

THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND MODERN FRENCH STUDIES

INAUGURAL LECTURE
DELIVERED AT RHODES UNIVERSITY
on 29 August 1990

by

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Mr. Vice-Chancellor, Mr. Vice-Principal, Registrar, members of Senate, colleagues, students and friends, I regard it as a privilege to continue the tradition begun at the beginning of this century by one of the four foundation Professors of Rhodes, G.F. Dingemans, Professor of Modern Languages. It was in 1917 that Bodmer was appointed as Professor of French and Weehuizen became Rhodes' first Professor of German. It is my particular privilege to succeed Professor Jean-Louis Cattaneo in the Headship of the present Department of French and Italian, after his long and successful tenure of the post.

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, I would like to thank the University authorities for permitting me to deliver this lecture on this date, which has made it possible, not only for members of my immediate family to be present, my wife, my mother-in-law and brother-in-law, but also Professor Robert Niklaus, Emeritus Professor of the University of Exeter and a Visiting Lecturer in my Department during this term, accompanied by his wife Kathy. I have interested myself in the eighteenth-century period of French studies for over twenty-five years and owe a great debt to Professor Niklaus for unfailing help and advice for the past twenty years, based on his wide knowledge of the Enlightenment and eminent reputation as an Enlightenment scholar. I am especially privileged that he should be among us this evening during his eightieth year.

It is sometimes argued that the "four great" philosophes, Voltaire, Diderot, Montesquieu and Rousseau, dominated a world of ideas whose problems ordinarily go beyond the understanding of human reason. It is also said that the philosophes and their allies gained a total and salutary victory over the partisans of the ancien régime. In fact, recent scholarship brings out clearly the inner struggle of Voltaire and Diderot to maintain their intellectual integrity while conserving for Man a moral

nature without a philosophical base. For example, several philosophes defended the natural right of Man to commit suicide. But their opponents declared that this pretended right violated the first natural law, which is that of conservation of human beings and not their destruction. Moreover, to exercise that right supposed in Man that free-will which determinists such as Diderot did not allow. Further, if life has no moral value, murder is as justifiable as suicide for men separated from God. For, according to some Deists and many materialists, all actions are morally indifferent. Man was seen by many as dominated by his own personal interests and by the search for pleasure. Consequently, our neighbour is appreciated, according to this line of thought, solely for the advantages that we can gain over him. (1) It is not difficult to connect the twentieth-century Existentialist school with the Marquis de Sade, whose thought, as exemplified in his literary works, counsels the pursuit of amoral and destructive conduct, as the eighteenth century comes to an end with the French Revolution of 1789 and its consequences. Nonetheless, we must see the positive contribution provided by the major thinkers of the French Enlightenment towards the resolution of human problems. This involved discussion of reason, nature, optimism, pessimism, materialism, determinism, deism, empiricism, pre-romanticism and sensibility. The dissemination of these ideas by the philosophes was through the medium of literature, which must include the Encyclopédie, making use of every genre, from the widely-read philosophical tales of Voltaire to the letter-novel by Montesquieu and Rousseau and the libertine novel and the dialogue by Diderot. The link that connects the thought of the Enlightenment on all these topics is the priority given to personal freedom as a universal feature of the human condition.

In this connection, the themes of liberty, equality, justice, sociability and moderation are strongly present in the works of Montesquieu. In his Persian Letters of 1721, the Persian

visitor to France Usbek writes to his friend Rhédi: "If men did not form (societies), if they left each other and fled from each other, it would be necessary to ask the reason for it and seek out why they remained separate. But they are all born linked one to the other; a son is born close to his father and remains there; there is Society and the cause of Society."(2) For Montesquieu, society is not opposed to the state of nature, but derives from nature: the instinct of sociability is for him as strong as thirst, hunger or the sexual instinct. Maintaining great detachment and avoiding as much as possible any one favoured regime, ranging from despotism, monarchy, aristocracy, to democracy, in his great work The Spirit of the Laws of 1748, he measures in his thought the observable political structures used in the past and in his own time. His point of view has been determined in large part by concern for the individual. He offers a list of human rights in his laws of nature and realistically faces the ambiguities and ambivalences involved in any effort to define anything as complex as human nature and behaviour. Montesquieu can point, on a comparative basis, to the advantages and weaknesses of each form of government, while explaining its success or failure in terms of human motivation. The main constraints on the individual pursuing needs, happiness and knowledge are the laws of the state. Man is conceived as malleable, susceptible to formation, either by climate, that is geographical locality, or by government. But over and beyond this, Montesquieu insists that individuals are free and equal by nature: "since all men are born free, it must be said that slavery is against nature."(3)

As Montesquieu believed in natural law resting on a sense of justice (which pre-dates any revelation), he condemned any particular law that was contrary to reason. Religion is viewed only in its social and political context. His ethic, which bypasses in effect the Christian ethic, is based on social utility. For him, the ideal form of government outside practical

considerations is an anarchical one in which every member of society needs to be virtuous, that is to say, places the common good before his own interest. In such a society, as illustrated in the allegorical story of the Troglodytes, there would not be any need to enact laws.

