

Au-delà de leurs doléances, Au nom de l'In-nocence: Renaud Camus and the Political
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M. Martin: Charity begins at home.

--Eugène Ionesco, *La Cantatrice chauve*

Ever since the publication of his allegedly racist, anti-semitic passages in *La Campagne de France* and the intense media storm to which it gave rise in 2000,¹ Renaud Camus has been on the defensive: he has tried in earnest to explain his passion for France and her culture; he has attempted to rationalize his reverence for the “French” experience, “telle qu’elle fut vécue pendant une quinzaine de siècles par le peuple français sur le sol de France” (*Du sens* 487).

Try as he might, however, more fully to contextualize his “paroles déplacées” (Schehr 119), his journalistic musing over what he perceived in 1994 as imbalances in the national media that were accelerating the misinterpretation, misunderstanding, the transformation, dilution, and ultimately the distortion of this experience,² Camus’ most ardent critics remain unswayed. In a work exploring the notion of “foreignness” which was published collaboratively in 2003, Alain Finkelkraut, one of the few high-profile allies Camus has left, observes for example that the guilty verdict delivered by the court of those quick to read him out of context seems irreversible. Any attempt the increasingly maligned writer might make to clear his name is likely to be in vain:

[i]ls ont autre chose à faire qu’écouter les justifications et les jérémiades interminables d’un penseur xénophobe, d’un champion du chauvinisme culturel, d’un écrivain maurrassien enfermé dans la vaine exaltation de la pureté nationale. Disposant d’un droit de vie et de mort intellectuelles à son égard, ils ont décidé, jusqu’à plus ample informé, de ratifier leur condamnation par un refus de lire où la frivolité le dispute à l’entêtement (*L’Etrangereté* 5-6).

Du sens (2002), framed by the question of whether or not Turkey's bid to be part of the European community has validity, or "makes sense," is arguably Camus' most Herculean effort yet to defend himself. He reexamines in it the polemical passages that were ultimately censored from his controversial journal and reconsiders the question of "Frenchness," "francité" in the context of the spiraling, always evolving nature of meaning. The hypothesis he forwards in this meandering, more than five hundred-page work is that the eternal dialogue between Plato's Hermogenes and Cratylus rehearses the dialectical "théâtre d'enjeux idéologiques considérables" (47) marking the tenuous "limits of French identity" (Stovall and Van Den Abbeele 3) and extending from convention and administrative convenience on the one hand, to essence, personality, style, race, and religion on the other.

For Hermogenes, all denominations are just. Names and designations are merely a matter of arbitrary convention. Because they imply no particular truth about any thing, person, or phenomenon, any discussion over the correctness and incorrectness of names is nonsensical (Plato 211). Cratylus, by contrast, believes names to reveal original, essential truth and that they belong naturally to their *nominata*:

Le nom dit la vérité de la personne et de la chose, même si cette vérité, hélas, a souvent été obscurcie par le temps et par la négligence des hommes, quand ils écrivent et quand ils parlent. La vérité perdue des noms, on peut la retrouver en la débarrassant de cette couche d'erreur et d'approximation dont l'ont revêtue les siècles, l'ignorance et la paresse (57).

Camus, who privileges history—experience over time rather than the origin as source of meaning—, thinks Cratylus mistaken. Having long preserved its meaning, what it means to be French today is, Camus claims, not only in flux as Cratylus believes reality to be (Plato 227) but "désoriginé" (48). Frenchness, "francité," has lost currency. Indeed, it cannot be separated from loss, "la perte de sens":

[...] la société française est en train de connaître la plus profonde transformation de son histoire—celle où l’adjectif *français*, dans *société française*, change radicalement de signification; passe, pour aller vite, d’un sens cratylien à un sens hermogénien (146, 418).

