CHAPTER FOUR

Camus’s War

L’Etranger and
Lettres à un ami allemand

*L’Etranger* was published in 1942. I begin the current chapter with this bald fact not because it will come as a surprise to anyone, but because it has not been sufficiently discussed. Camus’s first novel was published in occupied Paris. It is not set in mainland France, and it makes no reference to the war. However, it is hardly controversial to suggest that other French works produced during the Occupation period comment on the war even when they do not – cannot – mention it directly. Marcel Carné’s film *Les Visiteurs du soir* (1942) depicts a medieval city visited by the Devil, and with very little effort the work can be regarded as a study in how a population responds to the temptation of evil. Henri-Georges Clouzot’s great film *Le Corbeau* (1943) depicts a small town thrown into panic by a spate of poison pen letters. Even if the precise political position of the film is a matter of dispute, no one doubts that this situation evokes the letters of denunciation which were terrifyingly commonplace in occupied France. And Jean-Paul Sartre’s play *Les Mouches* (1943), showing the decision to oppose tyranny with violence, so obviously alludes to the wartime situation of occupied France that it is almost embarrassing to mention it. The war is not explicitly present in any of these works; yet it would be perverse to suggest that it did not influence them profoundly.

Camus initially conceived and began work on the novel that would become *L’Etranger* shortly before the outbreak of war. He had abandoned work on another novel, *La Mort heureuse* (which would be published posthumously in 1971), in February 1939. In July 1939, while still living in Algeria, he announced that he would soon begin work on his next
project. In March 1940, he moved to Paris and worked intensely on the new novel. France had been at war with Germany since the previous September, but serious hostilities had not yet broken out. On 1 May 1940, he wrote to his future wife Francine that he had finished a draft of the novel. Within days Germany would begin its major assault on Western Europe, leading to the French surrender on 22 June. Camus continued to work on his manuscript in occupied France and then back in Algeria, writing the date February 1941 at the end of the best surviving manuscript. It is likely that he made further changes, in particular in the light of comments made by André Malraux, before publication in May 1942.\(^2\) \textit{L'Etranger} is not and could not be a novel \textit{about} the war. Yet its gestation, drafting and revision were precisely contemporary with the period leading to the outbreak of war, the phoney war of September 1939 to May 1940, the invasion of France, the French capitulation and the Occupation. Moreover, much of the work on the novel was done while Camus was living in France immediately before and then during the Occupation.

Even though Camus was in Algeria when the war broke out, he felt immediately concerned by it.\(^3\) Despite his pacifism he attempted to enlist but was turned down on health grounds. One of the entries in his \textit{Carnets} begins simply: ‘Septembre 39. La guerre’ (Œuvres complètes \textit{II}, p. 884); and the following pages return repeatedly to the war and its significance. One entry, partly quoted in the Introduction to this book, is particularly interesting: ‘La guerre a éclaté. Où est la guerre? En dehors des nouvelles qu’il faut croire et des affiches qu’il faut lire, où trouver les signes de l’absurde événement?’ (p. 844). Camus immediately recognizes the war as an instantiation of the Absurd. Most importantly, it is both unmissable and invisible; it is everywhere, but no sign of it is to be seen. Camus concludes: ‘Mais pour aujourd’hui on éprouve que le commencement des guerres est semblable aux débuts de la paix: le monde et le cœur les ignorent’ (p. 884). So the war has begun but it has not yet made its mark on the world and the human heart; or, to be more precise, the way it has made its mark is by a curious experience of its absence, a sense that the world does not yet know how to register this enormous event. The witness does not yet know how to see what is massively present to him. This is, I want to suggest, how the war

\(^2\) Further details are given in Camus’s \textit{Œuvres complètes \textit{I}, pp. 1244–45.}\n
\(^3\) For a biographical account of Camus’s actions during the early days of the war, see Todd, \textit{Albert Camus}, pp. 279–99.
impinges on the novel Camus was writing when the war broke out. Even if it is never mentioned, the war is part of *L’Etranger*. My argument is not that it recounts the early stages of the war and the Occupation, but that it *accompanies* them. It registers the massive emotional disaster of the war through the story of a lone killer, set far from the French mainland.