The ethic of Voltaire is also wholly pragmatic and utilitarian and foreshadows that of John Stuart Mill. Like Montesquieu, he was a deist who believed that God had created the world, but he refused to conclude from that premise that God was good and just. He held that it was as absurd to state that God was just or unjust as to say that he was square or blue. Voltaire believed that mankind should concentrate on his terrestrial life for its own sake and refuse to become preoccupied with some unknown future life or with base, inferior actions related to death and destruction. Death and war are the greatest of evils. Contemporary rulers he considered enlightened if they promoted peace and the arts and sciences; they are blamed, naturally enough, if they favour war and destruction. This becomes evident in Voltaire's Correspondence and places him in confrontation with Frederick II of Prussia and to a lesser extent with Catherine II of Russia.(4) The movement from admiration of the enlightened despot to criticism can be traced through the philosophical tales from Zadiq in 1747 to Candide in 1759. During the period 1760-1776, Voltaire emphasises as the chief essential characteristic of the philosopher despot the willingness to fight for enlightened ideas. By this standard, Catherine is considered the foremost of rulers, fighting against ignorance and superstition in legislating to give new impetus to her people.

Voltaire can find justification for freedom from oppressive, arbitrary government once men have acquired knowledge of their rights through the advance of civilization. Mankind's claim to freedom is contingent upon an intellectual awakening. Sophisticated individuals recognise that they have a right to

liberty and property that has been taken from them by a right of conquest. To have the claim of individual rights recognised by others, all must abide by a rule of forbearance based on the instinct of benevolence, as expressed in the Treatise on Tolerance of 1763. The material rights of each individual include freedom of one's person and property from lawless arrest or confiscation, freedom of expression, right to trial by jury according to the process of law and freedom of worship. Authority for Voltaire resides in the will and opinion of the highly educated, as portrayed in the description of the ideal philosophe Zadig in 1747. In time, these individuals spread their belief in human rights to an entire nation. A belief in progress shared by the philosophes finds expression in Voltaire through emphasis on freedom of the people, the genius of the ruler, expenditure on the arts and sciences, the common good and the popularization of the philosophic spirit of the Enlightenment. Individuals who have freed themselves from fanaticism may turn themselves usefully to the inspiring pursuit of liberty and property and observe the need for compassion and forbearance. In his own time, Voltaire saw Europe divided into two camps, the forces of the philosophical spirit against the upholders of superstition. The ideal form of government thus equates life, liberty and property and makes these three principles all-important in contrast to the mere survival of the individual.

Rousseau was interested in the safeguarding of shared rights, but also in his own uniqueness and that of each individual. In his Confessions of 1770, he seems to intend to communicate with his reader through experiences everyone has shared. But he makes it clear that the subject-matter is Rousseau's own uniqueness, that any resemblance between his life and the reader's exists only at a superficial level. His memoirs deal with an interior world of feeling that only he can have known and which no one before him had tried to reveal. As the work is one of self-exculpation, his

claim is that those of his actions objectively blameworthy were the result of his innocence, the social pressures upon him and causes beyond his comprehension. As he writes the Confessions, he imagines a conspiracy against him that he finds himself unable to comprehend. He sees a contrast between his purity of intention and the blame that pursues him. He has a conception of citizenship so uncompromising in defence of individual right that he renounces his own citizenship and is rejected by the governments of France and Geneva. Human nature represents uniqueness for Rousseau, opposed to the socialised human beings that persecute that uniqueness. His solution, in the Reveries of a solitary walker, published posthumously, is to assume no other reader than himself. He reduces his role to that of an observer, the botanist who describes a plant that is himself.(5)

The reader that is also himself must judge the importance of the facts, of which the most important are the succession of impressions and ideas which constitute his being. Art for Rousseau is no longer the recognition of resemblances between author and reader, it is rather the emphasis of differences, which can be eliminated only when author and reader are one and the same. In his memoirs, Rousseau moves inside the self, defines it in terms of private values different from those of others. Through art, Rousseau resists society and its institutions and the very laws of necessity. In his great novel The New Eloïse of 1761, he makes his characters representative of the themes that obsess him: the natural sentiments of his hero and heroine, Julie and Saint-Preux, the altruism of Julie, the social intimidation by her father, the Baron d'Etange, the belief in reason evinced by Wolmar, Julie's admired husband, and the theme of necessity that affects each stage of the plot. Rousseau's enemy is society, which destroys uniqueness. It is also necessity, which threatens the liberty of the self. He therefore turns at times to advocacy of strong social institutions to protect the liberty of the self. But in the end,

