

**N° 19E**

**Camus in the test of *The Plague***

**or**

**The Transcendence of the Call**

**Bernard Spee**

**Onehope Editions**

**Small Literary Studies**  
**A collection for a systemic reading of works**

Keywords/Mots clefs: Camus, The Plague, The Myth of Sisyphus, Sartre, Levi-Lavenci, Dolto Françoise, Rieux, Tarrou, Joseph Grand, Paneloux, the absurd, transcendence, psychoanalysis, the mirror stage, onomastics, love, friendship, mother, parenthood.

First edition: 25 March 2020 Last update: 10 avril 2021

You can contribute to the diffusion of our site in several ways:

> 1/ if you find this text freely available on the Internet, you can help us to maintain the quality of the service by paying your contribution :

by a transfer to the following bank account

IBAN: BE13 0836 5681 0039

BIC: GKCCBEBB

Bernard Spee  
4020 Belgium

> 2/ you can also buy a paper copy in A4 format, numbered and signed which will be sent to you by post to the address you provide.

Legal deposit: April 2021 D/2021/13.661/4  
ISBN: 978-2-930874-41-8

# Albert Camus in the test of *The Plague*

OR

## The Transcendence of the call

"He wants to know if it is possible to live without call."  
Albert Camus<sup>1</sup>

The plague or Covid-19 epidemic breaks us from our most usual and entertaining relationships. "The plague was the ruin of tourism." <sup>2</sup>(p. 131), of entertainment, Pascal would say. Our relationship with the other becomes a threat, we are summoned to isolate ourselves in order to live when it is the others who have called us to live. Our identity, that "inexhaustible squaring of the recollections of the self"<sup>3</sup>, is weakened and threatened, and in ordinary times it is never more than floating. How is it possible to live without call?

### There would be "more absurd" than the Absurd

Before writing his masterpiece, *The Plague*, Camus said in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: "To know whether one can live without call is all that interests me. "It seems that with *The Plague*, Camus' thinking has been refined, that he has discovered that there is "more absurd" than the Absurd: war<sup>4</sup>, the killing of one human by another human. From this point of view, *The Plague* is an extraordinary allegory of the contagion of the taste for murder: each inhabitant of Oran is suspected of carrying in spite of himself an obscure desire for the death of the other, against which he must fight by agreeing to isolate himself... This desire for death is a commandment in war, but it seems to be legally practiced in a normal society to ensure its peace. Here is the plague... It is in this tragic theatre<sup>5</sup> of the epidemic that Camus constructs a spectacle, his novel, with masterful elegance: it is important for us to see how the novelist calls his characters to their place. Finally, a system of names<sup>6</sup> appears that highlights the hero of the tragedy. It will therefore be above all in the game of nomination, of the names of the characters, that we will try to grasp, to catch the author's conscience: that is, the moral values he puts up for debate.

---

<sup>1</sup> Camus A., *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, Éditions Gallimard, Coll. Idées N°1, Paris, p. 76

<sup>2</sup> In the present translation, the pagination refers to the French version of the novel *La Peste* published by Gallimard.

<sup>3</sup> Lacan J. *Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je*, in *Les Ecrits I*, Editions du Seuil, Coll. Points n°20, Paris, 1996, p.94.

<sup>4</sup> "These curious events, which are the subject of this chronicle, occurred in 194., in Oran" (p. 11).

<sup>5</sup> "The spectacle," says Hamlet, "is the trap where I shall catch the king's conscience." Shakespeare

<sup>6</sup> Our method of reading starts from three a priori: 1/ to be attentive to the Letter (in the Lacanian sense), and this, in particular by means of onomastics 2/ to pose as transcendence the emergence of the self-image during the mirror stage 3/ the observation that Camus often only manages to pose himself by opposing the religious text.

**Small Literary Studies**  
**A collection for a systemic reading of works**

**The Plague as the genealogy of a "Red Cross morality" ?**

Roland Barthes, in a well-known article, reproaches Camus for the absence of a foundation for his morality of solidarity: "For Camus, others are perhaps paradise. "A Red Cross morality", as Jeanson<sup>7</sup> would say. Barthes asks: "Is this morality sufficient in the face of human evil? "Camus will reply that it is possible "to consider the morality that we see at work in *The Plague* insufficient (but then you have to say in the name of what more complete morality)". Barthes will reply: "It is in the name of historical materialism".

In our opinion, the answer is too short. Our hypothesis is to show that Camus is not content with a morality of solidarity as a response, but that beyond that, he negatively senses the origin of evil in a psychological deficit. A deficit of call?

**Before the plague, an absurd world in itself ?**

Before the plague, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus' world is already absurd in itself. To get to the heart of the matter, we can say that beyond contemporary monotony (metro, work, sleep), the Absurd is lived and thought in relation to death: the human being is a "being-thrown away" for death, "a useless passion" in relation to a dream of immortality. This is explicit in his essay, for Camus, 'the only obstacle, the "only shortfall" is constituted by premature death. [...] Twenty years of life and experience can never be replaced. "

The existential response that follows is the race to accumulate experience, a true race for growth, which resonates perfectly with the game of economic liberalism...

With *The Plague*, the Absurd is lived and thought more explicitly in relation to a great Other who allows the death of the living and above all the death - beyond all logic of growth - of the child. Doctor Rieux, the central character of the novel, has these words: 'I will refuse until death to love this creation where children are tortured. " (p. 238). The use of the word creation demands attention because it shows us that Camus builds his thought in opposition to religion as an indispensable adjunct.

The term creation refers to the Christian conception of a universe willed by an all-powerful god who would impose on his creature the passage through a valley of tears before being able to find a lost Paradise, and this because of a fault, that of having wanted to be like gods, a fault committed by a distant ancestor, Adam. This great Other, the Creator, would be like a bad father who would command an educational expectation, a trial that is earthly life. In the time of this educational expectation, a clergy would officiate, on the lookout for sorrows and sufferings which, in order to manage them as well as possible, would direct the desire towards "an immense consolation" (p.112), towards another world, a paradise to be found again, a decoy.

---

<sup>7</sup> Note that the expression used by Jeanson, a disciple of Sartre, is most contemptuous: he does not use the expression "Morale of the Red Cross". in Lévi-Valensi J., *La Peste*, Editions Gallimard, Coll. Foliothèque N°58, Paris, 1996, p. 194.

## Small Literary Studies

### A collection for a systemic reading of works

#### Religion and class struggle

In *The Plague*, the Jesuit Paneloux is part of a consoling clergy. His name indicates it: Paneloux<sup>8</sup>, the "wolf of punishments"... The French allows for a play on words, a phonetic proximity between "(Pane)loux" and "(Pane)loup" : "Panewolf" in English. He justifies the unjustifiable, the death of the child by a double discourse, firstly, that of a punishment due to a faulty carelessness, and secondly, that of the Pascalian wager, a last chance trick where between everything and nothing, one might as well believe that there is still something afterwards.

