkable portrait of the psychology of the conquest reconstructed from French diaries and letters of the 1830's and 1840's by Mostafa Lacheraf, senior member of the FLN, and post-independence professor at the University of Algiers,¹² is to perceive the dynamic of what makes Camus's diminishment of the Arab presence inevitable.

The core of French military policy as articulated by Bugeaud and his officers was the *razzia*, or punitive raid on Algerian villages, their homes, harvests, women and children. 'The Arabs,' said Bugeaud, 'must be prevented from sowing, from harvesting, and from pasturing their flocks.'¹³ In his study, Lacheraf gives a sampling of the poetic exhilaration recorded time after time by French officers, their sense that here at last was an opportunity for *guerre à outrance* beyond all morality or need. General Changarnier, for instance, describes the pleasant distraction vouchsafed his troops in raiding peaceful villages; this type of activity is taught by the scriptures, he says, in which Joshua and other great leaders can be seen conducting 'quite appalling *razzias*'. Ruin, total destruction, uncompromising brutality are condoned not only because legitimized by God but because, in words echoed and re-echoed

¹¹ Emir Abdel Kader, *Écrits spirituels*, Paris 1982.

¹² Mostafa Lacheraf, *L'Algérie: nation et société*, Paris 1965.

¹³ Quoted in Abdullah Laroui, *The History of the Maghreb: An Interpretive Essay*, Princeton 1977, p. 301.

from Bugeaud to Salan, 'the Arabs only understand brute force.'¹⁴

Lacheraf comments on the French military effort in the first couple of decades that it went well beyond its object—the suppression of Algerian resistance—and attained the absolute status of an ideal.¹⁵ Its other side, as expressed with tireless zeal by Bugeaud himself, was the colonization of the country. The exasperation that seems ubiquitous in his letters toward the end of his stay in Algeria derived from the way in which European civilian emigrants were simply using up the resources of Algeria without restraint or reason; leave colonization to the military, he said, but to no avail.¹⁶ Indeed one of the quiet themes running through French fiction, from Balzac to Psicharri and Loti, is the abuse of Algeria and the scandals deriving from shady financial schemes operated by unscrupulous individuals for whom the openness of the place permitted nearly every conceivable thing to be done if profit could be promised or expected. There are unforgettable portraits of this state of affairs in Daudet's *Tartarin de Tarascon* and Maupassant's *Bel Ami*.¹⁷

Destruction and Reconstitution

But the crucial matter is how the destruction wrought upon Algeria by the French was systematic on the one hand, and constitutive of a new French polity on the other. About this no contemporary witness between 1840 and 1870 was in any doubt. Some, like de Tocqueville whose criticisms of American policy towards Blacks and native Indians were very stern, saw the advance of European civilization as necessitating the greatest cruelties against the Muslim *indigènes*: therefore in his view total conquest became equivalent to French greatness. He considered Islam to be synonymous with 'polygamy, the isolation of women, the absence of all political life, a tyrannical and omnipresent government which forces men to conceal themselves and to seek all their satisfactions in family life.'¹⁸ And because the natives were, in his view, nomadic, he believed 'that all means of desolating these tribes ought to be used. I make an exception only in case of what is interdicted by international law and that of humanity.' But, as Melvin Richter comments, Tocqueville said nothing 'in 1846 when it was revealed that hundreds of Arabs had been smoked to death in the course of the *razzias* he had approved for their humane quality.'¹⁹ 'Unfortunate necessities', Tocqueville thought, but nowhere

¹⁴ Lacheraf, p. 92.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 93.

¹⁶ Bugeaud, *Par l'Épée et par la charrue*, Paris 1948. Bugeaud's later career was equally distinguished: he commanded the troops who fired on the insurgent crowds on 23 February 1848, and was repaid by Flaubert in *L'Éducation sentimentale* who had the unpopular marshal's portrait pierced in the stomach during the storming of the Palais Royal on 24 February 1848.