If critics have cold-shouldered Camus and largely ignored his observations, some of his faithful readers have, he notes, requested that he follow, build, resolve or act upon them:

[...] parmi le courrier que je reçois un certain nombre de lecteurs, qui veulent bien me signifier leur intérêt pour mes analyses, si c’est bien le mot, en assortissent l’expression d’un regret, que ces analyses ne débouchent sur aucune résolution, sur aucun plan d’action précis, sur nul parti ni parti pris. « Tout cela est bien beau, demandent-ils en substance: mais où cela mène-t-il? » Je reconnais le bien-fondé de leurs doléances, et me décide à les prendre au mot, et sans doute un peu au-delà (“Exposé des motifs”).

Taking their requests to heart, he founded the “Parti de l’In-nocence” on 16 October 2002.³

How, in the name of “in-nocence,” does Camus use the Internet to take his “analyses” in *Du sens* to the next level? How does his party propose to fight, to counteract the perceived “métissage universel” in France, her “fusion par le bas” (“Culture et communication”), or the generalizing and reductive multiculturalism that Camus sees as rotting his country away at the core? And, given his reputation first and foremost as a writer, is his virtual expansion into the political realm literarily meaningful?

FROM LOST TIME TO (LOST) CULTURE?

Readers of *Du sens* may very well have encouraged Camus to take the analysis in which he is engaged to the next level, if not beyond it (“un peu au-delà”), and thereby directly prompted him to form the “Parti de l’In-nocence.” But the philosophical underpinnings behind the politics had their basis in his frustration at the lack of common courtesy of many of his compatriots. At the beginning of the millennium, Camus had been invited to participate in the public reading at the Centre Georges Pompidou of *A la recherche du temps perdu*. As he explains in his journal for

2000, Marcel Proust's gargantuan work was to have been read in its entirety as part of the exhibit, "Le Temps, vite," organized to celebrate the grand reopening of the museum. During his own interpretive "chant de Proust," Camus was distracted several times by a child talking, the result being that he had to interrupt his oral performance, his "hurlements, anglicisations, plouqisations, bêlements," and wait for the child to quiet down before continuing.

Later, during a meal with his boyfriend, whose birthday he was celebrating at the rustic Ambassade d'Auvergne, Camus was reminded—in Proustian fashion, no doubt—of a dinner he had enjoyed there the month before. The savory subtlety of the spiced lamb, "une des choses les meilleures qu'[il eût] mangées depuis longtemps," was lost to the "propos en général malveillants" of the discourteous restaurant patrons seated next to him concerning a certain unwitting biology colleague with the unfortunate misnomer, Casanova, who they made plain to everybody within earshot "malgré tout ce qu'il représentait, ou *croyait* représenter, n'était jamais qu'un 'petit garçon'" (K. 310 28-9).

Whispering, in the latter case of social intrusion, and total silence in the former, would, Camus insists, have been more civil, more socially acceptable. Were he a philosopher and to develop a political theory, one of its fundamental tenets or pillars, he went on in his journal to hypothesize, would be that of the antinomic couple: "nocence," synonymous with "nuisance," "in-civilisation," "délinquance" (*Du sens* 421, 430, 455), and "in-nocence," or "le revers heureux, actif, réactif, dynamique, éminemment souhaitable." Social and political life, he elaborated, amounts to negotiating the tension between these two nouns. One should endeavor, strive for the latter and the suppression of the former, "par l'effort moral et civique de ceux qui pourraient les commettre, d'abord par les règles de la courtoisie et de l'urbanité, ensuite, puis par la loi et finalement par la contrainte et par la force, si nécessaire" (K. 310 30).

