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Moya Longstaffe, *The Fiction of Albert Camus: A Complex Simplicity*. Oxford, Bern, Berlin, Brussels, Frankfurt am Main, New York, Vienna: Peter Lang, 2007. 300 pp. Footnotes, bibliography, and index. \$68.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 3-03910-304-0.

Review by William E. Duvall, Willamette University

The Albert Camus of Moya Longstaffe's study is, from the outset, a moralist pursuing "the dogged search for a way of living which will affirm the dignity of the individual and explore the nature of happiness in a world without transcendental meaning" (p. 17). The fiction of this Camus is an extension of the classical tradition of French literature with its stylistic discipline and heroic values.

Longstaffe's book is part of the Modern French Identities series edited by Peter Collier, but it seems a bit at odds with the mission of that series which is "to explore the turn-of-the-century turmoil in ideas and values" articulated in French critical theory and to explore "the idea that identities are constructed not found" (Series announcement at the end of the book). Longstaffe finds a consistent Camusian identity in the fiction: there is nothing in her analysis that points to Camus as an anticipation of the interpretive uncertainties that mark postmodernism. By coincidence, the essays in *The Cambridge Companion to Camus*, also published in 2007, sought quite deliberately to see Camus as just such an anticipation.[1]

Longstaffe centers her lengthy introductory chapter on *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* as the context for its author's early fiction. Camus's notion of the Absurd, what Longstaffe calls "the dichotomy between the senselessness of the world and the craving of man as a rational being" (p. 17), is the departure point for what Longstaffe sees as his journey from death (in the early unpublished novel, *La Mort heureuse*) to the first man (in his late unfinished novel, *Le Premier Homme*). Throughout this journey, Camus rejects as forms of despair Sartrean existentialism along with Pascalian or Kierkegaardian theism and clings to an affirmative, hopeful lucidity about the human condition. This heroic hopefulness, she argues, combined with nostalgia for innocence and happiness in the face of the Absurd, drives Camus's fiction toward parable and allegory. Launching this argument, Longstaffe turns Camus's comment at the end of *Le Mythe*, that "Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux"[2], into an assertion that Sisyphus was in fact innocent and happy. In doing so, she reveals a tendency toward overstatement that runs through much of her book. If her Sisyphus—"this hero without transcendence, this saint without God"—is too pure and too happy, so also her Camus, sharing in these same qualities, comes off as too much the secular Christian. While her Camus is drawn to the life-affirming, even Dionysian, qualities of the Greeks, he also exhibits the spirituality, asceticism and moral rigor of Christianity (p. 45). The tensions between lifestyles are present in Camus to be sure, but in the end her Camus is also too religious, even absolutist, not a Camus who as a moralist pursued limits, measure, and balance while seeking to avoid the all or nothing.

Treating the fiction in chronological order, Longstaffe takes up the early unpublished *La Mort heureuse* in the context of Sisyphus. Her cast of influences on Camus is established here and remains consistent throughout with, on the one hand, Plotinus, Augustine, and Pascal, and on the other, Stendhal, Chestov, and Nietzsche. She also establishes the themes that she will explore consistently through all the fiction: friendship and happiness; innocence, guilt and judgment; imprisonment, injustice and revolt; heroism and honor. It is in these themes that she sees an overall constancy in Camus's thought and that she grounds the thesis of the book's subtitle, Camus's "complex simplicity." In this she honors (p. 240)

Camus's own sense that "[u]ne œuvre d'homme n'est rien d'autre que ce long cheminement pour retrouver par les détours de l'art les deux ou trois images simples et grandes sur lesquelles le cœur, une première fois, s'est ouvert." [3]

The strongest chapter of the book is the next, entitled "A Happy Life and a Happy Death: *L'Étranger*," in which Longstaffe offers an insightful reading of *L'Étranger*. She ties the two early novels together around the question of how one is to live so as to die happy. Her reading is spiritual and symbolic, and the novel becomes parable. As she reads here, it is clear that she knows in depth the critical, scholarly literature on Camus's fiction. She astutely reads the novel as a sustained "reflection upon death in all of its forms" (p. 74), beginning with the death of Meursault's "maman" and ending with Meursault in prison having come to terms with his own imminent death, having rejected the consolation of religion, and having determined like Sisyphus that life after all is worth living. Her Meursault is an intelligent man and an artist but also everyman, ordinary, like others, and a man who has chosen his own style of life. She pushes Camus's comment that Meursault is "the only Christ we deserve" (p. 73) so that Meursault becomes, like Sisyphus, reconciled, happy, and innocent—a "Christ" who has saved himself. Yet her ultimate judgment is that Meursault's lifestyle models "failure" for he demonstrates "the impossibility of living *without* value judgments" (p. 100, her emphasis). He knows and accepts what has happened but is insufficiently introspective to understand the consequences of his choices. If her temptation to overstatement and to over-spiritualize Camus's characters appears here again, the larger value of her interpretation is that it prods one to argue with her, and therefore to reflect and ponder.