Rousseau comes to believe in his own personal vision above all, which expresses his uniqueness in spite of all the pressures upon him. It is this element that allows him to support the concept of the social contract, a renunciation of self in areas that involve the good of the community. Each individual exercises his will, enters into the agreement voluntarily and unanimously, which means that the contract is authentic and legitimate in terms of the individual. The advantages of the contract are consistent with the desire for happiness and this ideally replaces the desire for more and more personal possessions obtained by the force of the strongest. For it is private property that for Rousseau is the demonstration of one personal will exercising a despotic impact on another. This leads Rousseau to a call for revolution in the name of the liberty of the individual and of the more perfect social institutions that may be formed. Rousseau's concept of freedom is to provide a collective shelter against the strongest while maintaining the privacy of each separate will. This is neither liberalism nor totalitarianism in the modern sense. It is not liberalism because the nation is seen as an essential support of the individual, who can find true freedom only through the defence the state offers each citizen against other individuals. Nor is it totalitarianism because the self allows no levelling, denies any concept that would destroy the individuality that every person possesses.

Diderot's readiness to change his mind is a striking characteristic. As he said in the Discussion with d'Alembert of 1769, "Our true feeling is not that from which we have never changed, but the one to which we have most frequently returned." (6) Thus, we find a relativism in his thought, a refusal of absolute principles and a belief in hypothesis rather than certainty. The changeability of human emotions is a theme to which Diderot constantly returns. In his posthumously published experimental novel Jacques the fatalist, he interjects

the following remark in his role as narrator: "the first promise made by two creatures of flesh and blood was at the foot of a rock crumbling into dust; they swore to their fidelity beneath a sky that is constantly changing; everything was changing within them and around them, and they believed their hearts freed from vicissitudes. O children! always children!"(7)

His position involves a perpetual resistance to authority and permanence and gives attention to new ideas and hypotheses. Diderot sees each individual nervous system as bringing order out of the environment, placing his own interpretation on the universe. In this way, each diversified member of mankind makes his private contribution to what the species will become and Diderot is able to reconcile the laws of necessity, the atheistic materialism that he believes to be intellectually true, with individual morality and sentiment.

In the Discussion between a father and his children of 1771, Diderot submits the theory of natural right, or right as seen from the viewpoint of the community, to a severe test of acceptability. The dialogue is organized in the form of a conversation between Diderot, various family members and other characters. The first moral problem is that a parish priest's money is to go to his poor and deserving heirs, but then a will is found which leaves it all to a rich man. The question is whether the executor of the will should suppress it, help the heirs to contest it, or simply allow the rich man to benefit in terms of the law. A second moral problem is that of a medical doctor who has the option of helping a sick criminal, an enemy of the state, or refusing him the medical attention needed to keep him alive. Diderot, arguing in favour of natural equity, would suppress the will and let the criminal die. Diderot's father fears such logic and the anarchy that would ensue. Diderot is attracted by the idea of the sage, that is himself, taking extreme measures to replace laws and institutions by justice and

reason, but draws back from allowing the individual to break society's laws in favour of a higher purpose.

In Rameau's Nephew, published posthumously, Diderot returns to the principle of liberty in a society dominated by cynicism and he returns also to the claims of genius. In the dialogue between Moi and Lui, in which Diderot expresses the duality of his nature through the two protagonists, Lui finds that the genius, with his expression of truth, upsets the status quo of society. The Nephew, Lui, has the function of a "grain of yeast that ferments and gives back to everyone a portion of his natural individuality ... he brings out the truth ... and it is then that the man of common-sense listens..."(8)

Lui finally accepts Moi's point of view that existence must be accepted as it is, including genius, nature, the pursuit of truth in the name of the value of the human species. However, the dialogue makes clear that genius exists in evil as much as in virtue and it does not necessarily follow that individuals will reach agreement on the good of the community or the future of the species. Toleration is the only value with which all could identify.

Just as Montesquieu uses his two Persian visitors to question French institutions, Diderot writes his Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage to Tahiti of 1772 to question the prejudices, customs and laws to which eighteenth-century France has become the depository. France should not follow Tahitian manners and laws because, in the final resort, Paris is not Tahiti, but laws should match human nature and environment more closely. Diderot knows it is an impossibility to escape from the oppressive customs imposed by history, but Tahiti offers a vision of liberty permitting the reader of Diderot's work to see France with a greater degree of lucidity. Diderot also espouses the philosophical ideal of cosmopolitanism.