Let's emphasize again this (residual?) difficulty in thinking the absurd by attacking the deceptive discourse of religion. It is an ironic coincidence that the first victim of the plague is the caretaker Michael. In Hebrew, this name means "who is like God". It refers to the greatest of the angels, the archangel Michael, who is the most eminent of the angels, conqueror of Satan and advocate of the righteous at the Last Judgment in the Apocalypse.

This inability to think without religion is partly based on a sociological fact: religion reinforces the discourse and the exercise of power by an elite. It is therefore not insignificant that the narrator highlights the tortuous death of little Philip, the son of Judge Othon, rather than that of a poor child. In the case of the Othon family, the family name<sup>9</sup> and the son's first name refer to the first names of kings, an echo of the exercise of absolute, bygone power, incorporating the manipulation of religion. By mixing references to the history of Germany and France, Camus expresses his detestation of a certain elite<sup>10</sup>; he pushes his 'hatred' to the point of using a typically extremist procedure<sup>11</sup> by attributing animal names to the Othon family<sup>12</sup>. In short, we have a denunciation of a class war to which medicine is also linked. Let's think of the president of the Oran medical association (p. 40) who is called Dr Richard..., a phonetic proximity in French with the adjective "richard", "rich person" or "moneybags" in English.

#### Beyond the class struggle ?

Faced with a rich elite, blind or attentive, we have Dr Rieux, the son of a worker, and the model employee, Grand Joseph, from an equally modest background.

---

<sup>8</sup> In Latin, peine is called "poena" which means: "punishment, chastisement, punishment. This name is in line with the first sermon of Father Paneloux.

<sup>9</sup> Othon phonetically refers to Otto I, founder of the Holy Roman Empire, and Philippe to the King of France, Philippe Le Bel, who inaugurated absolute power.

<sup>10</sup> The choice of the name Nicole for his daughter is ironic. Etymologically, Nicolas means "victorious people", it refers to the Greek "nikè" (victory) and "laos". (victory) and "laos" (the people). But from the haughty and snobbish description that Camus gives us of the Othon family (in Camus A., *La Peste*, p. 37.), it is phonetically that the first name should be understood, 'the one who "nicks", fucks ... the people'.

<sup>11</sup> History has taught us that when one wants to eliminate an adversary, a population, one reduces them to the rank of an animal: for example, that of rats, for the Nazis; that of vermin for the Communists; that of cockroaches during the Rwandan genocide, etc

<sup>12</sup>His wife was as thin as a black mouse" (p. 37); "M. Othon, the examining magistrate, always led his menagerie" (p. 74); "M. Othon, the owl man, but followed only by his two learned dogs" (p. 130). (p.74); "M. Othon, the owl man, but followed only by his two learned dogs" (p.130

## Small Literary Studies

### A collection for a systemic reading of works

If in these times of epidemic, social tensions appear in broad daylight and are heightened, the sanitary confinement puts a mute on them and many antagonisms are overcome thanks to the history and the personal commitment of Jean Tarrou. His first name evokes that of Christ's favourite disciple who, at the moment of death, entrusted his mother Mary to him. This choice corresponds to the concern that Tarrou had for his mother and to the resemblance that Tarrou will find between Rieux's mother and his own: the same devoted self-effacement.

In the course of the epidemic, Jean Tarrou will bring together, federate the top and bottom of society, two worlds, by condemning the principle of any killing, whether it is legally proclaimed or endorsed by a revolutionary project.

Tarrou is a son of the upper middle class: his father is a public prosecutor responsible for handing down death sentences. During a trial he attends at the age of seventeen, where his father demands capital punishment, he identifies with the condemned man, 'this poor little red-haired man, about thirty years old [...], looking like a frightened owl' (p. 270). He enters into a deep revolt and leaves the house: 'I wanted to settle a score with the "red-headed owl"' (p. 272). Here, it seems, the image of the father and that of his "owl" victim merge, with a possible polysemy of the surname Tarrou: one can hear a play on words "Tare-ou", "Tar(e de)rou(x)" or "where there is a defect", a serious defect, that of the killings. Moreover, by turning his back on his father, he renounces ease: 'I have done a thousand jobs to earn a living' (p. 272). He finds himself 'rolling his hump'. His reaction of flight could be signified in an inversion of the syllables of his surname: Tar-rou becomes "rou-tard" in French, a backpack in English, a "backpacker"... who ends up in Oran.

In Oran, he makes this admission to Rieux: 'I was already suffering from the plague long before I knew this city and this epidemic. "(p. 267) Are we to have a definition of the plague as a social phenomenon?

In fact, Jean Tarrou does not want a social peace that is based on murder... even if there were a project of social utopia. "I was told that a few deaths were necessary to bring about a world where no one would be killed anymore. "(p. 272) His reaction becomes a conviction, that "we could not make a move in this world without risking death. "(p. 275) This conviction became permanently anchored in him after he witnessed a death sentence in Hungary. The unconditional prohibition of the killing of one man by another became part of his identity.

In short, Tarrou represents this awareness that, even before any revolutionary project, every social system is based on the silent and masked murder of other men. Unacceptable! Tarrou is the individual who is led to a sacrificial reaction, to an expiation because of an experience, a "native" proximity to (legal) murder, coupled with the discovery of a manifest absence of love between his father and mother. It is a feeling of guilt combined with a desire for expiation that leads him to found and organise the sanitary formations, a sort of peaceful counterpart to the famous international brigades of the Spanish war.

In the end, Jean Tarrou, as a 'disciple' of Dr Rieux, is in search of inner peace: 'I only know what to do to stop being a plague victim and that this is the only thing that can give us hope of peace or, failing that, a good death' (p. 275). "(p. 275) In his conversations with Dr. Rieux, Tarrou will give the ultimate meaning of his search: "Can one be a saint without God, that is the only concrete problem I know today. "(p. 277) This highly reactive search nevertheless includes a self-criticism: beyond sympathy, love is needed. Tarrou is aware of this issue. Tarrou says: 'Of course, a man must fight for the victims. But if he ceases to love nothing else, what is the point of his fighting?' (p. 278)

## Small Literary Studies

### A collection for a systemic reading of works

In Oran - etymologically "*The Radiant One*" in Berber, but here pestiferous, full of the smells of the crematoria worthy of the Auschwitz camp<sup>13</sup> -, Tarrou will propose to Rieux, a sea bath, a midnight bath, as a metaphor for friendship and love. A return to a call, to a primordial foundation, that of the mother-sea<sup>14</sup>, the one we always love first is the mother: the question arises for Tarrou and Rieux without any possible overcoming of love at first sight?