Camus expands upon the concept underpinning the philosophy of existence driving his party on its website, <www.in-nocence.org>. “In-nocence” is more of an ideal towards which to strive than a given, or *fait accompli*. It is the prerequisite for the idealized process of resistance, the inner and social struggle against “nocence” which the ecological party he founded represents. By promoting and defending security, peace, and cleanliness, by protecting and preserving the French countryside, culture, and language, his party will strive to fight indoctrination and deculturation by the media just as ardently as it will miseducation by schools (“Editorial 29”). In addition to supporting and strengthening the programming of state-sponsored Arte, La Cinq, France Culture, and France Musiques, for instance, it favors the creation of a “truly” cultural television channel “qui ait recours à l’extraordinaire vivier presque inexploité sur les ondes que constituent les artistes, les écrivains, les professeurs et les intellectuels, tant étrangers que français” (“Culture et communication”) and an interactive channel whose purposes will be both educational and didactic. Born from the values of civic duty, civility, civilization, urbanity and respect for the truth, “l’épaisseur stratifiée du sens,” the party is, moreover, as attached to the concept of what makes Europe “European” as it is to that of what makes France “French.” It therefore opposes, as does Camus in *Du sens*, Turkey’s petition for admission into the European Union and any efforts forcefully to integrate immigrants into French society, especially when their number is elevated to such a degree that French citizens are forced to integrate themselves within “un nouvel ensemble où se noient ses traditions, sa culture, son mode de vie et sa propre identité” (“Immigration”). The “Parti de l’In-nocence” furthermore holds education, “processus de tous les processus et principal instrument de l’in-nocence” as one of the pillars of culture (“Démographie”) and underlines its fundamental role in society: “c’est la culture [...] la connaissance [...] le sens du sens et son destin parmi les hommes” (“Culture et communication”). Among its goals for schools, the “site de la rencontre avec la forme, et son

imposition par l'exemple, la persuasion, l'exercice et les textes" ("Education"), therefore, are the reestablishment of educators' authority in the classroom, the elimination of ideological, opportunistic instruction, and the increasing of standards.

Given its relatively modest means, "essentiellement d'ordre webmatique," as Camus admits ("Editorial 16"), the lens through which to view, the space in which to debate and constantly to refine the party's positions are thus those of the computer screen and Internet respectively. Just as in its name the "indispensable" hyphen ("Nom"), the "moins intérieur" ("Editorial 24") distancing it from the "nocence" it stands to combat punctuationally enacts his party's neo-Cratylusian spirit ("Europe"), so too the World Wide Web, with its virtuality, its ideal form of presence/absence, exemplifies the discretion it lauds:

On est là sans être là, présent pour qui veut bien nous chercher, absent pour quiconque jugerait dérangeant de nous voir et de nous entendre. On ne tire personne par la manche, on ne fait pas de propagande, on est ouvert à qui veut, on n'exerce aucune *nocence* ("Moyens").

In addition to the wealth of information about the party's statutes one can find at its website, as of December 2004 there were posted some 32 editorials by Camus, 82 communiqués—concerning topics which range from the party's stance on the management of the Ardèche river Gorges to the inefficiency of the French postal service, from attacks against French mosques near Lyons to the boycott of Israeli universities by the University of Paris and the party's hope that with the departure of Edwy Plenel from *Le Monde*, the newspaper will become more objective—, a "Répertoire des nocences," private and public forums, as well as numerous press links.

Most notably, the platform of the party is presented as a grid, a zone under permanent construction. Like the ideal of "in-nocence" which the party will constantly strive to promote and emulate, it is less the preestablished *parti pris* yearned by Camus' readers ("Exposé des

motifs”) than a framework, a means of guidance, the basis for evolution into practice of its ideals:

Le programme [...] se présente à l’état de chantier, où sont certes perceptibles de premières grandes lignes, mais qui doit évoluer et se développer suivant les suggestions des membres du parti et de ses sympathisants, telles qu’exprimées par exemple sur les divers forums. On peut lire ci-contre une liste des premières rubriques [...] Des liens conduisant aux textes dans leur rédaction actuelle, éminemment sujette à révision et extension (“Chantier de programme”).