Diderot is seen to hesitate between a social ethic based on bienfaisance, in which one must judge a moral act by its social effect, that is without reference to any Christian definition of right or wrong and without listening to any inner voice of conscience, which is at the root of Rousseau's deistic faith, and alternatively a subjective appreciation of moral values to be found in individual man. He preached his social ethic in his published work, in the Encyclopédie and in his plays, but realised that individuals may fail to respond to environmental conditioning and education. In contradiction to Helvétius, he believed that heredity, or if you will the genetic make-up of a man, could be more significant than his social adaptability and could lead to incorrigibly anti-social behaviour.

All these thinkers, with their eyes fixed on ensuring happiness in this world, whether they were deists or atheists, were confronted by the same basic moral problem which had to be solved in the interest of society.

There is, however, throughout the age of the Enlightenment, a contrary destructive current at variance with the ideas of the philosophes so far mentioned, which is primarily concerned with man as an individual at odds with society. We find, for instance, that Gil Blas, in Lesage's novel of 1715-35, moves on from place to place, working out his destiny by struggling against the social forces with which he is confronted. Likewise, Marivaux's Jacob in The newly-rich Peasant of 1735, foreshadows the determination and lack of moral fibre to be found in some of the heroes of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century novel. Beaumarchais' Figaro, of lowly extraction, seeks freedom in all its forms and is determined to get on in his world without any moral scruples.

L.G. Crocker sees the major epistolary novel Dangerous Liaisons of 1782, arguably the greatest example of the last stage of

cerebral libertine behaviour, as "part of an exploration of human nature and potentialities... and of the whole problem of evil, human and cosmic, that had accumulated for more than a century. Laclos's characters, Valmont and Madame de Merteuil, represent a culmination (Sade is the other) of philosophical theory and moralistic practice. Whatever else Laclos's protagonists may be, they could not have existed without this context of moral debate and theorizing: though they far surpass the role of spokesmen for a philosophical view of life, they are such spokesmen." (9)

As Crocker noted, eighteenth-century writers explored and debated the endless variations of the question of evil, which they saw as omnipresent. While part of the discussion revolved around the metaphysical question of the subjectivity or objectivity of evil, other thinkers were more concerned with the way it operated in society and ways of dealing with it. There was general agreement about the nature of evil and, in the moral realm, evil seen as the deliberate mistreatment of others.

In writing about Laclos's novel, many critics stress the same link between sexuality, the intellect and a lust for power over other individuals. C.J. Greshoff, for instance, states that this novel is really about power and that sex is literally disembodied by intellect, since a disincarnated intellect lives, acts and corrupts through the body. Because of this, Greshoff regards the two main protagonists of Dangerous Liaisons, Valmont and Merteuil, as truly satanic forces. He writes: "Pride and lust for power are Satan's. What the hero and heroine seek through power is an extension of the self which is, in fact, a desire for spiritual possession of others." (10)

Brooks points out that the work "is profoundly a novel about system, processes of systematization, man as a creature of system." (11) What is particularly striking about the Valmont-Merteuil couple is that they believe in that system, sacrificing

the emotions to an abstract code, for the human dimension of sexuality is not a value to the systematic nihilist. As Brooks puts it, man is a being 'irreducible to system' and the function of these literary characters, apart from reflecting an element of society, is to be the illustration of this fundamental truth.

After Laclos's novel, the main development is to be found in the works of Sade, since he uses the human need for sexual gratification to wound and destroy physically, to manipulate others and even to deprive them of human status. Sade supplies a systematic political justification for the worst kind of national and international destructiveness our contemporary world can imagine.

Sade, an atheist like Diderot, makes matter the source of all creation. Nature without God is understood by him as operating according to definite laws. Passion may play a positive role in human activity, but human nature can also be destructive. Sade exalts the destructive passions and claims there is no crime in following their dictates. In a universe from which God is removed, there is a sense, in Sade's work, of the terrible impact of aggressive forces within man and of cataclysmic changes in nature which threaten human existence. This is resolutely modern, as recent critics have observed.

In explaining his conception of Nature, Sade contrasts weakness and aggressiveness, which make of human beings either victims or victors. For Sade, what hypocrites call evil deeds are in fact the result of following the voice of Nature. His heroes and heroines exemplify an amoral position in which enjoyment comes from injuring others because the crushing of the weak demonstrates the superiority of the strong. Evil, or what is called evil by the moralist, is seen to be a part of the organization of this world, in which physical nature and human nature are conceived to be neutral and notions of good or evil

out of place. The tradition of the libertine novel throughout the eighteenth century, with its protagonists observing a code involving control of their victims, is not far from the Sadean theme of joy through self-indulgence.

As an essential part of an uncontrolled universe in which instincts are equally set free, primacy is always given to the individual. Sade stresses the theme of the unique self, following Rousseau, and goes on to argue very differently from this basis an intense rivalry between individuals who are so different in their physical make-up that they cannot be expected to observe any system of laws designed to define what is to be called virtue. Individuals, because of their very uniqueness, must have priority, there must be no limiting of the self for the common good. Thus, Sade's characters reject the unifying bonds of virtue, love and friendship, make the ego supreme at the level of sensation and believe only in the free exercise of the senses, in egoism and in self-interest.

