

Distinguished guests,
Dear friends,

“Ma patrie, c’est la langue française ».

‘The French language is my homeland’, Camus said on Dec. 10th 1957. As a matter of fact, it is also mine, but out of courtesy I shall speak in English today. I’m sure Camus would forgive me.

On Oct. 16th 1957, Camus was having lunch in a restaurant in the Latin Quarter in Paris when a young employee told him he had just been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Camus turned very white, appeared deeply distressed by the news and started to repeat that the prize should have gone to Andre Malraux. True enough, Malraux deserved it – his name had been quoted on many occasions, especially during the preceding year, when he had pronounced a very much acclaimed speech in Stockholm, on the occasion of the 350th anniversary of Rembrandt.

But other names had been suggested: Pasternak, St John Perse or Samuel Beckett...all to be honoured later in time ...except Malraux.

But it was Camus, not even 44-years-old at the time, who then received international recognition. Camus was of course satisfied, but for several reasons, he was also frightened.

“ He finds himself very young, believes his work is far from being complete, he thinks he is sterile, suffers from the Algerian tragedy and has to cope with very intimate difficulties”

Besides, he was anxious about the reaction of the Paris intelligentsia, “the Parisian society of denigration”, as he called it. In effect, he was not disappointed. Criticism came from the Right, where he was viewed as a left-winger close to the Algerian “rebels”, but also from the Left: “L’Humanite”, the communist party’s newspaper had never forgiven him his public condemnation of the Hungarian invasion in 1956 and used to call him “the philosopher of the myth of abstract freedom”, or “the writer of illusion”. Jean-Paul Sartre, who had fallen out with him since the publication of “L’Homme revolte”, famously declared nastily “He deserved it!”

Also, the Paris “salons”, nests of vipers, had never admitted Camus because of his origin – an Algerian-born Frenchman or “pied-noir” from the poorest outskirts of Algiers, whose mother was deaf and could not read nor write, an amateur philosopher with a taste for football...In a word, he was seen as “vulgar”.

Out of jealousy, meanness and ethnocentricity those so-called intellectuals simply missed out on the fact that Camus’s Nobel Prize

“enthused the whole of Europe and its youth”. The dissidents from the East were leaping with joy, celebrating in their underground publications or “samizdats” “L’Homme revolte”.

After Gide and Mauriac, both “grands bourgeois”, the Swedish Academy was honouring a child of a working-class background, and one of the youngest at that ! – only Kipling had been younger than him before.

So, why Camus? Had the members of the Academy foreseen Camus’s fate, who was to die three years later?

What they surely foresaw, which is so much more crucial, is that time had come to tell the world the importance of Camus’s work and to express their conviction that after “L’Etranger”, “La Peste” and “La Chute”, their laureate would produce even more major work.

I think I can safely assert that they were right. Unfortunately, only two texts are proof to it, but what texts!

First, Camus worked on a novel entitled “Le Premier Homme”. This unfinished novel, yet a major work of striking modernity, published far later by his children, is probably his masterpiece, his chef d’oeuvre. Secondly, during the award ceremony of December 10th 1957, Albert Camus made a beautiful and prophetic speech about the future of a world deprived of its “gods” and fallen victim of “technique gone mad”.

I quote him :

“Each generation doubtless feels called upon to reform the world. Mine knows that it will not reform it, but its task is perhaps even greater. It consists in preventing the world from destroying itself. Heir to a corrupt history, in which are mingled fallen revolutions, technology gone mad, dead gods, and worn-out ideologies, (...), where intelligence has debased itself to become the servant of hatred and oppression, this generation (...) has had to re-establish, both within and without, a little of that which constitutes the dignity of life and death. In a world (...), in which our grand inquisitors run the risk of establishing forever the kingdom of death, it knows that it should, in an insane race against the clock, restore among the nations a peace that is not servitude, reconcile a new labour and culture, and remake with all men the Ark of the Covenant.”

What is still a topical question, –the modernity of Albert Camus’s vision– lies in a two-fold assertion:

– First : One needs to take sides. That is what Camus did entering the Resistance during the Nazi Occupation and denouncing the Soviet power as soon as he heard of the Russian gulag.

- But, second point, intellectuals have to be careful : To denounce one barbarism only serves to encourage other barbaric excesses – that, he learned during the Algerian war, a conflict which affected him deeply. Camus was always adamant that revenge should never serve as justice – even Auschwitz could not justify Hiroshima. As an intellectual, one should strive for conciliation between justice and fraternity, whatever fate history throws at us. As Camus wrote in “la Peste” : “ Only to say what one learns from plague, that men are more to admire than to despise”

In Camus’s Nobel Prize speech, there is another central point, precisely linked to this violence which darkens reason and gives a dismal aspect to justice. 1957 fell in the middle of a XXth century characterised with barbarism. The Russian totalitarian regime had not yet collapsed and memories of Nazism were as vivid as ever. A world was beginning to end, a new moral law to ascertain itself. What Camus declared in Stockholm was that even though he belonged to a generation who wanted to change the world, he was then invited to preserve it.

Camus’s work has never been deserted by the public, contrary to what often happens to famous writers or creators once they’re dead. “L’Etranger” has always been read, it is in fact one of the most translated French contemporary works and, as it happens, a cult book for many American, German and Japanese major writers. But it has taken a long time for the works of Camus to be retrieved from the purgatory where French academics long left it. Only recently has it been recognized that Camus faithfully followed in the footsteps of Montaigne, Pascal, Diderot and Benjamin Constant. No one can today deny how “L’Etranger” and “La Chute” were inaugural literary works.

Of course, Camus had not foreseen the changes of the world he was striving to preserve – neither the religious fanaticism comeback, nor worldwide terrorism, nor how the mind would be affected by information technologies nor how humanitarian ambition can lead to a war in the name of “good” – what would La Peste’s Dr Rieux would have done confronted to the war in Irak?

But, Camus’s influence has been considerable, and only today can we measure its effects. His fight against extremes, his revolt of a human scale, his acceptance that men have to accomplish their tasks with no assurance of success nor promise of salvation – these were ideas on which many a contemporary work has since fed itself.

To conclude, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Nobel Museum, especially to Prof. Svante Lindqvist, director of the Nobel Museum, Marika Hedin, Karin Jonsson and all their colleagues for their initiative and the splendid and moving display in front of us today.

I would like also to pay tribute to my friends Jean Daniel, writer, journalist and friend of Camus and Benjamin Stora, historian, for the precious information they provided me in the course of writing this speech.

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