#### **In the background, a relational deficit? An autobiographical jump?**

That a character in *The Plague* should aim at a certain sanctity was not part of the program of the absurd man. In fact, what can define a saint is a concern for perfection and this in relation to an ideal. For Tarrou, this ideal is not to have blood on his hands, not to be responsible for the death or exploitation of any human being. "I try to be an innocent murderer" (p. 276)! Such an ideal can only be approached by being on the side of the victims: hearing the call of the victims!

And what if the first victim whose call it is to hear was the mother? Tarrou's mother first, even before those of the capital executions ordered by his father? Then a little further on, that of Rieux's mother, so silent? Or even a little further on, that of the author Camus?

As an echo, we can hear here, along with many commentators, Jacqueline Lévi-Valensi's words about Camus: "To his mother, who speaks little and with difficulty, binds him 'all his sensitivity'; writing will undoubtedly be a way of responding to this absence and this silence, and of going beyond them. "It is a fact: Camus's mother is loving and will be loved by her son<sup>15</sup>, but as a very modest working woman, she has to entrust her sons to her mother "whom she begs not to beat her children too hard. "In short, Camus's mother is an absent Presence with the consequence that for the child, all the objects of the world will be discovered on a mortifying horizon: a faith in the absurdity of life will be established.

#### **From the psychological to the metaphysical ?**

Let us recall that at the beginning of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus asks the following question, which he repeats: "To know if one can live without call, that is all that interests me. "This question is immediately followed by the following propositions: "I cannot leave this terrain. This face of life being given to me, can I live with it? But in the face of this particular concern, belief in the absurd amounts to replacing the quality of experiences with quantity. "The belief in the absurdity of life gives rise to a response which is that of a conquering race for the accumulation of experiences. This response seems to become synonymous with life as the recomposition of a positive unity of Presence in the world.

#### **Don Juan as a model of life?**

In fact, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, after a theoretical argumentation, Camus vulgarises his point by giving as incarnations of the absurd man, Don Juan, then the actor and the conqueror.

---

<sup>13</sup> You knew Camps well," said one. [...] He was at the switch." (p. 34)

<sup>14</sup> The French language allows for a play on words, a phonetic proximity between sea ("mer") and mother ("mère") : the sea is like a mother and vice versa.

<sup>15</sup> We refer to Camus's words at the time of the award of the Nobel: "I believe in justice, but I will defend my mother before justice." The reader may also refer to our study of *The Stranger* where we have shown that Camus discreetly imagines another life for his mother.

## Small Literary Studies

### A collection for a systemic reading of works

By choosing the character of Don Juan first, Camus unintentionally refers us to a psychological profile close to his initial suffering, that of a child who has not been offered the unifying image of a little child looked at and loved, an image that a child in normal conditions recognises with joy and jubilation. His mother calls him with her eyes and gestures, but with too few words after the disappearance of his father during the battle of the Marne in 1914, when the child Camus is not yet one year old.

We can read this initial suffering in the story of the character of Dom Juan. In an article<sup>16</sup> on Moliere's *Dom Juan*, we highlighted the fact that Dom Juan's mother was *a absente Beautiful*<sup>17</sup>, which is much more serious than *a mute Presence* as in Camus' case. Dom Juan's mother has no concern for others, she is all to herself, which leads Dom Juan, her son, to seduce and ravish all the beauties in order to avenge his mother's beautiful great absence. Camus notes that in reaction, 'what Don Juan puts into action is an ethic of quantity, as opposed to the saint who tends towards quality. Not believing in the profound meaning of things is the characteristic of the absurd man. "

With this Donjuanesque model, of which Sganarelle will remember the cry of the victims<sup>18</sup>, we are far from Tarrou's call to listen to the victims, and even farther from his quest for a secular holiness, synonymous with the possibility of a profound meaning of things, of an ethic of quality. Could this quality be found in the love that Tarrou adds as the indispensable complement to humanitarian action?

### **Love as the ultimate meaning? Rambert or Rieux ?**

In the course of the epidemic, Camus chooses to have Tarrou die from his devotion to the victims of the plague but saves Raymond Rambert, the Parisian journalist who is desperate to find his fiancée. According to the narrator, this must be the order of things: 'to heroism the secondary place that should be its own, just after, and never before, the generous demand for happiness. "(p.154) How is this possible? Is it really in the order of things?

As soon as he arrives in Oran, Raymond Rambert, as the etymology of his first name indicates, takes advice from Dr Rieux. Caught in the trap of the epidemic, he wants to flee by all means. He is not a coward, but his experience of the international brigades during the Spanish war of 1936 has made him a "bear"<sup>19</sup>, selfish of his happiness. He confided his desire to escape to Dr Bernard Rieux, who, as his first name etymologically indicates, had all the makings of a "strong bear". The latter did not condemn him and would later willingly accept his commitment to the Tarrou health units.

Like Rambert, Dr Rieux also has a wife, but as she is ill, he has sent her to a nursing home, just before the plague, far from the town. So Dr. Rieux is all about his work, even at the risk of dying: the true scientist, like his colleague Dr. Castel, gives himself no rest in his attempt to correct creation with the utmost honesty. "The main thing was to do his job well. " (p. 51)

---

<sup>16</sup> On the myth of Dom Juan, we refer the reader to our study: Spee B. "*Dom Juan, une figure du terrorisme culturel de l'Occident*", La Revue Nouvelle, n° 8, Brussels, August 2004, p. 66-81.

<sup>17</sup> Idem, in particular pages 73 and 74 entitled La beauté et son rôle dans l'économie psychique.

<sup>18</sup> "By his death everyone is satisfied: Heaven offended, laws violated, daughters seduced, families dishonoured, parents outraged, wives harmed, husbands pushed to the limit, everyone is happy. Only I am unhappy... [Mes gages, mes gages, mes gages!]" says Sganarelle. in Molière, *Dom Juan*, Act V, scene VI, v.12-17.

<sup>19</sup> Rambert, allows for a play on the words 'rend berg', 'ram' has a phonetic resemblance in French to 'ren', the conjugated form of the verb 'render', in the sense of 'to transform someone'; "berg" meaning bear in German.

## Small Literary Studies

### A collection for a systemic reading of works

This honesty leaves him - it seems - with no other possible true love in life than that of his mother, a relationship to which we will return a little later.

But what of the significance of the doctor's surname? If it is possible to find a polysemy, a sign of overdetermination, in the surname Rieux attributed to the "strong bear" that is the doctor, it would be, first of all, with a different letter, that of laughing. Via a phonetic proximity in French between the surname "Rieux" and "rieur", synonym of laughter, Rieux is a laughter: he is the one who has a "friendly laugh" (p. 146) with them, "eux" in French, Tarrou and all the other plague victims. His name would ultimately have a Nietzschean echo.