Sade quotes Montesquieu in his novel Aline and Valcour of 1795. "Men, said Montesquieu, in the state of nature, could give only the impression of weakness fleeing before the strength of the oppressors, without a fight and without resistance from the victims..."(12) This is the reaction of the oppressed in Sade's novels and short stories. He accepts the principle of the innate fearfulness of mankind and regrets Montesquieu's failure to see the corollary, that the will to destroy and dominate is an even more basic natural passion, declares the benevolent despot Zamé in Aline and Valcour. So long as a condition of relative anarchy is maintained, there can be freedom, for all individuals, free of the dictates of conscience, establish their rights naturally. Sade is therefore opposed to laws of the state, he wants anarchy, the law of the strongest, as Hobbes had already formulated, and sees the idea of law as the true oppressor. His conception of

anarchy is completely at variance with that of Montesquieu, who postulated law and order.

Nature, by making some people stronger, gives them the right to attack the weak: the Sadean utopias are dedicated to the whim of a noble despot. Despotism reduces existence to the laws of necessity and human beings to the condition of objects, but for Sade, those who exploit the weak and virtuous are living fully and experiencing with their victims the pleasures and pains of real existence. In the utopia of Tamoé, whose structure is described by the despot Zamé in Aline and Valcour, individuals are indoctrinated from childhood in altruistic behaviour. If they become criminal in their behaviour, the despot believes that no law can contain them and, having resisted indoctrination, they are placed above morality or law. This leaves the rest of the population available to be constrained by religion and by intellectual deprivation and economic exploitation. The despotic state may become a powerful nation capable of competing militarily and commercially with moderate states constituted by law. The despot may make the people participate in public works, agricultural and industrial enterprises, while keeping them in political servitude. Sade created in his utopias a structure that anticipated modern dictatorships.

How far have problems changed, if at all, in the two centuries since the Enlightenment and what contribution has been made by French thinkers? Peregrine Worsthorne, writing an editorial of 10th June 1990 in the London Sunday Telegraph, commented on "the intellectual and moral corruption of a whole generation in the 1960's." His remark was directed, of course, to a whole generation in Europe rather than to France in particular. For those of us pursuing University studies in Europe in the early 1960's and proceeding to teach later in the decade, it did not appear at the time that the ideas in circulation were essentially corrupt, or at least there was a balance as always between

conflicting viewpoints, what we were taught to regard as a classical balance.

Those of us who chose to study the development of the Novel in France during its formative period in the eighteenth century were faced with a multitude of conflicting ideas and techniques and structures and view of the reality of that world, soon to be replaced by another world-view after 1789. Those observing French thought of the twentieth century critically were impressed by the influence of classical balance and restraint co-existing with the constructive and destructive poles of the legacy of the Enlightenment. It has also been said that we are all the descendants of Rousseau in his stress on the uniqueness of the individual.

The nineteenth century produces a determinist philosophy, coupled paradoxically with a bourgeois Christian family ethic under Louis-Philippe, as under Victoria. There were of course signs of an impending change by the end of that century, as seen in strong challenges to conventional morality and as brought out by members of the surrealist movement. A better understanding of the human psychology through the probing of the complexity of the unconscious mind led to the denouncing of contemporary hypocrisy and false moral values. The advent of the First World War suddenly broke up the conventional bourgeois pattern and standard practices. However, it was the Second World War that precipitated the moral crisis, which explains the birth and success of Existentialism, in particular the works of Camus and Sartre. This new ethic came close to the ethic of the late eighteenth century.

Camus had a profound influence on the post Second World War generation. He represented a humanist empiricism, declared that he did not believe enough in reason to believe in any system and

insisted that he was not a philosopher and was able to express only what he had personally experienced.

It is revealing that Camus, in his philosophical essay The Myth of Sisyphus of 1942, returns to the basic question discussed by the eighteenth-century philosophes, that of suicide: "There is only one really serious philosophical problem: it is suicide. To judge whether life is worth living or not responds to the fundamental question of philosophy." (13) However, the question has changed from an argument about the natural right to commit suicide to a different question about whether it is logical to commit suicide because life is pointless, hopeless, meaningless. Science is unable to explain an ultimate purpose, death is inevitable. Suicide is an escape and so is the hope in an after-life. Camus dismisses the 'leap of faith' and he also rejects suicide as the response to the question raised at the beginning of the essay. (14) He concludes with a philosophical position that refuses an escape, but that sets Man in revolt against the absurdity of human existence. In this statement, Camus speaks for his generation! The absurd will remain at the forefront of his view of Man's situation until the final absurdity of the burst tyre and the car-accident that will kill him purposelessly in 1960 at the age of only forty-seven.