¹⁷ See Martine Astier Loutfi, *Littérature et colonialisme: L'Expansion coloniale vue dans la littérature romanesque française 1871–1914*, Paris 1971.

¹⁸ Melvin Richter, 'Tocqueville on Algeria', *Review of Politics* 25, 1963, p. 377.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 380. For a fuller and more recent account of this material, see Marwan R. Buheiry, *The Formation and Perception of the Modern Arab World*, ed. Lawrence I. Conrad, Princeton 1989, especially Part I, 'European Perceptions of the Orient', which has four essays on 19th-century France and Algeria, one of which is on Tocqueville and Islam.

near as important as the 'good government' owed the 'half-civilized' Muslims by French government.

To today's leading North African historian, Abdullah Laroui, French colonial policy intended nothing less than to destroy the Algerian state. Clearly Camus's declaration that an Algerian nation never existed took the ravages of French policy as having wiped the slate clean. Nevertheless, as I have been saying, post-colonial events impose upon us both a longer narrative and a more inclusive and demystifying interpretation. Laroui says: 'The history of Algeria from 1830 to 1870 is made up of pretences: the colons who allegedly wished to transform the Algerians into men like themselves, when in reality their only desire was to transform the soil of Algeria into French soil; the military, who supposedly respected the local traditions and way of life, whereas in reality their only interest was to govern with the least possible effort; the claim of Napoleon III that he was building an Arab kingdom, whereas his central ideas were the "Americanization" of the French economy and the French colonization of Algeria.'²⁰

When he arrives in Algeria in 1872 Daudet's Tartarin sees few traces of what he calls 'the Orient', which had been promised him, and finds himself instead in what is an overseas copy of his native Tarrascon. For writers like Segalen and Gide, Algeria is the exotic locale in which their own spiritual problems—like Janine's in *The Adulterous Woman*—can be addressed and therapeutically treated. Scant attention is paid to the natives whose purpose is quite routinely to provide transient thrills or opportunities, as in the case not only of Michel in *The Immoralist* but also of Malraux's protagonist Perken in the Cambodian setting of *The Royal Way*, for exercises of will. Differences in French representations of Algeria, whether they are the crude harem postcards studied so memorably by Malek Alloula,²¹ or the sophisticated anthropological constructions unearthed by Fanny Colonna and Claude Brahimi,²² or the impressive narrative structures for which Camus's works furnish so important an example, can all be traced back to the geographical *morte-main* of French colonial practice.

How deeply felt, how consistently replenished, how completely incorporated and institutionalized an enterprise in French discourse we can further discover in early 20th-century works of geographical and colonial thought. Albert Sarraut's *Grandeur et servitude coloniales* states no less a goal for colonialism than the biological unity of mankind, '*la solidarité humaine*'. Those races who are incapable of utilizing their resources (e.g. natives in the French overseas territories) are to be cultivated, helped, brought back to the human family; 'here, for the colonizer, is the formal counterpart of the act of possession; it removes from the act its character of plunder and makes it a creation of human law.'²³ In his classic work on colonial policy and land

²⁰ Laroui, op. cit., p. 305.

²¹ Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, Minneapolis 1986.

²² Fanny Colonna and Claude Haim Brahimi, 'Du bon usage de la science coloniale', in *Le mal de voir*, Paris 1976.

²³ Albert Sarraut, *Grandeur et servitude coloniales*, Paris 1931, p. 113.

distribution, Georges Hardy ventures that the assimilation of colonies to France 'caused inspiration to burst forth and not only led to the appearance of numerous colonial novels but also opened minds to the diversity of moral and mental forms, encouraging writers to adopt new modes of psychological exploration.'²⁴ Hardy's book was published in 1937; Rector of the Academy of Algiers, he was also honorary director of the Ecole Coloniale and, in the uncannily declarative phrases of his description, an immediate forerunner of Camus.