Or if we put a "c" in place of the "r", we would have the term "cieux", "skies" in English, which leaves an opening in the disaster. But next to the variants "rieur" and "cieux", "laughter" and "skies" in English if we invert the first letter of Rieux with the last one, we can hear Xieur, very close to seigneur in French, "lord in English : Doctor Rieux would be a kind of new "Christ" the Saviour, a "saintly doctor" for "doctor" [ this pun is phonetically possible in French "médecin" (doctor) like "méde(saint)" or (doctor saintly) ] "who seeks to render service by remaining alive as long as possible...". "All men who cannot be saints and refuse to admit plagues, nevertheless strive to be doctors. " (p. 314)

However, in the character of the doctor, there is something regressive in the dominance of the mother figure, and this, to the detriment of the wife who is quickly "discarded": perhaps this is because "Love demands a little future. " (p. 201) ? Dr Rieux does not seem to believe in conjugal love.

### **The place of the mother<sup>20</sup> and of women in *The Plague*<sup>21</sup>**

In contrast to men, women are hardly named in *The Plague*. The only woman who has a surname is Madame Loret, 'the mother of the workwoman who worked at Tarrou's hotel' (p. 102), who is anxious that her daughter Loret<sup>22</sup> 'will get it', the plague. "I do hope it's not the fever everyone is talking about. "(p. 103) Oh, the irony: his daughter has it, the plague... She dies of it.

Precisely among the victims who died of the plague, but of a plague before the plague that Tarrou is said to have experienced, we can count Tarrou's mother, who was too submissive to her husband: 'Later, I knew that there was nothing to forgive her for, because she had been poor all her life until her marriage, and that poverty had taught her resignation. " (p. 271).

But whether or not there was forgiveness does not rule out the possibility that the mother's behaviour had an impact on the Tarrou child. If, by implication, we hear the image of a bad mother, in contrast, we have the image of the good mother, that of Dr Rieux, whom Tarrou admires.

This division between an image of the good mother and an image of the bad mother was already present in the reading of *The Stranger*, and consequently, we can ask ourselves if it is not the dominance of the image of the bad mother, poor, weak and effete, which is the basis of the belief in the absurdity of life...

---

<sup>20</sup> Let us remember that the French language allows for a play on words, a phonetic proximity between sea ("mer") and mother ("mère") : the sea is like a mother and vice versa, a place of birth.

<sup>21</sup> Camus in his Carnets had this to say: "Make the theme of separation the great theme of the novel; it is the theme of the mother who must dominate everything. "

<sup>22</sup> The French language allows a play on words, a phonetic proximity between the name "Loret" and "l'aurait": Loret is like "would have", "l'aurait" is in French the conjugated form of the verb "avoir", "to have".

## Small Literary Studies

### A collection for a systemic reading of works

At the beginning of the novel *The Plague*, the other women loved are very much alive, they are far away, in Paris for Rambert, or away in a nursing home for Rieux's wife, as if in the face of the scourges of the plague or the war, it was better not to have lovers<sup>23</sup>. "The thought of his wife came to him, but he rejected it every time. "(p. 314) Indeed, for Rieux, the announcement of his wife's death, at the very end of the narrative, is merely the addition of one death to all the others in *The Plague*: there is little emotion in Dr. Rieux confirming the sentence just before the announcement of his death "A heat of life and an image of death, that was knowledge. " ( p. 316).

In fact, only one presence stands out at the beginning and at the end, that of Dr Rieux's mother: it is the portrait of the good mother. "She came to look after her son's house, in the absence of the sick woman. " (p. 18). We find her again at the end of the narrative at the moment of Tarrou's agony, who sees in her an idealised double of his own mother, the good mother he should have had.

Rieux, watching over Tarrou as he dies with his mother, has this reflection for himself: 'He knew what his mother thought and that she loved him. He also knew that it is not much to love someone, or at least that a love is never strong enough to find its own expression. So he and his mother would always love each other in silence. "(p. 315) In fact, at the heart of Dr Rieux's life, we find this mother, self-effacing but omnipresent, who reminds us of Camus' mother. Just as Camus' mother lived through the two world wars, Rieux's mother lived through the epidemic as if nothing had happened, and every evening she guaranteed the 'strong bear' a haven of peace.

Rieux's mother is in fact present like the sea on the edge of Oran in which Tarrou and Rieux will find themselves for their famous sea bath, this sea of which "the waters swelled up and slowly went down! This calm breathing of the sea made oily reflections rise and fall on the surface of the water. "(p. 279) This sea is really described as a person from whom they seek an epidermal intimacy. In short, the sea bath taken by Tarrou and Rieux is also the symbol of a brotherly love... as if there was only a sea bath to feel carried, supported in the face of the sufferings of existence. Tarrou says: "Of course, a man must fight for the victims. But if he ceases to love nothing else, what is the point of his fighting? (p. 278)

However, in order to find a future for a true love other than regressive, a love that calls for other lives, we must turn to the one whom the narrator, namely Dr Rieux himself, designates as the only hero of this tragedy: Joseph Grand. A nomination which - at first sight - leaves no doubt but which seems a bit forced!

### **Joseph Grand as hero?**

While he is at the bottom of the social ladder as a lowly town hall employee and abandoned by his wife Jeanne<sup>24</sup> due to material poverty, Joseph Grand is very much a 'failure'. However, he is presented to us as the only true hero of the plague epidemic in Oran.

---

<sup>23</sup> In the play *Orpheus and Eurydice*, performed in Oran during the plague, it is quite symbolic to see that at the moment when the actor playing the character of Orpheus has to come out of the Underworld, the latter is struck down by the plague and falls in the middle of the set. (p. 218-219) This strange micro-narrative is a sign that in wartime, wanting to save one's beloved can only lead to the death of one's saviour, contrary to the myth.

<sup>24</sup> Jeanne, John's wife, is the opposite of the apostle John's behaviour: she abandons her man in the face of adversity.

## Small Literary Studies

### A collection for a systemic reading of works

"If there absolutely has to be one in this story, the narrator proposes precisely this insignificant and self-effacing hero who had only a little shame in his heart and an apparently ridiculous ideal." (p. 153-154) Old, long and thin, leading an almost ascetic life, this character is in charge of "adding up the deaths": he has become the secretary of the "health brigades". The time he has left he devotes to writing; he is looking for the right word for a novel that he would like to be brilliant, but he cannot find it. In the face of his search for expression, there is the media discourse on the humanitarian exploits of the carers, but in Rieux's opinion, this discourse is of little value in the face of 'the daily efforts of Grand, for example, unable to account for what Grand meant in the midst of the plague. " (p. 154)

Paradoxically, this family name probably only makes sense in the face of his first name Joseph. Etymologically in Hebrew, Joseph means "God will increase my descendants" but above all, this name refers to the adoptive father of Christ: Joseph is an effete figure, if there is such a thing, in front of the Creator, but he is the one who will take care of the child's growth, so that he becomes a man and not a god. By this appointment targeted on the character of the evangelical Joseph, Camus indicates to us that the call to humanity is of the order of an ordinary, banal or simply parental transcendence.