Camus defines the absurd as the situation of Man condemned constantly to repeat the same action, as exemplified in the Greek myth of Sisyphus. The absurd is also an illusory hope in the future, when it is an edifice constructed on death. Camus' philosophical solution is the acceptance that we are all condemned to death, making the absurd more apparent, the confrontation between Man and the world in which he lives. Paradoxically, Camus calls this acceptance a revolt. Camus' practical solution for living, recommended to the individual who accepts this lucid revolt, set out in the second part of the

philosophical essay, is total liberty, freedom from convention, and also living passionately, experiencing life to the full.

The expression of Camus' philosophical attitude in the form of the novel is found in The Outsider of 1942. The novelist is no longer a teller of tales, but a presenter of philosophical attitudes, engaged in society, using a form that seeks to influence a wider public through literature.

The outsider, Meursault, is a stranger to himself, he regards himself as an object and refuses to play a role in society, in the wake of the latter Rousseau. There is of course an essential difference in terms of mental attitude. Meursault is indolent, lethargic, indifferent to human emotions. The novel depicts his slow awakening to a lucid awareness of a sense of life's absurdity. His killing of an Arab has no specific motive: the sun is beating down on his head, he is dazed, the sun is in his eyes and on the Arab's dagger. When he is tried for murder, the judge and jury apply moral judgments that are imposed on meaningless, inevitable events. The psychological change in Meursault comes after his condemnation to death. He is representative of society, since for Camus at that stage of his thought, we are all outsiders. With the certainty of approaching execution, he becomes sure of his life and the approach of his death, in contrast with other people who do not know how much of life remains to them.

Camus had written, in a preliminary note to The Myth of Sisyphus, "the absurd is considered in this essay as a point of departure. In this sense, it can be said that there is a provisional aspect to it: it is not possible to prejudge the position to which it leads."(15)

During the Second World War, Camus fought with the French Resistance. Why should he have risked his life, when life was

all that held value for him, when all is pointless and when there is no scale of values, as exemplified by his character Meursault in The Outsider? Camus declared that he wanted to love truth and justice as well as his country. It was this position of new humanism that he explained in the novel The Plague of 1947, which constitutes a development and change in Camus' thought. This symbolic novel depicts life's absurdity and personal happiness is still the main aim, but there is also the claim of justice, other men must be made happy as well as ourselves. As the character Rambert declares, "it can be shameful to be happy alone." (16) There is also a sense of human solidarity and an optimism expressed by the medical doctor Rieux in the conclusion: "there exists in Man more to admire than to despise." (17)

Man in Revolt of 1951 follows nine years after the Myth of Sisyphus and is the culminating point of Camus' thought as he had time to express it. In his Introduction, he sees the work as an attempt to understand his own time. He writes: "a period which, in fifty years, uproots, enslaves or kills seventy million human beings should...be judged." (18) Camus argues that the rejection of suicide in The Myth of Sisyphus also implied a rejection of killing. The state of revolt, a lucid awareness of the absurdity of life and victory of the intelligence over the human condition, gives a value to our actions, which is an existentialist position. But while Camus had argued previously that there is no scale of values, implying a continuity with the dialectic of the absurd, here he presents the view that being in revolt is itself a statement of absolute values.

A brief historical survey, including Rousseau, Sade, the men of the Revolution of 1789 and their nihilist successors, leads Camus in this work to a choice of classical order, what he calls the philosophy of light at midday in contrast to that of darkness at midnight, the choice of gradual political reform and not violent revolution. An attack is made on the marxist belief in history.

The break on Camus' part was not only with the politics of marxism, but also with the progressive tendencies of the Sartrean school. The publication of this essay constituted a leave-taking with the intellectuals of the extreme left in Paris, those that Simone de Beauvoir, Sartre's companion, was to call the Mandarins in her novel of the period, those who had inspired French thought for the previous ten years and within whose ranks Camus had seemed the clearest theorist. At Camus' death, Sartre wrote that Camus reaffirmed, in our time, the importance of morality. Certainly, for Camus, humanism, the rights and aspirations of the individual, was both a way of thought and a way of life and, while he believed that the world had no meaning, he believed passionately in Man. It was thus left to Man to create his own moral values. Camus avoided ultimate despair through a qualified belief in the future of mankind and may be seen as a meliorist in the tradition of Voltaire.