One further note: Longstaffe is aware of "political" readings of Camus (for example, those of Conor Cruise O'Brien and Edward Said [4]), and she points to Meursault's indifference to politics as a great contrast to "Camus's own passionate involvement in social justice and world events" (p. 95). But she stays away from considering the Algeria and colonialism that surround Meursault. Again this is in contrast to *The Cambridge Companion to Camus* in which the essays collectively seek to reread all of Camus precisely in terms of this context.

The theme of lifestyle choices is at the center of Camus's next novel, *La Peste*. Rather than one voice or choice (Meursault), the reader now confronts several. For Longstaffe, "[t]he enrichment of narrative voices offers a more complex perception of the human predicament, and the 'styles of life' in response to it..." (p. 117). She links this text to the aristocratic masculine virtues of the French classical tradition—generosity, courage, and silence (p. 119). Here those virtues come to the service of revolt and resistance. Longstaffe seeks to use *L'Homme révolté* as a context for *La Peste* just as she used *Le Mythe* as context for *L'Étranger*, but her efforts are not quite so successful. She does not get at the heart of this long essay on how to live in the world without absolute values. Nevertheless, her reading of the major characters—of their different "styles"—is perceptive and, in particular, her treatment of the priest figure, Father Paneloux, and his theological struggles, is quite passionate. Although the resonances of Christianity are strong as she discusses the characters, when commenting on this novel, she controlled her temptation to overstatement. Longstaffe notes the absence of women in the novel but not the absence of the indigenous population of Algeria. She also notes that the novel is an allegory for Nazi-occupied France, though its weakness in this regard is that the origin of evil (the plague) is not a human responsibility. She makes no gesture, however, to explore the parallels between occupied France and colonized Algeria.

The chapter on *La Chute* is the most problematic of the book. Longstaffe only briefly mentions, as a context for the novel, the Sartre/Camus conflict. She sees Jean-Baptiste Clamence, the first-person narrator, as another of Camus's extremist characters (p. 168), which is interesting in light of the fact that she does not examine Camus's own search for the middle, for moderation and limits. At the extreme, her Clamence is Satanic and plays his role in the circles of Hell that is Amsterdam; the religious resonances of her analysis are strong. Her discussion allows other texts, those of Pascal and Stendhal and even *L'Étranger*, to flow into and become the means of making sense of Clamence's discourse. As a consequence, she does not grapple fully with Clamence's intense irony or with the

Nietzschean presence in the text. Nor does she see Clamence as an “everyman” like Meursault. If Clamence is not a sort of everyman, his role as judge-penitent cannot be effective; others must feel as guilty as he does. She pushes too hard at the idea that Clamence’s sense of the world is essentially that embodied in the hell of the concentration camps, yet ironically, she does not explicitly examine what he (or Camus) means by the word “servitude.” She also does not examine the progressive stages of Clamence’s humiliation and fall. However, Longstaffe offers an interesting interpretative twist on the chronology of Clamence’s life, suggesting that his hedonistic life in Paris recounted previously in the narration was an attempt to repress the experience in a concentration camp earlier in his life. The girl jumping from the bridge in Paris, to whom he offered no help, forces him to recall his treacherous camp behavior. Longstaffe’s interpretation demands that the reader rethink Clamence. In the end, however, the chapter does not produce a clear and satisfying understanding of the novel. If Clamence is buried by the flow into the text of things external to it, Camus himself and his intellectual evolution are pretty much effaced.