In fact, with the character of Joseph Grand, we have more than a failed little hero, we have the timid but real reference to another order, a transcendence, that of the call to be a parent! "One day, in front of a Christmas shop, Jeanne, who was looking at the window with wonder, had turned to him and said, "How beautiful!" He squeezed her wrist. That was how the marriage was decided. " (p. 95) This is what Camus reminds us of when Rieux finds Joseph Grand malade, in tears, 'almost pressed up against a shop window, full of toys roughly carved in wood' (p. 284), a souvenir of a 'Christmas shop' (p. 284): this transcendence is built on the hope that despite poverty and death, another life can be called, that of a child, as if one could mark an absolute agreement with life to the point of betting that it is worth reproducing it and making people believe in Father Christmas<sup>25</sup>. And Grand Joseph finds life again to write a letter to Jeanne, better than a brilliant novel, to tell her to come back...

In the end, we can say that in Camus, this transcendence of the call takes the form of a secular faith when we think of the final sentence of Dr. Rieux: "There are more things to admire in men than things to despise. " (p. 334) Let us note that this transcendence of the call can take a form that leads to a Christian faith. We find a surprising formulation in Françoise Dolto insofar as she takes an "absolute" support on the conscious unity won against fragmentation during the mirror stage: "If I am, it is because He is. If I am, it is because He is."<sup>26</sup> "It is because we are!" would nuance Camus of *The Plague*.

---

<sup>25</sup> "To build a child, a fable may be necessary for a time. Indeed, it is important that as a child he believes that he is falling into a world that wants him well. If, too early on, he is convinced that here below, "Hell is other people", as Sartre put it, this child will find it difficult to trust those he meets. How can one grow up if from the start the child has to distrust everyone and everything? "

We refer the reader to our analysis of the interview "*What is a true thing? (Le Père Noël)*" by Françoise Dolto in F., *Lorsque l'enfant paraît*, tome 1, Editions du Seuil, 1977, p.93-95. This analysis is available on the website [www.onehope.be](http://www.onehope.be) under the title *Petites Études Philosophiques n°4 A propos de Dolto*.

<sup>26</sup> Dolto Françoise, Séverin Gérard, *La Foi au risque de la psychanalyse*, Editions du Seuil, collection Points n° 154, Paris, 1983, p. 97. The "He" is the Other, the great Other who recognises me and names me, a fundamental time for self-recognition and self-construction. Dolto also uses the word God in place of the "He".

Another echo of this formulation can be found in the Ubuntu of African philosophy: ubuntu can be translated as "I am what I am thanks to what we are. "This concept inspired Nelson Mandela's action.

## Small Literary Studies

### A collection for a systemic reading of works

#### To produce proof to the contrary: Cottard

In the spectacle of men facing the plague, Camus does not blacken his characters, he even gives the unsympathetic a dose of humanity. This is how Father Paneloux comes to take part in the health training courses, even if his words before dying are unambiguous: "Religious people have no friends. They have placed everything in God. " (p. 253)

This compassion is also found in relation to Judge Othon when the narrator lets us know that the judge does not want to resume his function but to take care of the camp of the isolated because "It's stupid to say, I would feel less separated from my little boy. " (p. 283). Here is Judge Othon metamorphosing into an "adoptive father" in the image of Joseph...

On the other hand, there is less compassion for Cottard, the "hanged man" whom Joseph Grand has untied *in extremis*: it would have been better if he had not done so, for Cottard becomes a living corpse on probation from a sentence he is expecting before the plague... So he has no qualms about making money on the deadly plague. Hence Tarrou's reflection: "His only real crime is to have approved in his heart of what was killing children and men. " (p. 328)

A "wine and liquor representative" (p. 65), fond of gangster films, with the "allure of a boar"<sup>27</sup> (p. 65), Cottard becomes a prosperous trafficker flooding confined Oran with his corrupting largesse, hoping for some support after the plague. We have here the typical profile of the collaborator, a former outcast of society who finds, under the Occupation, an opportunity to "make an easy life again".

In fact, here we are not in the transcendence of the call but of the calculation... Possible polysemy on his surname, Cottard, we are dealing with someone "with (a) defect"<sup>28</sup> or suffering from Cotard's syndrome, "a strange mental illness which makes a person believe that he is dead" and therefore, that it is "too late", "trop tard" in French to change his life, his favourite sentence being that "The big ones always eat the small ones. "(p. 66)

#### Conclusion

After *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *The Plague* marks a turning point for Camus, a significant evolution in the search for values: the model of a hero of the absurd like Don Juan will be succeeded by Doctor Rieux.

However, by favouring an onomastic approach that we have presented as the theatre of names and surnames, we have been able to better highlight the sharing of values that is debated in Camus' thought.

Beyond the humanists<sup>29</sup>, beyond Tarrou, beyond Rieux, there would be Joseph Grand, a "saint" who would make us sense "the deep meaning of things": he abandons his "Work" for Christmas or Noel<sup>30</sup> ( in French text)...

---

<sup>27</sup> It is worth noting once again the use of an animal qualification for an unsympathetic character as in the case of Judge Othon's family...

<sup>28</sup> The French language allows for a play on words, a phonetic proximity between "Cotard" (the surname) and "comme tare" ou "avec une tare" ( with (a) defect ) : "tare" is like a defect.

<sup>29</sup> "It is the men who pass, and the humanists in the first place, because they did not take their precautions. Our fellow citizens were no more guilty than others, they just forgot to be modest, that's all, and they thought that everything was still possible for them, which implied that plagues were impossible. They were still doing business, they were planning trips and they had opinions. How could they have thought of the plague suppressing the future, travel and discussion? They thought they were free and no one will ever be free as long as there are plagues. " (p.48)

<sup>30</sup> Etymology: birth.