Now if Camus was condemned for what he included in the “centre de première réflexion, de réflexion à chaud” (Alvarez 161), the “immense opération hygiénique” that was his polemical 1994 journal (Camus, *L’étrangèreté* 15), in this most recent philosophico-political project which some see as ill-informed, he has been criticized for what he does not include. The allegations of racism and anti-semitism that stemmed from the former, highly personal work derived essentially from questions of admissibility, the “bornes du dicible et du publiable” (“Editorial 30”). What was appropriate to have included in a journal? What was the right cultural balance for which to have striven on a purportedly non-partisan radio program? Who to have admitted as “principaux porte-parole et organes d’expression [...] [de la] culture et [...] civilisation françaises”? Here, the proteiform state of his political party, the “base très incomplète de discussions éventuelles, et d’élaboration” (“Réponse de Renaud Camus”), the “très vague esquisse de structure” (“Editorial 16”), the “avant-projet d’avant projet” (“Editorial 15”) is deemed amateurish by critics. Appropriate, perhaps, for a “club de réflexion” (“Editorial 7”) and smacking of “Marie-Chantalisme” (Kéchichian), it is considered unworthy, ill-suited, inadmissible in the hard-knock world of politics where what you stand for matters far more than what you might become, where measurable success means votes cast in your favor. Rémi Pellet,

for instance, deplores Camus' dilettantism, "le glissement du domaine de la littérature à celui de la politique, sans 'éléments sérieux de démonstration'" (Kéchichian).

But in his defense, Camus notes that to be the fan of a writer—vice-president of the Société des Lecteurs de Renaud Camus, in Pellet's case—and to share the political perspective of an organized group are two completely different things:

Les types d'adhésion impliqués ici et là sont extrêmement différents, et il aurait été bien étonnant que tous ceux qui sont prêts à offrir à l'un soient automatiquement disposés à accorder l'autre. Les deux mouvements n'ont rien à voir ("Editorial 15").

While raising doubts about its exact nature, he furthermore points out that his party's pre-platform has not been written in the same, spontaneous way as might be a journal:

M. Pellet paraît considerer que l' 'avant-projet' de programme est en quelque chose gravé dans le marbre, et par exemple qu'il est d'une nature très éloignée de ce que l'on peut s'attendre à lire dans un simple *journal*, écrit au fil de la plume. Et certes cet 'avant-projet' ne relève pas du meme genre littéraire qu'un *journal*: je doute même, hélas, que le terme de 'littéraire' soit bien adéquat en l'occurrence ("Editorial 8").

(RIEN) A VOIR, (RIEN) A FOUTRE? BATHMOLOGY AND POLITICS

That those who read and admire literary works do not necessarily share the political views of their writers is not under dispute. But for Camus—who, it should be noted, was a student of Sciences Politiques and not the Ecole Normale Supérieure, as some might expect—to question whether "literary" is an adequate, sufficiently Cratylusian label to apply to his journal or his party—something he has himself deemed his "projet artistique le plus fou" ("Questions de Frédéric Vignale")—is perhaps misleading.

Identifying three stages, changes, or literary "metamorphoses" in Camus oeuvre, Alexandre Albert-Galtier demonstrates that Camus' general project is strengthened through change and shows the extent to which the political, a concept linked in France both to parties and

revolutionary ideals, is contained within and also extends, or stretches it. The “first” Camus of the four volumes of his “Églogues” (1975, 1976, 1978, 1982), Albert-Galtier points out, explores textual experimentation “au gré de vertigineux jeux de citations, de fragments, de construction de formes et de voix, de discours décomposés et recomposés.” The “second” Camus of *Tricks* (1979), *Buena Vista Park* (1980), and *Notes achriennes* (1982), centers on homosexuality and participates in the emancipation of mores. The “third” Camus of *Roman roi* (1983) parodies the great historical novels of the nineteenth century. In this anachronistic last work, history and politics play the role that fragments and citations do in the “first” Camus, where the historical and political schemes of the imaginary kingdom of Caronia are decomposed and recomposed (78-81).