It is surprising that the wartime context of *L’Etranger* has received so little comment. The predominant readings of the novel have been existential or, more recently, postcolonial. For the former, the historical context of the novel’s publication is not relevant because, even if Camus’s ideas may have been formed by his historical circumstances, the novel is concerned with man’s position in the universe. Sartre’s brilliant ‘Explication de *L’Etranger*’ remains the key study here. Writing in 1943, and setting the interpretive agenda for readers of Camus for years to come, Sartre begins by referring to the context of occupied France. The novel, he says, has been heralded as ‘*le meilleur livre depuis l’armistice*’, depicting the sunlit world of Algeria rather than the Parisian ‘aigre printemps sans charbon’ (*Situations, I*, p. 120). Sartre’s point is that, although it was published in occupied France, the novel should precisely not be read in that context because it depicts an alternative world, which is not beset by the restrictions and shortages of the Occupation. The novel, in this account, is not about the war. It is about man’s situation in an absurd, godless universe.

In part in the wake of the posthumous publication of Camus’s unfinished novel *Le Premier Homme* in 1994, much recent criticism has concentrated on colonial and postcolonial issues raised by Camus’s work. Whereas in the Sartrean reading it is the existential situation of man which weighs most heavily on the novel, in this reading it is the colonial context. Conor Cruise O’Brien and Edward Said have both suggested that *L’Etranger* is tacitly informed by the colonial discourses of the time. 4 In their accounts of the novel the fact that Meursault is tried for killing an Arab suggests a faith in the fairness of the French justice system which far from accurately reflects the state of affairs in colonial Algeria: ‘by suggesting that the court is impartial between Arab and Frenchman, [the novel] implicitly denies the colonial reality and sustains the colonial fiction’ (O’Brien, *Camus*, p. 23). In this reading it becomes immensely significant that it is an *Arab*, moreover an unnamed and unspeaking Arab, whom Meursault murders on the beach. Virtually the only thing we know about him is his racial identity. He belongs to a

---

4 See O’Brien, *Camus* and Said, *Culture and Imperialism*. 
group who look at Meursault and his white friends threateningly, ‘à leur
manière’ (L’Étranger, in Œuvres complètes I, p. 169). In this perspective, L’Étranger looks to be more about simmering violence in Algeria in the
years before the War of Independence than it does about man’s position
in a senseless universe. This is not to deny the context of the Second
World War. The most important sustained contribution to the postco-
lonial interpretation of Camus’s career and work, David Carroll’s Albert
Camus the Algerian, links the injustices of French colonial Algeria, as
depicted in L’Étranger, to those of Vichy France (pp. 28, 37). However,
insisting on Camus as a specifically Algerian, or French Algerian,
writer refocuses the interpretation of his work onto its colonial and
postcolonial relevance. Rather than reflecting the timeless existential
condition of man or the contemporary reality of occupied France,
Camus’s L’Étranger can now be seen to register the growing racial
tensions in colonial Algeria and to anticipate the War of Independence
which would break out in 1954.

The postcolonial reading of Camus’s work effectively changes the
framework though which L’Étranger may be read. It also in part deflects
interest from that novel onto some of Camus’s later works, especially
the short stories of L’Exil et le royaume and the posthumous Le Premier
Homme, which were written during the Algerian War of Independence.
For critics, these works also have the advantage that to date they have been
less extensively interpreted than Camus’s first novel; the publication of Le
Premier Homme in 1994 provided an invaluable new source of study which
has been very welcome in the academic world. It is pretty hard, perhaps
impossible, to find anything new to say about L’Étranger itself. In 1992
Adele King wondered, ‘Is it possible to find any incident, sentence, even
detail [in the novel] that has not been subjected to some critical analysis?’
(Introduction to Camus’s ‘L’Étranger’, p. 12). The difficulty of saying
anything new about the novel is reflected in The Cambridge Companion
to Camus, edited by Edward Hughes. Chapters are devoted to Camus’s
life, formative influences, his thought, theatre and journalism, his quarrel
with Sartre, and to his works L’Envers et l’endroit, La Peste, La Chute
and Le Premier Homme. There are numerous references to L’Étranger
throughout, but only one of the 14 chapters is partially devoted to the
novel. It is as if Camus’s most infamous work has now been exhausted,
even for the purposes of a textbook which aims to give a comprehensive
account of his life, work and continuing relevance.