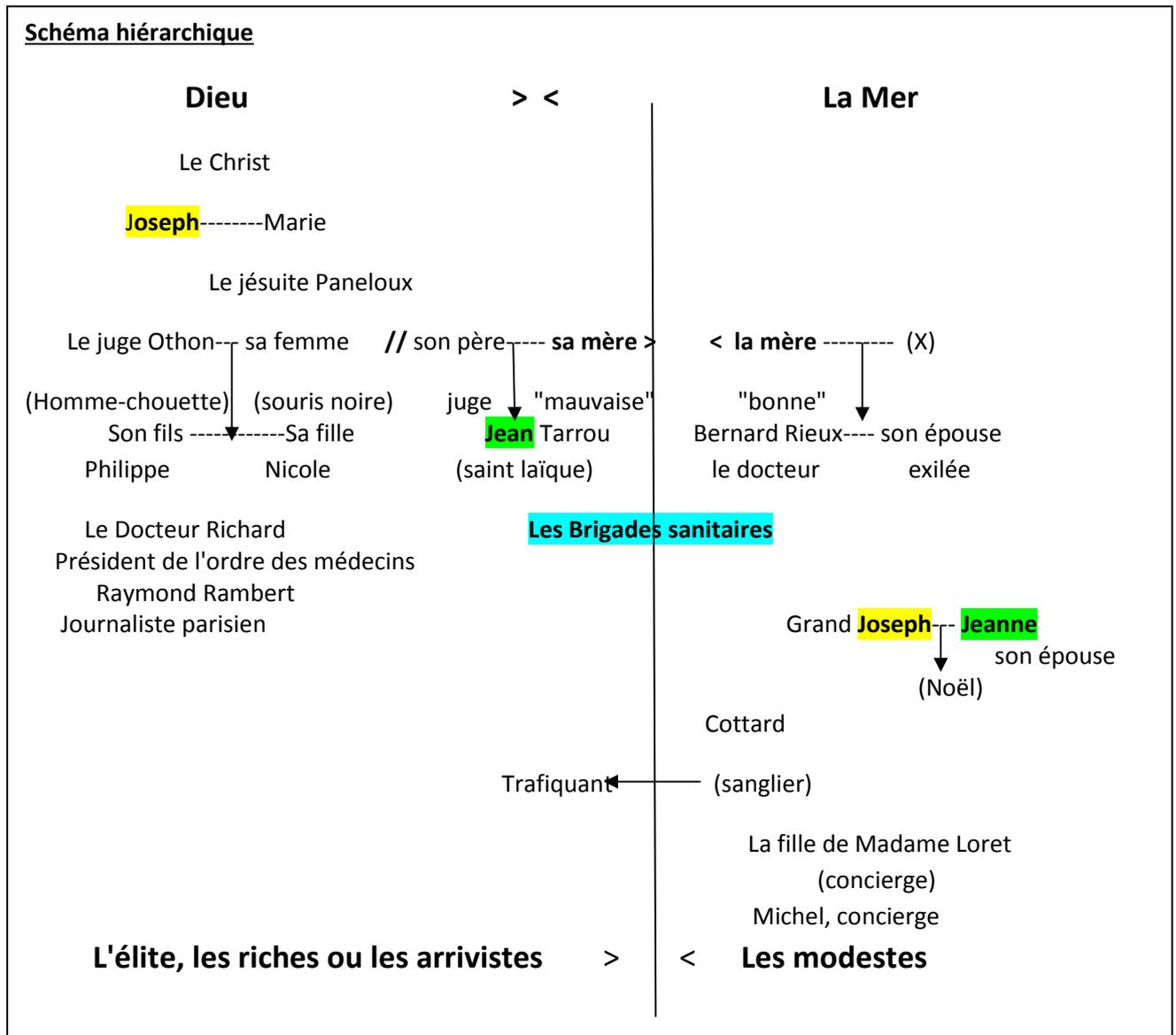
**Small Literary Studies**  
**A collection for a systemic reading of works**

Joseph Grand is the opening to another order, that of the transcendence of the call to life, even if, at first glance, the presentation of the character does not make one want to be... The character is, however, in an order of truth that reminds us of our own existence: we have been called at some point in principle into a family. For Camus, this rediscovery, probably the object of a slow reconciliation with a difficult past, will have to wait for his posthumous work entitled *The First Man*.

**Small Literary Studies**  
**A collection for a systemic reading of works**

**Appendix n° 1**

The construction of a hierarchical diagram is a step in our reading. The general hierarchical<sup>31</sup> scheme takes the names, first names or pseudonyms of the various characters, which we arrange in two pyramids that situate the hero and the other characters among themselves and according to the scales of values that in principle inspire them.



What the diagram indicates is the presence of a social distribution of characters: the 'beautiful' roles go to characters of modest origin (Rieux, Grand) with one exception: Tarrow. The elite is disqualified...

<sup>31</sup> The elaboration of a hierarchical scheme always takes a family tree as a starting point: it is a good tool that allows a first approximation of the links between the characters in a story. For more details on the methodology, we refer the reader to our systemic study of Georges Rodenbach's *The Idol*

**Small Literary Studies**  
**A collection for a systemic reading of works**

**Appendix n° 2**

**Echo of a methodological and theoretical opinion**

We owe Nicolas Rouvière, lecturer at the University of Grenoble-Alpes (INSPE), a critical light that helped and comforted us in the writing of our study on Camus. We dedicate our study on *The Plague* to him.

NICOLAS ROUVIERE

Sat 06-06-20 07:19

Hi Bernard,

This is my friendly point of view.

I'm not sure how much of a reading event the onomastics are in your analysis of *The Stranger*, but the added value here seems to me to be less, as you are only supporting an analysis of the system of characters that can stand on its own (and to which I personally give credit). The polysemy of the names is such that the associations do not, it seems to me, manage to make as much of a system.

The question is whether your overall analysis pre-exists the reading of the novel, as a hypothesis forged elsewhere and which creates its own corpus of meaning after the fact to justify itself. In any case, I believe that it is the lot of any interpretive act to be first of all a gesture of belief anchored in the subjective authenticity of the interpreter. Only the number, quality and coherence of the textual traces collected can enable us to aspire to a certain accuracy in the analysis. In this respect, I would say that the elements in the file are still a little thin and that this is quite normal. I therefore read your article as a starting hypothesis and not as a demonstration. But I find this hypothesis very stimulating and I believe in it, in other words, by reading you I have a desire to see what it produces by digging deeper.

As far as your reader's reaction is concerned, I can understand that she doesn't find her children there, both on the thematic level (the epidemic) and on the level of psychoanalytical analysis, which is supported here above all by recourse to biographism, the Mirror stage and the relationship to the Mother, and would require more textual traces.

On the other hand, it seems to me that it is unnecessarily focused on the word "transcendence", insofar as you do not approach it on a metaphysical or religious level, but rather situate it in the filial and generational link of transmission; in short, the great Other is on a very human level that Lacanism does not deny as a fact of structure.

I believe that you are not going in the same direction and that you gain by pursuing your own path, not by reducing the scope of the article but by unfolding all the corners and extending the amplitude of the canvas.

As for the substance of the analysis itself, I'm sorry I can't advise you further.