Camus reappears, however, in the next chapter which is about the collection of short stories entitled *L’Exil et le royaume*. And he reappears changed: the innocence and happiness themes that Longstaffe strongly emphasized in her discussion of Camus’s earlier works are overshadowed by a consideration of Clamence’s sense of guilt and exile. The search now, for Longstaffe’s Camus, is for the paths from exile toward the kingdom of human solidarity. And the religious resonances and overtones of her interpretation are again strong. If her treatment of the first and fourth stories, “La Femme adultère” and “L’Hôte,” is rather cursory, Longstaffe offers a particularly stimulating and provocative interpretation of the second, “Le Renégat,” and here does take up the meaning of servitude. All three stories afford her the opportunity to confront directly and in depth the issues of French colonialism in Algeria and the relations between the French and the indigenous populations, but again Longstaffe considers them only in passing.

Longstaffe’s discussion of the last piece of Camus’s fiction, the unfinished and posthumously published *Le Premier Homme*, finally and appropriately confronts the tensions in colonial Algeria along with Camus’s agony in the face of Algeria’s struggle for independence during the French-Algerian war of the 1950s. Though Longstaffe comments on the absence of the indigenous population in Camus’s novels, just as she acknowledges Camus’s “French” perspective that contributes to his avoiding the mention of French crimes in Algeria, she nonetheless refuses any critical judgment of his choices. And she does not attempt to reach back and link this manuscript with those short stories where the Algerian situation is so explicitly present. Rather, she turns quickly to focus on her central themes and on the classical values (with Christian echoes) present in this novel, namely the stoic courage and sense of acceptance manifested in Jacques Cormery, the protagonist who has much in common with Camus.

A concluding chapter ties together the texts and themes of happiness, innocence, guilt, judgment, imprisonment and exile, and looks further at the absence of women and “the Arabs” in Camus’s fiction. With regard to the latter, she affirms Camus’s respect for their “spirituality.” Where they appear, indigenous North Africans are victims, secretive, silent, unfathomable, keepers of some sacred mystery, proud and menacing: Longstaffe articulates Camus’s “French” perspective with no accompanying gesture of critical assessment (pp. 280-81). If the final image of the book is the Christ, Longstaffe’s final comments insist again on Camus’s classicism. And here she concludes that all Camus’s fiction is grounded in such antitheses, yet she does not consider his acceptance of “approximative” values and his search for measure, limits, and moderation.[5] Her Camus the moralist simply does not “fit in well with a post-Christian Europe, which in fact he predates” (p. 285).

There is much to argue with in this book. Longstaffe’s interpretations are strong, clear and insistent. As I suggested above, the virtue of the book is that it prods one to ruminate. Indeed, returning from the meeting of the Western Society for French History in Albuquerque in November 2007, while in the airport waiting for my flight, I took up Longstaffe’s book at the beginning of the chapter on *La Chute*

where I had left off the evening before. I became so involved in thinking about her analysis of the novel, so engaged in arguing with her, that I failed to notice that my plane boarded and departed from the gate only a few feet from where I sat. Is this a significant commendation for Longstaffe's book? I think so. She has offered us a thoughtful, stimulating, provocative, sometimes angering interpretation of Camus's fiction.

NOTES

[1] Edward J. Hughes, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Camus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[2] Albert Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* in *Essais* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), p. 198. "One must imagine Sisyphus happy." Translation from Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1955), p.123.

[3] Albert Camus, *L'Envers et l'endroit* in *Essais*, p. 13. "A man's work is nothing but this slow trek to rediscover through the detours of art, those two or three great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened." Translation from Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, ed. Philip Thody, trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1968), p. 17.

[4] Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Albert Camus of Europe and Africa* (New York: Viking Press, 1970) and Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Random House, 1993). In a brief passage Longstaffe does comment that "[r]ather than taking the view of those critics who accuse Camus of having a blinkered *piéd-noir* point of view, I would suggest that the ill-treatment of the Arabs in the novel, the humiliation and beating of the woman, the murder of the man on the beach, the poverty of the Arab population, their preponderance in the overcrowded prison population, the evident 'outsider' status they occupy in their own land, the denial of a voice, add up to a very serious indictment of the relationship between the dominant European population and the indigenous people (pp. 98-99). And she adds that we are invited to see in Meursault's "attitudes simply...those of a representative French Algerian living in modest circumstances, neither consciously racist nor committed to any political ideology" (p. 99). But she goes no further, and this distance from 'political' issues remains the pattern in her treatment of all of Camus's fiction.

[5] Albert Camus, *L'Homme révolté* in *Essais*, p. 698.

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