The current chapter makes two core suggestions. The first is that the
wartime context in which L’Étranger was completed and published has
been wrongly neglected. In occupied Paris in 1942, the chief German censor, Gerhard Müller, allowed the publication of the novel because he regarded it as apolitical. The existential reading inaugurated by Sartre confirms this insofar as it puts the novel’s philosophical significance above its political resonance; and the postcolonial reading tends to focus on how the novel anticipates the Algerian War of Independence rather than how it relates to the more immediate context of the Second World War. It is nevertheless important to recall some basic facts, even if it is not obvious how they should be interpreted. The novel revolves around a murder committed by a white Frenchman. We are repeatedly reminded that his victim belongs to a different ethnic group. Indeed, this is nearly the only thing we know about the man whom Meursault kills. While this was being depicted, in 1942, the Nazis were formulating the policy of the ‘Final Solution’, following which white Europeans would set about the systematic murder of victims belonging to different ethnic groups. Moreover, only a couple of months after the publication of *L’Etranger*, white Frenchmen would officiate in the notorious Rafle du Vel’ d’Hiv, thereby participating in a genocidal crime of which Meursault’s murder of an Arab is a mere foreshadow. And we should also not forget that the sunlit Algeria in which *L’Etranger* is set was by no means a world separate from the war. Although it was not occupied by the Germans, it was governed by the collaborationist Vichy regime until its invasion by Allied forces in late 1942. The anti-Semitic legislation which affected the free zone was also valid in Algeria. When Pétain revoked the Crémieux decree in 1940, Algerian Jews were denied the French citizenship to which they had been entitled since 1870. Jews were excluded from administrative positions and many other professions; their property was confiscated and eventually they were excluded from public education; and some were interned in concentration and labour camps. They were probably only saved from a far worse fate by the Allied invasion. Meanwhile, the Arabs had *never* enjoyed the French citizenship granted to the Jews in the nineteenth century, and which would be restored to them in 1943. Killing an anonymous Arab in Algeria is a small-scale enactment of the widespread race crimes being perpetrated and prepared in Europe at the time when *L’Etranger* was published.

My second suggestion is that the way to find fresh insight into Camus’s novel may not, for the time being, be to trawl it internally but to find new texts with which to juxtapose it. This chapter asks the question of what it means to regard *L’Etranger* as a novel about the Second World War. The text itself is utterly silent about this. Yet the war is absolutely
vital to the Camus’s self-(re)invention in the early 1940s. As Carroll puts it, the war made of Camus ‘the living symbol of the young, politically committed writer who had risked his life in the struggle against racism and oppression and challenged existing social norms and values in his editorials, novels, and plays’ (Albert Camus the Algerian, p. 7). And yet there is no reference in his greatest work, L’Étranger, to the war which dominated the defining period in his life. This is not to say, though, that the novel has nothing to say about its context. In order to tease out what this might be, I want to look first of all at a text which explicitly confronts the meaning of war for Camus during the Occupation, namely his Lettres à un ami allemand.