Albert-Galtier also cautions those drawn to, seduced by the political in Camus’ works, who might read them systematically through “une grille de lecture adaptée à cette conception particulière du politique insistant sur le rapport de force à l’intérieur d’un groupe,” not to lose sight of their literary and cultural dimensions:

Cette démarche a les mérites d’une méthode systématique mais elle a aussi le défaut de minimiser et, dans certains cas, d’éliminer deux aspects fondamentaux de [ses] projets [...]: d’une part la dimension littéraire, à travers laquelle les discours ne sont pas seulement envisagés comme des mécanismes de pouvoir, dimension littéraire dont la finalité est de créer du plaisir dans un rapport au texte sans doute exactement opposé à la contrainte et à l’autorité puisqu’il ouvre une circulation ludique entre le sens et les formes, et d’autre part le lien conscient ou inconscient, voulu ou pas, que tout texte entretient avec les conditions dans lesquelles il est produit, conditions historiques, sociales, morales, en un mot culturelles, lien qui, à rebours, permet de penser à travers un objet littéraire ce concept de politique (76).

Given Camus’ ever-evolving oeuvre, his characteristically obsessive tendency to build upon and thus constantly expand, reinvent himself, further propagate his conception of the world with its science of levels of language and degrees of meaning, might the “Parti de l’In-nocence”

represent a “fourth” Camus? Might it not continue the movement begun in 1998 whereby he extended his book-length personal advertisement, *P.A.* (1997) online in *Vaisseaux brûlés*, a very abundantly annotated edition in hypertextual format of the self-categorized former work, “une version indéfiniment évolutive du meme ouvrage qui lui-même est déjà composé, pour une large part de notes et de notes à des notes, etc.” (Kennelly 67), and thus mark his continued migration to and embracing of the Web, the so-called “forme heureuse” (“Sans bêtise”) as alternative, if not idealized literary space? Just as in his move six years ago to *Vaisseaux brûlés* he had hoped to solve the problems of page and layout that had delayed and ultimately undermined the print-based edition of *P.A.* (71), in this move for approval beyond the fixed covers of the novel, for example, to the hyperreal, the ever-evolving expansiveness of cyberspace, the seeking of public endorsement in the tenuousness of a pre-platform always already subject to discussion, revision, reformulation, and precision, might Camus be recontextualizing but also actualizing, literalizing the literary in the political?

Marc du Saune asks Camus how he might reconcile the perceived one-sidedness, the “platitude bloquée” of politics with the semantic richness of his own “oeuvre feuilletée.” The statements on culture and communication, demographics, ecology, education, Europe, fiscality, immigration, institutions, and foreign policy that some take to be fixed in stone are, Camus suggests in response, really little more than necessary, seemingly antithetical starting blocks in a bathmological race with neither a finish line nor a pre-defined course:

Le sens y semble achevé [...] c’est précisément qu’il ne l’est pas, qu’il n’a pas encore été soumis à ce *travail d’inachèvement* qui est le processus d’élaboration le plus consubstantiel au sens (“Editorial 15”).

The pre-platform of his party lends itself to complexification, elaboration, if not the contradictions which he sees to be the very instruments through which one can negotiate degrees of meaning. If, as Camus claims, bathmology implies, invites, necessitates its opposite, it is only

logical then that a party such as his, a work in progress that stems from an always metamorphosing oeuvre in progress, that opposes by virtualizing (Chaouat, par. 15)—grow, evolve from some pre-established, pre-conceived truth:

Toute entité, à quelque nature qu'elle appartienne, a besoin, pour persévérer dans l'être, d'une dose variable, en général assez réduite, de son contraire, ou de ce qui peut apparaître comme son contraire [...] de même que la démocratie a besoin pour sa survie d'une armée disciplinée et non-démocratique dans son fonctionnement interne, le jeu infini du sens a besoin, lui, à une certaine dose qui bien sûr reste à préciser, d'un sens arrêté, fixé, déterminable et déterminé ("Editorial 15").