Critics have seen a philosophy of despair in Sartre's thought. He writes Existentialism is a humanism of 1962 as a defence. He states "we understand by existentialism a doctrine that makes life possible and which further declares that all truth and every action imply a human situation and subjectivity." (19)

Sartre resolutely denied the existence of God, whom he sees as invented in the image of Man. The first principles of existentialism are that Man is nothing more than what he makes of himself and that Man is totally responsible for his existence and for that of all other men. In the totality of our choice, we choose Man as we believe he ought to be. In contrast with the liberty achieved by Camus in the recognition of the absurd and revolt against it, for Sartre there is the liberty to make a series of choices that create one's essence, but it is then too late to make an alternative choice. In his literature, Sartre gives frequent examples of the problem caused by this concept, such as in his short story The Wall, where the principal

character inadvertently finds himself a traitor to his cause during the Spanish Civil War, as a result of an unfortunate choice. Recognition of the existentialist view of the human condition leads the character Roquentin in the novel Nausea of 1938 to a sensation of physical nausea. Anguish, while seen by Sartre as a motive for action, in fact expresses the emotional strain of total responsibility placed on the individual for every action he takes. Sartre sought to deny the pessimism of his philosophy, a systematic concept in the tradition of cartesianism and using the same principle of systematic doubt as a matter of proof, but without God, who had played a role at the centre of Descartes' philosophy. It seems hard to refute the essential pessimism of Sartrian statements that all existence is born fortuitously, continues fortuitously and dies fortuitously. The contrast is with the optimism of Camus' Sisyphus, despite his atheism, who declares that "this universe from then on without a master appears to him neither sterile nor futile." (20) The conclusion of Sisyphus is even more illuminating, for "we must imagine Sisyphus as happy." (21)

Sartre and Camus may be seen as the towering figures of the modern period, whether their philosophical starting-point is accepted or not, in their thought and in their influence through literature on the post Second World War generation. They are contributors to the anguish, the self-questioning and the focus on the individual experienced in our time. The question of the point of departure of their thought has central importance, for whether one holds strong religious views or not, in the present climate of opinion, it remains a force within society and needs to be addressed in the interest of morality.

Another important figure, who has recently left the world-stage, is Samuel Beckett who, although Irish, wrote in French after 1945. He made Paris his spiritual as well as his physical home and shared the intellectual and metaphysical preoccupations of

his contemporaries, which he brilliantly translated in dramatic terms. He pointed out the absurdity of Man in the universe waiting for a Godot that never comes, and stressed his singular alienation. As Vladimir queries, in Beckett's play Waiting for Godot of 1953, "Was I sleeping while the others suffered? Am I sleeping at this moment? To-morrow, when I think that I am awake, what shall I say about to-day? That with my friend Estragon, at this place, until nightfall, I waited for Godot?"(22) Beckett is not without sympathy for the abject and distressing condition of Man, but in his play he puts on stage characters that are rejects of society, nevertheless finding in hope a *raison d'être* and expressing in their own way the problem of existence. It is perhaps interesting to note the information provided by the theatre critic Harold Hobson that whenever he thought of Estragon and Vladimir in Waiting for Godot, he thought of them as tramps in broken bowler hats and torn trousers, though it was not as tramps that Beckett conceived them. In Paris, they approximated more closely to circus clowns, which was what Beckett wished.(23) As a further development in Beckett's theatre, End-Game of 1957 brings to the stage the dying, the exhausted, the bitter, preparing themselves for death. This represents an ending of the world without the final intervention of God. Man is brought to his end, exchanging desperate and sarcastic remarks amid a gloomy décor of twilight. This is an expression of the ultimate pessimism in regard to the human condition.

These major figures of French literary expression have a certain unity in general direction, eighteenth-century thinkers demonstrating total faith in human reason and twentieth-century writers reflecting the consequences of a world without God. There are, of course, many writers to-day who are expressing widely different standpoints and hold very diverse philosophies, but those I have singled out are still studied and discussed in French intellectual circles and throughout the world. They form

a significant part of our cosmopolitan heritage. They need to be studied more fully and indeed subjected to an ever-increasing critical analysis. The function of a University Department of French, as I see it, in addition to the imparting of an adequate command of both spoken and written French, is to familiarise the students with the thought of some of the most important and relevant writers of the past, as of our own time, whose intellectual contribution is not in doubt, yet requires elucidation and evaluation.

In a Department of French, it is always necessary to stress the philosophical and intellectual content of their leading writers. As regards the particular situation of a Department of French studies in South Africa, there is a primary need for the teaching of the language. It must be emphasised that there are well over forty-two million French speakers in Africa and that French is, in fact, the most commonly used European language on the continent. South Africa is a country at present largely cut off from the French-speaking countries of the continent, but before long we may expect that contacts with French-speaking Africa will increase and there will be a need for people with ability to communicate in the language. The study of French-speaking African writers must also form part of the programme of our Department, so that our students gain a background in French African culture, which is important for their broad general education. Again, it must be remembered that twenty per cent of white South Africans are descended from Huguenot stock and French language and culture should have an important place in South African life and thought. I took up my post as Professor of French in 1988, the tercentenary of the arrival of the Huguenots in this country. It seemed an appropriate time to remind colleagues and students that South Africa has a major link with the language and culture of France.