Kind regards,

Nicolas

Appendix n° 3  
Camus and the humanists

**Camus claims that humanists<sup>32</sup> are the first victims<sup>33</sup> of *The Plague*.  
Why is this?**

What is humanism? Many claim to be humanists, including existentialism<sup>34</sup>. Let's try a first definition, that of the affirmation that there is no god above man without claiming that man is a god, or even a little god... In other words, at the heart of humanism is the affirmation that man, in order to be human, must renounce the idea of god, the idea of omnipotence (including technological<sup>35</sup>).

In this general perspective, Christianity as a religion has announced itself as a humanism: God, if he exists, became man, lived and loved the human condition to the point of being a victim. This framework makes it possible to put forward the proposition that Christianity is "a religion of the exit from religion", except that with the affirmation of the resurrection, the human being finds himself at the mercy of an elsewhere, a final judgement which is not that of History. The result is that the movement of love or empathy of a god for the human condition commands, at the very least, the sacrifice of life in order to be equal to the divine attitude. With this "recommendation" whose cost seems exorbitant and which in the history of the West has commanded a mass of devotion, sacrifice and privation, doubt and the wish to conceal this "truth" readily impose themselves, whereas it could be that a purely materialistic observation of natural and political mechanisms unfortunately implies and confirms - more often than we think - the sacrifice of life in order to triumph?

Faced with this painful possibility, humanism in its evolution will rightly develop the theme of love as a final value linked to the theme of freedom in order to obliterate the "masochistic" side of Christianity in favour of the idea of happiness, "a new idea in Europe", according to Saint-Just. At the beginning, with courtly love, we will witness the divinisation of love. Then, with time, in parallel with the development of science and the desacralisation of love, naturalism could ultimately present itself as a more authentic humanism. Courbet's *Origin of the World* is a symbol of this. Finally, we will slide from the Holy Family to the valorization of the bourgeois and republican family until its current breakdown.

Then came existentialism, which in turn proclaimed that it was a humanism. For existentialism, the human being cannot be defined either in relation to a god or to Nature. In fact, there is no human essence, no gender: the human being invents himself, invents his own values, he defines himself by himself: this is his freedom. The human being is *causa sui*.

---

<sup>32</sup> Appendix to our study "*Camus à l'épreuve de La Peste ou La transcendance de l'appel*", Spee Bernard.

<sup>33</sup> Camus A., *La Peste*, Editions Gallimard, Coll. Folio plus n°21, Pars, 1996, p. 48.

<sup>34</sup> Let us recall the famous title of Sartre's work: "Existentialism is a humanism."

<sup>35</sup> "[...] aiming to repair what is inferior to the norm, not to replace it with a superior norm: to cure my sick children rather than to produce more intelligent children. "in Todorov, *Devoirs et Délices une vie de passeur*, Editions du Seuil, 2002, p. 244.

## Small Literary Studies

### A collection for a systemic reading of works

Pushing this approach to the limit, some people like Philippe Vilain<sup>36</sup>, while referring to Camus, assert that Donjuanism is a humanism. While the existentialist's concern is to choose his own values, Dom Juan's is to tear others away from their values, to break their ties, the most diverse ones, under the pretext of liberating them. He hates others, even to the point of attacking the statue of the dead, that of the commander, or of not respecting the status of the child, the pretty little girl Claudine, whom he "loves with all his heart."<sup>37</sup> In the end, Don Juan becomes a hell for others.

In the face of these so-called humanisms<sup>38</sup>, let's define them again by saying that humanism is a love in the broad sense of a trust that is granted to the being, to what the earthly world in its diversity is. It is a faith that it is better to be than not to be.

It is therefore fundamentally important that this trust be instilled in the first steps of every human being's existence by refusing to undermine childhood. This humanism does not automatically make the individual the strongest, the most violent, it does not guarantee him victory in the first stages of a conflict, but in the end, victory will be for him, because concern for the life of the smallest makes him more attentive and more inventive of what makes life. This is perhaps why humanists like Tarron are the first victims of *The Plague*.

In parallel with this problem, we thought it would be interesting to reproduce a comment from Todorov's Interviews with Catherine Portevin about current humanists:

To Madame Portevin's remark:

"That there would be a price to pay for freedom. This is a rather sacrificial vision ...

We have this response from Todorov:

"It is not me who suggests this, it is all the critics of modernity, [...] I think that we are all, on occasion, conservatives, at least on certain levels. The point is to know what hierarchy our values form, whether it is the affirmation of modernity that prevails or its critique [...].

To Madame Portevin's remark:

"That there would be a price to pay for freedom. This is a rather sacrificial view ...

We have this response from Todorov:

"It is not me who suggests this, it is all the critics of modernity, [...] I think that we are all, on occasion, conservatives, at least on certain levels. The point is to know what hierarchy our values form, whether it is the affirmation of modernity that prevails or its critique [...].

According to conservatives, then, the devil has taken a triple tithe from modern man: he has deprived him of his social sense and condemned him to solitude (modernity is necessarily "individualistic"; he has deprived him of values, forcing him to live without ideals or religion, in pursuit of his material interests alone (modernity is "materialistic"; he has deprived him of

---

<sup>36</sup> Quite the opposite of our analysis, one can read the preface "*Le donjuanisme est un humanisme*" by Philippe Vilain in Molière's *Dom Juan*, Edition Hatier, Coll. Classiques et Cie Lycée, 2015, p.7-10

<sup>37</sup> Molière, *Dom Juan*, Act IV, scene III, lines. 49-50.

<sup>38</sup> For a broader discussion, we refer to pages 220-249 of Todorov's work .

**Small Literary Studies**  
**A collection for a systemic reading of works**

his stable and solid self, which thought it reigned supreme over the world : In reality, man is the prey of subterranean forces, of unconscious impulses over which he has no control.

Of all the moderns, the humanists are, more specifically, those who refuse to admit that, in order to preserve freedom, it is necessary to renounce sociability, values or the self. They believe that the social condition of man can be transformed but not eradicated; that common values must be preserved, even if they are no longer founded in God or in the structure of the universe; and that the self, if it is not capable of controlling everything, is nevertheless free, as Rousseau said, "to acquiesce or to resist"<sup>39</sup>.

Todorov clearly indicates that humanists are in a structural and uncomfortable tension, but that this is the price to pay for not falling into any fanaticism, and thus remaining open and committed to the future.

---

<sup>39</sup> Todorov, *Devoirs et Délices une vie de passeur*, Editions du Seuil, 2002. p. 224-225.