**Lettres à un ami allemand**

Camus’s *Lettres à un ami allemand* consists of four texts which take the form of open letters written during the war by a Frenchman to a former German friend who has now embraced Nazism. Dated July 1943, December 1943 and April 1944 respectively, the first three were published in clandestine newspapers during the Occupation. The fourth, dated July 1944, was published after the Liberation, when Camus was revealed to be the author of the letters. The interest of *Lettres à un ami allemand* lies partly in what the four texts show about Camus’s attitude to the war and in particular to the use of violence, and about the evolution of his ethical thinking in the years between *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942) and *L’Homme révolté* (1951). The philosophy of the Absurd developed in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* leads to an ethical impasse because it can envisage no overarching framework to regulate the lives of all citizens. The later work attempts to think beyond that impasse by the appeal to solidarity and collective revolt summarized in Camus’s revised cogito, ‘Je me révolte, donc nous sommes’ (*L’Homme révolté*, in Œuvres complètes III, p. 79). Revolt establishes a new collectivity. *Lettres à un ami allemand* is an intermediary text in which Camus can be seen to be striving towards the ideas which would be developed in *L’Homme révolté*. As John Foley puts it, the letters ‘[display] a conscious effort, motivated by the experiences of occupation and resistance, to move beyond a discussion of the absurd itself to a discussion of the possibility of ethics’ (Albert Camus, p. 33). The most recent editor of the letters, Maurice Weyembergh, concurs that they show Camus’s thought in a state of transition:
Dans le parcours de Camus, les Lettres marquent à la fois le passage du pacifisme à l’engagement dans la lutte, le passage de l’individualisme extrême à la découverte du destin commun, de l’absurde à l’au-delà de l’absurde, de l’amoralisme du ‘tout est permis’ individuel ou politique à l’affirmation de valeurs morales communes. (‘Note sur le texte’, Camus, Œuvres complètes I, p. 1131)⁵

The implied relationship between the author of the letters and his German addressee is that they were friends before the war, and shared many of the same ideas. Those ideas might approximately be identified with those of the author of Le Mythe de Sisyphe: there is no objective truth or universal values which rule over the chaos of existence; the world has no inherent meaning, purpose or structure; man’s desire for order will always be frustrated. The author’s aim is not to refute these ideas, but to show that they might lead to fundamentally different commitments and actions:

Vous n’avez jamais cru au sens de ce monde et vous en avez tiré l’idée que tout était équivalent et que le bien et le mal se définissaient selon qu’on le voulait. Vous avez supposé qu’en l’absence de toute morale humaine ou divine les seules valeurs étaient celles qui régissaient le monde animal, c’est-à-dire la violence et la ruse. (Lettres, in Œuvres complètes II, p. 26)

Believing that cruelty and injustice are at the foundation of a meaningless world, the German addressee has embraced aggressive German nationalism. The author of the letters concedes that, at the time of their friendship, he thought in much the same way: ‘Et à la vérité, moi qui croyais penser comme vous, je ne voyais guère d’argument à vous opposer, sinon un goût violent de la justice qui, pour finir, me paraissait aussi peu raisonné que la plus soudaine des passions’ (p. 26). This sentence introduces the minimal but crucial difference between the author and the addressee. The Frenchman does not offer an argument against the German’s convictions. Instead, he counters it with his craving for justice, while conceding that there is nothing rational, reasoned, objective or compelling about it. Equally, it is no less rational and compelling than the moral despair to which the German has succumbed. Starting from an acknowledgement of the Absurd, the

⁵ It is important to recall that Camus’s letters were not written as a single text. There is an evolution from one to the next, as Camus shows an increasing confidence in imminent victory. Nevertheless, the attitudes and rhetoric discussed here are consistent across the four letters.
Frenchman develops a form of humanist pan-Europeanism grounded in solidarity, revolt and a refusal to consent to injustice:

Vous le voyez, d’un même principe nous avons tiré des morales différentes. [...] Je continue à croire que ce monde n’a pas de sens supérieur. Mais je sais que quelque chose en lui a du sens et c’est l’homme, parce qu’il est le seul être à exiger d’en avoir. Ce monde a du moins la vérité de l’homme et notre tâche est de lui donner ses raisons contre le destin lui-même. (pp. 26–27)