NOTES

1. See L.G. Crocker, An Age of Crisis: Man and world in eighteenth-century French thought (The John Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1959)
2. "Si les hommes n'en formaient point, s'ils se quittaient et se fuyaient les uns les autres, il faudrait en demander la raison et chercher pourquoi ils se tenaient séparés. Mais ils naissent tous liés les uns aux autres; un fils est né auprès de son père, et il s'y tient; voilà la Société et la cause de la Société" (Letter XCIV, Lettres persanes, ed. Vernière, Classiques Garnier, Paris, 1975, pp.193-4)
My own translation from the French throughout.
3. "comme tous les hommes naissent égaux, il faut dire que l'esclavage est contre la nature" (De l'Esprit des Lois, ed. Caillois, Oeuvres complètes, Pléiade, Gallimard, 1951, p.496)
4. See C. Mervaud, Voltaire et Frédéric II: une dramaturgie des Lumières, 1736-1778, SVEC, 234 (1985)
5. Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire, ed. Rodmer, (Classiques Garnier, Paris, 1960, Lettre II, p.15)
6. "Notre véritable sentiment n'est pas celui dans lequel nous n'avons jamais vacillé, mais celui auquel nous sommes le plus habituellement revenus" (Oeuvres philosophiques, ed. Vernière, Classiques Garnier, Paris, 1964, p.283)
7. "le premier serment que se firent deux êtres de chair, ce fut au pied d'un rocher qui tombait en poussière; ils attestèrent de leur constance un ciel qui n'est pas un instant le même; tout passait en eux et autour d'eux, et ils croyaient leurs coeurs

affranchis de vicissitudes. O enfants! toujours enfants!"

(Oeuvres complètes, ed. Lewinter, Paris, 1971, XII, pp.136-7)

8. "un grain de levain qui fermente et qui restitue à chacun une portion de son individualité naturelle... il fait sortir la vérité... c'est alors que l'homme de bon sens écoute... (Oeuvres complètes, ed. Lewinter, X, p.301)

9. "The status of evil in Les Liaisons dangereuses" in L.R. Free (ed.), Critical Approaches to Les Liaisons dangereuses (Madrid, Turanzas, 1978, p.77); see also pp. 66,70

10. "The moral structure of Les Liaisons dangereuses", French Review, XXXVII, (1974), 396-7

11. The Novel of Worldliness: Crébillon, Marivaux, Laclos, Stendhal (Princeton University Press, 1969, p.177)

12. "Les hommes, dit Montesquieu, considérés dans l'état de pure nature, ne pouvaient donner d'autres idées que celles de la faiblesse fuyant devant la force des oppresseurs, sans combat et sans résistance des opprimés" (Oeuvres complètes, ed. Pauvert, Paris, 1986, Vol.IV, p. 332)

13. "Il n'y a qu'un problème philosophique vraiment sérieux: c'est le suicide. Juger que la vie vaut ou ne vaut pas la peine d'être vécue, c'est répondre à la question fondamentale de la philosophie." (Essais, ed. Quilliot, Pléiade, Gallimard, Paris, 1965, p.99)

14. op.cit. p. 146

15. "l'absurde est considéré dans cet essai comme un point de départ. En ce sens, on peut dire qu'il y a du provisoire dans

mon commentaire: on ne saurait préjuger la position qu'il engage." (op.cit. p.97)

16. "il peut y avoir de la honte à être heureux tout seul."
(Théâtre, Récits, Nouvelles, ed. Quilliot, Pléiade, Gallimard, Paris, 1962, p. 1389)

17. "il y a dans les hommes plus de choses à admirer que de choses à mépriser" (op.cit. p. 1473)

18. "une époque qui, en cinquante ans, déracine, asservit ou tue soixante-dix millions d'êtres humains doit... être jugée."
(Essais, p. 413)

19. "nous entendons par existentialisme une doctrine qui rend la vie humaine possible et qui, par ailleurs, déclare que toute vérité et toute action impliquent un milieu et une subjectivité humaine" (L'Existentialisme est un humanisme, Nagel, Geneva, 1962, p.12)

20. "Cet univers désormais sans maître ne lui paraît ni stérile ni futile" (op.cit. p.198)

21. "Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux." (op.cit. p.198)

22. "Est-ce que j'ai dormi, pendant que les autres souffraient? Est-ce que je dors en ce moment? Demain, quand je croirai me réveiller, que dirai-je de cette journée? Qu'avec Estragon mon ami, à cet endroit, jusqu'à la tombée de la nuit, j'ai attendu Godot?" (En Attendant Godot, ed. Duckworth, Harrap, London, 1966, Act II, p.84)

23. op.cit., Forward by Harold Hobson, pp.VII, VIII