## Small Literary Studies

### A collection for a systemic reading of works

#### Brief bibliography

- Arendt A., *La crise de la culture*, Edition Gallimard, Col. Idées n°263, 1972 (pour la traduction française)
- Dufour D.-R., *Le Divin Marché*, Edition Denoël, collection Folio essais n°562, 2007, 411 pages.
- Castoriadis C., *La montée de l'insignifiance Carrefour du labyrinthe - 4*, Editions du Seuil, Coll. Points n°656, Paris, 1966, 292 pages.
- Camus A., *L'Étranger*, Gallimard, coll. Folio plus N°10, 1942, 1996, 173 pages.
- Camus A., *Le mythe de Sisyphe*, Editions Gallimard(1956), coll. Idées n°1, Paris,1974,187 pp.
- Camus A., *La Peste*, Editions Gallimard, Coll. Folio plus n°21, Pars, 1996, p. 396.
- Camus A., *La Chute*, Edition Gallimard (1956), coll. Folio n°, 1983, 153 pp.
- Collectif, *Dictionnaire Albert Camus*, Editions Robert Laffont, Coll. Bouquins, 2009,
- Collectif, *Albert Camus*, Europe La revue mensuelle n°846, octobre 1999.
- Compagnon A.(1998), *Le démon de la théorie*, Editions Du Seuil, Coll.Points essais, Paris, 338 pp..
- Costes A., *Albert Camus et La Parole manquante*, Editions Payot, Coll. Science de l'homme, Paris, 1973, 255 pages.
- Dolto Françoise, Séverin Gérard, *La Foi au risque de la psychanalyse*, Editions du Seuil, collection Points n° 154, Paris, 1983, p. 151
- Gassin J., *L'univers symbolique d'Albert Camus Essai d'interprétation psychanalytique*, Editions Minard,1981
- Huston N., *L'espèce fabulatrice*, Editions Actes Sud, 2008, Paris
- Jejcic M., *De l'étranger à l'Absurde*, Editions Eres "Essaim" 1 N° 24, pages 97-108.
- Lacan J. *Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je*, in *Les Ecrits I*, Editions du Seuil, Coll. Points, Paris, 1996, 290 pages.
- Lebrun J.P., *La perversion ordinaire. Vivre ensemble sans autrui*, Editions Denoël, coll. Médiations, 2007, 436 pp.
- Le Monde, *La part obscure de L'Étranger*, article du 17 juillet 1995 consulté le 13 avril 2020 sur le site : [https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1992/07/17/la-part-obscur-de-l-etranger\\_3901511\\_1819218.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1992/07/17/la-part-obscur-de-l-etranger_3901511_1819218.html)
- Lévi-Valensi J., *La Peste*, Editions Gallimard, Coll. Foliothèque N°8, Paris, 1991, 215 pages.
- Lévi-Valensi J., *La Chute*, Editions Gallimard, Coll. Foliothèque N°58, Paris, 1996, 216 pages.
- Melman C., *L'Homme sans gravité*, Entretiens avec Jean-Pierre Lebrun, Editions Denoel, Coll.Folio Essais n°453, Paris, 2002, 270 pages.
- Sartre J.P., *Situations I, essais critiques*, Editions Gallimard, Paris, 1947, p.92-112.
- Simon P.-H., *Témoins de l'homme*, Editions Petite Bibliothèque Payot n° 96, Paris, 1962, 236 p.
- Sloterdijk Peter, *Après nous le déluge, Les Temps modernes comme expérience antigénéalogique*, Editions Payot et Rivages, Coll. Petite Biblio Essais N°1079, Paris, (2016), 2018, 524 pages.
- Spee B. (janvier 2013), « *La Question Humaine de François Emmanuel ou A la recherche des sources d'une éthique Introduction à une poétique* », 16 pages,
- Spee B. (mars 2013), *Pietr le Letton ou Comment se sauver de l'envie de tuer son frère ?*, La Revue Nouvelle n°3, mars 2003, Bruxelles.
- Spee B.(août 2004), *Dom Juan, figure du terrorisme culturel de l'Occident* in *La Revue Nouvelle*, n° 8, Bruxelles
- Spee B., (décembre 2008), *L'Idole de Georges Rodenbach ou L'anorexie comme trouble de l'idéal ? Une application « Du « Comment lire ? » de T. Todorov*, Petites Etudes Littéraires N°1, 25 pages. Texte inédit publié sur le site [www.onehope.be](http://www.onehope.be).
- Spee B. (janvier 2011) *Du "roman" évangélique au roman hergéen ou De l'histoire d'un petit bourgeois abusé au malaise d'une société désabusée*, Petites Etudes Hergéennes n°9, 20 pages.
- Spee B. (décembre 2006), *Hergé et le mythe du boy-scout ou la bonne conscience de l'Occident. Lire Tintin avec Lévi-Strauss* in les Actes du Colloque *Mythe et Bande dessinée* organisé par le CRLMC de l'Université Blaise Pascal à Clermont-Ferrand (France).
- Spee B., (avril 2020), " I *L'Etranger d'Albert Camus "le seul Christ que nous méritons." ou un héros coupable d'être vivant et donc étranger d'être sur Terre.*", Editons Onehope, Coll. Petites Etudes Littéraires N° 18, Liège, 28 pages.
- Spee B., (mai 2020), " II *Camus à l'épreuve de La Peste ou La transcendance de l'appel*", Editons Onehope, Coll. Petites Etudes Littéraires N° 19, Liège, 24 pages.
- Spee B., (octobre 2020), " III *Camus à l'épreuve de La Chute ou L'enfer existentialiste*", Editons Onehope, Coll. Petites Etudes Littéraires N° 20, Liège, 24 pages
- Todd O., *Albert Camus, une vie*, Editions Gallimard, Coll. Biographies, Paris, 1996, 858 pages.
- Todorov T., *Comment lire?* p. 129-143, in *La Nouvelle Revue Française, Vie ou survie de la littérature*, N° 214, octobre 1970, 256 pages
- Todorov T., *Devoirs et Délices une vie de passeur*, Entretiens avec Catherine Portevin, Editions du Seuil, 2002, 395 pages.
- Vilain Ph., *Le donjuanisme est un humanisme*, préface in *Dom Juan de Molière*, Edition Hatier, Coll. Classiques et Cie Lycée, 2015, p.7- 10.

**The little literary study N° 19**

**Camus in the test of *The Plague*  
or  
The transcendence of the call**

Before writing his masterpiece, *The Plague*, Camus had this to say in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: "To know whether one can live without call is all that interests me. "It seems that with *The Plague*, Camus' thinking has been refined, that he has discovered that there is more absurd than the Absurd. It is in this tragic theatre of the epidemic that Camus constructs a spectacle, his novel, with masterful elegance: it is important for us to see how the novelist calls his characters to take their place. It will be above all in the game of nomination, of the names of the characters, that we will try to grasp, to catch the author's conscience: that is to say, the moral values that he puts up for debate.

Bernard Spee is a philosopher by training. He taught literature and history in the final year of secondary school at the Collège Saint-Hadelin in Visé (Belgium). Concerned with a systemic approach to texts and works, he is the author of numerous analytical articles on Hergé, Molière, Simenon, Rodenbach, Carrère and the paintings of René Magritte. He is also the author of several pedagogical articles.