A Metropolitan Transfiguration

Interpreted as an integral element in this background, Camus's novels and stories very precisely inflect a distilled version of the by now mostly invisible traditions, idioms, discursive strategies of Algeria's appropriation by France. He gives to what in effect is a massive 'structure of feeling' its most exquisite articulation, its final evolution. But for this structure to be discernible Camus's works must be considered as forming a metropolitan transfiguration of the colonial dilemma: they represent the colon writing for a French audience, yet the colon's personal history is tied irrevocably to this southern department of France, Algeria; a history taking place anywhere else but in Algeria is unintelligible. Yet the ceremonies of bonding with the territory that are enacted by Meursault in Algiers, or Tarrou and Rieux enfolded within the walls of Oran, Janine during a Saharan vigil, ironically stimulate queries in the reader about the need for such affirmations. When the violence of the French past is thus inadvertently recalled, these ceremonies assume the role of a foreshortened, highly compressed commemoration of survival, that of a community with nowhere to go at that moment.

Meursault's predicament is more radical than any of the others. For even if the falsely constituted law court (which, as Conor Cruise O'Brien rightly says, was a most unlikely place for a Frenchman to be tried after killing a poor Arab) is assumed to have a continuing existence, Meursault himself understands the utterly prescribed finality at which he has arrived despite the ritual of justice he has endured. At last he can experience relief and defiance together: 'J'avais eu raison, j'avais encore raison, j'avais toujours raison. J'avais vécu de teile façon et j'aurais pu vivre de teile autre. J'avais fait ceci et je n'avais pas fait cela. Je n'avais pas fait cette autre. Et après? C'était comme si j'avais attendu pendant tout le temps cette minute et cette petite aube où je serais justifié.'²⁵

There are no choices left here, no alternatives, no humane substitutes. The *colon* embodies both the contribution of his community's real human effort and the obstacle of refusing to give up a political system

²⁴ Georges Hardy, *La Politique coloniale et le partage de la terre aux XIXe et XXe siècles*, Paris 1937, p. 441.

²⁵ Camus, *Théâtre, Récits, Nouvelles*, Paris 1962, p. 1210. *Ed. trans.*: 'I had been right, I was again right, I was still right. I had lived like this and could have lived like that. I had done this and had not done that. I had not done that other thing. And so? It was as if I had all along been waiting for this moment and this daybreak when I would be vindicated.'

constructed out of the many systematic injustices perpetrated on a native population. But the deeply conflicted strength of Meursault's suicidal self-acknowledgement could only have emerged out of *that* specific history and in *that* specific community. At the end, however, he not only accepts what he is but he understands why his mother, confined to an old persons' home, has decided to remarry: 'elle avait joué à recommencer . . . Si près de la mort, maman devait s'y sentir libre et prête à tout revivre.'²⁶ We have done what we have done here, and so let us do it again. A tragically unsentimental obduracy turns itself into a symbol of an unflinching human capacity for renewed generation and re-generation. And this of course is the way Camus's readers have taken *L'Etranger*, imputing to it the universality of a liberated existential humanity facing cosmic indifference and human cruelty with impudent stoicism.

To re-situate *L'Etranger* in the actual geographical nexus from which its brief narrative trajectory emerges is to interpret it as a heightened form of historical experience. Like Orwell's work and status as 'Orwell' in England, Camus's plain style and unadorned reporting of social situations conceal the rivetingly complex contradictions out of which they are fashioned, contradictions unresolvable by his feelings of loyalty to French Algeria delivered as a parable of the human condition. This is what his social and literary reputation still depends on. Yet because there was always the more difficult and challenging alternative of first judging then refusing the mixture of territorial seizure and political sovereignty that blocked a compassionate, shared understanding of Algerian nationalism, Camus's limitations seem unacceptably paralysing. Counterpoised with the decolonizing literature of the time, both French and Arab—Tillion, Kateb Yacine, Fanon, Genet for instance—Camus's narratives assume a vital, albeit negative role. In them the tragic human seriousness of the colonial effort achieves its last great clarification before ruin overtakes it, with a waste and sadness we have still not completely understood or recovered from.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 1211. 'She had played at starting again . . . So close to death, mother had to feel free and ready to live everything again.'