But is the elaboration, the eternal extension his party's bathmological pre-platform begs not also a testing of literal sense? And of political pertinence? For if every entity relies, as Camus claims, for its survival on a form, a dose of its opposite, if "la forme, c'est l'autre" ("Editorial 23"), and if consenting to become, "à être autre chose [...] consentir au regard de l'autre et à son poids sur soi," is the hallmark, the fundamental pact of "in-nocence" ("Editorial 22"), what is the role of the "Parti de l'In-nocence" in a world "pareil au même," "sans autre" (Camus, *L'étrangèreté* 31, 46)? How, and why bother to "défendre le caractère français [...] de la France" if in the total paradigm shift from Cratylusian to Hermogenesian, it is "un combat déjà perdu" ("Editorial 29"), "un drame depuis longtemps noué" ("Editorial 30")? Or as Albert-Galtier asked, long before Camus ever created his party, "un nationalisme qui prend pour objet une course 'perdue' ou 'imaginaire' [...] est-ce vraiment du nationalisme et une prise de position politique?" (84)

Camus refers in an editorial to an online exchange he had with a young, self-described Nietzschean who could not understand the rationale for, the relevance of his party's "Répertoire des nocences," for instance. The questions being entertained there were, his e-correspondent claimed, futile, insignificant, unworthy of attention. They were, in his eyes, as meaningful

politically and intellectually as whether or not to put one's feet up in public transport. In sum, he could not give a damn, "n'en avait rien à foutre."

This very lack of concern, Camus notes, runs counter to the spirit of his party. Echoing Alfred Jarry's scatologically suggestive neologism "Merdre" that at the Paris premiere of his play *Ubu roi* in 1896 ushered in the final century of the last millenium some four years early, its motto, he points out in tongue and cheek fashion, might just as well be "A Foutre," "Tout à foutre," or even just "Foutre."

In a world of sameness, one Camus sees as being without form, where the notion of citizenship "n'a plus aucun sens," "ne touche plus au réel" ("Editorial 22"), to yearn as a general philosophy of existence (*Campagne de France* 220), like philological salmon swimming upstream (*Du sens* 508) for "la source chantante" ("Sans bêtise, pas d'oeuvre"), for what no longer is, a "spectre [d']altérité passée et à venir" (Chaouat, par. 41), and in a constantly changing, always evolving form, to embrace an asymptotic process, "nourr[i] et orient[é] par l'origine" (*K. 310* 129) is utopian but also undeniably Camusian. Considered in context, within the life work of a moralist who conceives of his own experiences through the collective and universal framework of the literary experience (Albert-Galtier 88), this writerly mission to seek words for "ce que les politiques ne peuvent pas dire" (95) is also courageous. The "fourth", if not ultimate stage of a literary career, it might also very well—naively, or "in-nocently"—model the virtual face for political engagement, indeed a new existential paradigm.

Notes

¹ For more on "l'affaire Camus," see "Documents relatifs à la controverse autour de *La Campagne de France*" on Camus' own website, <<http://perso.wanadoo.fr/renaud.camus/affaire/affaire.html>>.

² Bemoaning that on France Culture's midday program "Panorama," which purportedly served to promote and defend the French experience, there not be a more representative, "panoramic" mix of personalities, Camus writes: "il m'agace et m'attriste de voir et d'entendre cette expérience, cette culture et cette civilisation, avoir pour principaux porte-parole et organes d'expression, dans de très nombreux cas, une majorité de Juifs, Français de première ou de seconde génération la plupart du temps, qui ne participent pas directement de cette expérience, qui ont tendance à en maltraiter les noms propres, et qui expriment cette culture et cette civilisation—même si c'est très savamment—d'une façon qui lui est extérieure, semblable à ces commentaires musicaux traduits et retraduits qu'on lit dans les livrets d'accompagnement des disques" (*Du sens* 487).

³ It was founded with Camus as its president, philosophy professor Paul Mirault as its general secretary, and photographer Luc Charcellay as its treasurer.

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