A key point here is the author’s insistence that, although there is no Meaning (‘sens supérieur’), not everything is equally meaningless. As the Frenchman puts it in the second letter, ‘Si rien n’avait du sens, vous seriez dans le vrai. Mais il y a quelque chose qui garde du sens’ (p. 15). What is at stake, for the Frenchman, is the need to rescue some shards of meaning from the abyss of meaninglessness. In this endeavour, it is of the utmost importance that the war itself is not treated as simply a random event in a senseless sequence of random events. On the contrary, it appears in the letters as both a bearer and a producer of meaning. In the first letter, the author considers the French defeat of 1940. Rather than explaining it in military terms by reference to the superior German forces and tactics, he describes the French as not yet intellectually prepared for victory: ‘C’est pourquoi nous avons commencé par la défaite, préoccupés que nous étions, pendant que vous vous jetiez sur nous, de définir en nos cœurs si le bon droit était pour nous’ (p. 11). Before they could fight effectively, the French had to wrestle with their own beliefs and values. In the second letter, the significance of this period of reflection and self-interrogation is developed further. The war appears not as something imposed from the outside; rather, the Frenchman writes, ‘C’est la guerre [que notre peuple] s’est donnée à lui-même, qu’il n’a pas reçue de gouvernements imbéciles ou lâches, celle où il s’est retrouvé et où il lutte pour une certaine idée qu’il s’est faite de lui-même’ (pp. 18–19). The French are ‘défenseurs de l’esprit’ (p. 19), and for them the war becomes a Hegelian dialectical struggle. The author does not underplay the danger represented by the Germans, and the hardship, despair and death which will be required to defeat them. At the same time, the Germans are strangely irrelevant. What is really at issue in the war appears to be something much bigger: the self-recognition and self-(re)discovery of the spirit as it unfurls in the history of Europe.

The Germans will be defeated militarily because they have already been defeated intellectually, spiritually and ethically. This is the
conclusion which flows from the author’s apparently casual insistence that ‘il y a quelque chose qui garde du sens’ (p. 15). It also underpins the confidence sustained throughout the letters. What might most surprise a reader of L’Etranger in Lettres à un ami allemand is the author’s comfortable, exultant, jubilatory certainty. He knows the truth and he does not doubt his ability to tell it: ‘je vous dois de vous éclairer,’ he tells his misguided addressee (p. 10), and he recognizes that he writes ‘sur le ton de la certitude’ (p. 14). Throughout, his sense of intellectual and ethical superiority is unshakeable. He positions himself as a patient, slightly exasperated teacher who knows better than his stubborn pupil. Misunderstanding is possible, but it is not the inevitable condition of humankind. Moreover, the first person singular who writes to a former friend rapidly becomes a first person plural, as the author speaks in the voice of truth on behalf of all right-minded citizens: ‘Mais, pour finir, c’est nous qui avions raison’ (p. 16). Camus’s use of the first person plural is similar to Sartre’s, as discussed in the previous chapter: it entails arrogating the right to speak on behalf of the collective. And the shift from je to nous also, crucially, anticipates the cogito of Camus’s cycle of revolt, according to which ‘Je me révolte, donc nous sommes’.

In the Lettres à un ami allemand there are, to be sure, traces of the more sceptical attitudes found elsewhere in Camus’s work. In his 1944 article on Brice Parain, ‘Sur une philosophie de l’expression’, Camus wonders ‘si notre langage n’est pas mensonge au moment même où nous croyons dire vrai’, and whether, rather than binding humans together in shared communication, ‘le langage n’exprime pas, pour finir, la solitude définitive de l’homme dans un monde muet’ (Œuvres complètes I, pp. 901–02). This anxiety surfaces for a moment at the beginning of the third letter, when the author concedes that ‘nous ne donnions pas le même sens aux mêmes mots, nous ne parlons plus la même langue’ (Lettres, p. 21). When the same words have different meanings to different people, the author’s command of his medium is put at risk. But here, linguistic anarchy is quickly dismissed. Misunderstanding turns out to be contingent and provisional, as the Frenchman quickly resumes his more confident, pedagogical role. A further problem which may unsettle the author’s intellectual dominance is his similarity to Jean-Baptiste Clamence, the narrator of Camus’s final completed novel La Chute. Clamence’s verbal self-confidence aims to mystify as much as to explain; and La Chute is similar to Lettres à un ami allemand because in neither work do we get to hear the replies of the fictional addressees. Perhaps the author of the letters sounds a bit too much like Clamence for comfort.
However, I do not wish to dwell on these issues. The wartime context of the letters justifies their polemical lack of self-doubt. And in the letters war appears as an event which bears meaning and which positively contributes to the production of further meaning. It is something to be understood and explained. The reflection to which it gives rise reinforces the subject’s self-confidence in its own speaking position. Moreover, the community and its values emerge stronger from the ordeal which it has undergone. Although Camus’s text does not neglect the misery of war, it also hints at its benefits for subjectivity, society and ethics.

L’Etranger

It is hard to believe that the same man wrote both Lettres à un ami allemand and L’Etranger. The narrator of L’Etranger could not be more unlike his counterpart in the letters. From the famous first paragraph, he reveals himself as someone whose command of reality is limited: ‘Aujourd’hui, maman est morte. Ou peut-être hier, je ne sais pas’ (p. 141). Moreover, ‘Cela ne veut rien dire’ (p. 141), whatever ‘cela’ might be: the death of the mother, the words of commiseration on the telegram which announces it, or the text we are just beginning to read.

My suggestion here is that L’Etranger is as much a response to the war as Lettres à un ami allemand. The novel does not describe, analyse or even refer to the war in any way, but that is not to say that it does not register it deeply. In order to argue this further, I need to invoke modern trauma studies. Trauma, as it is now commonly understood, is often traumatic to the damaged subject because it is not fully available to consciousness: it dominates and obsesses precisely insofar as it is forgotten, repressed, excluded from the conscious mind. The less we see it, the more it is there. As discussed in Chapter 2, the problem this poses for the interpretation of cultural products such as literature and film is that we are left looking for traces of what is not explicitly present. The task for the interpreter is to give a plausible account of how something which is not explicit in a text is nevertheless importantly present in it. For the moment, we might retain the point that, even if L’Etranger does not allude to the war and the humiliating French defeat of 1940 in any way, this does not mean that these factors do not determine the text to a fundamental degree.

One issue which impedes the depiction of L’Etranger as a trauma text – and which, I will suggest, the novel in turn problematizes – is
that of belatedness, or what Freud calls Nachträglichkeit. In classical trauma theory derived from Freud and his nineteenth-century medical predecessors, the enigma of trauma resides in the gap between event and symptom. The traumatic event seems, initially at least, to leave the subject physically and emotionally undamaged. It is only later – sometimes much later – that trauma becomes manifest. Chapter 2 referred to the much-quoted passage from Freud’s Moses and Monotheism in which a man walks away from a train crash apparently in good health, but subsequently begins to show signs that he has not escaped unscathed. Trauma is not experienced at the moment of the crash. It comes about only retrospectively, after a period of incubation or triggered by some subsequent event which transforms its significance. The notion of belatedness (Nachträglichkeit) refers to this phenomenon in which the traumatic experience is not experienced as traumatic at the time of its occurrence. It becomes traumatic in the light of what comes after it.

In terms of the representation of the Second World War, the notion of belatedness should suggest that the most traumatized accounts would appear some time after the event, rather than in its immediate aftermath. There is certainly evidence to support this. Some of the best known and most important first-hand accounts of the concentration camps in French did not appear immediately after the war. Works such as Elie Wiesel’s La Nuit, Jorge Semprun’s Le Grand Voyage and Charlotte Delbo’s Aucun de nous ne reviendra demanded an incubation period before their authors were ready to finalize and to release them. Works published in the immediate post-war period exhibit distress but not trauma, insofar as trauma entails the obstruction of narrative and understanding. David Rousset’s L’Univers concentrationnaire and Robert Antelme’s L’Espèce humaine certainly do not overlook the suffering of the camp prisoners, but they are not trauma texts as such because in both the camps and the experience of them make sense to a significant degree. As committed anti-fascists, both Rousset and Antelme fully understand why their enemies treated them so badly. The experience of the camps is awful, but it does not entail a traumatizing subversion of their existing world view and sense of self. The key point is that trauma strikes belatedly, in the light of more recent occurrences and experiences. Initially, the experience of horror appears still to make sense, so it is not perceived as traumatic. It becomes traumatic only later, when the sense which it appeared to make begins to dissipate. Meaning protects against trauma, but the protection it offers may crumble over time.
Henry Rousso’s now canonical account of the phases of the Vichy syndrome supports this suggestion that the war becomes traumatic in French representations only belatedly. After an initial period of what, using psychoanalytical vocabulary, he calls ‘mourning’, Rousso describes France as entering into a period of repression, from 1954 to 1971. This does not mean that the memory of war was simply erased. Rather, the meanings of war – its potential as a source of multifarious, radically opposed meanings – was simplified. Although there were of course numerous dissenting voices, a unified vision prevailed, bringing the French people together through the myth of résistancialisme. This story of a nation united in resistance to the evil invaders kept the more problematic reality of Occupation at arm’s length. The memory and representation of the war became problematic only later, when this unifying discourse began to break down, in part in the wake of the new crisis of May 1968. One trauma provokes the awakening and reinterpretation of another. The initial denial of trauma lays the ground for its subsequent devastating irruption.

All of this is to say that, according to this classic account, L’Etranger should not be a trauma text: it is too close to the initial traumatic event to register an impact which should become effective only later. The jubilatory command of meaning in Lettres à un ami allemand fits the scheme much better. Writing in 1943 and 1944, Camus displays a confidence that history bears meaning even in its darkest moments. And yet, L’Etranger suggests otherwise. Some of its most striking features can now be understood as characterizing the literature of trauma:

- Unsettled chronology. Although the events of L’Etranger unfold in a linear manner, Meursault’s chronological position in relation to the narrative is impossible to pin down. The first word of the novel is ‘Aujourd’hui’, yet the text cannot consistently be explained either as interior monologue or a journal. The second paragraph of the novel uses the future tense (‘Je prendrai l’autobus à 2 heures’) whereas the third uses the past tense (‘J’ai pris l’autobus à 2 heures’) (p. 141). The narrator’s position in time slips from one paragraph to the next. He is in the midst of events, but also floating strangely above them, as if his story is searching to find a proper chronology which is never settled.
- The subject’s detachment from his own emotional life. Meursault’s emotional detachment is such that his story barely seems to be his own. He appears to be unmoved by his mother’s death, he is willing to marry Marie even though he says he does not love her and he kills a man without regret. When asked by Marie if he loves her, he replies ‘qu’il me semblait que non’ (p. 161), and later that ‘je ne pouvais rien savoir sur ce
point’ (p. 165). This sense of detachment reaches its peak at his trial. He
listens with interest, but is surprised when his lawyer uses the first person
to refer to Meursault’s acts: ‘Moi, j’ai pensé que c’était m’écarter encore
de l’affaire, me réduire à zéro et, en un certain sens, se substituer à moi’
(p. 201). It is as if he is a spectator to his own life rather than an agent in
it. His emotions are not available to him.

- Events seem disconnected and lacking in meaning. Meursault attends his
  mother’s funeral, takes a lover and kills a man. The issue at Meursault’s
  trial, as for the reader of the novel, is to establish whether or not there
  is any connection between these separate events. Is there a link between
drinking coffee over your mother’s corpse and failing to show remorse
over a violent crime? The paratactic style of the novel exacerbates the
problem for the reader. Sentences are juxtaposed without the explanatory
conjunctions which would establish the causal connections between them.
As Sartre puts it in ‘Explication de L’Etranger’, ‘on évite toutes les liaisons
causales, qui introduiraient dans le récit un embryon d’explication et
qui mettraient entre les instants un ordre différent de la succession
pure’ (Situations, I, p. 143). Each sentence is an island of meaning
with unspecified, perhaps ungraspable, connections to what precedes or
follows.

- The compulsion to repeat. Meursault’s words are minimal but repetitive.
The novel is constructed around repeated deaths: the mother’s shortly
before it begins, the Arab’s at its centre and Meursault’s (presumably)
shortly after its ending. The novel’s central, impenetrable enigma is the
question of why Meursault continues to fire into the already dead body
of his victim, shooting him five times in total. This is never adequately
explained, as if the repetition of the murder impedes and replaces proper
understanding. Meursault must keep on killing his victim precisely
because his own actions make no sense to him. But such an interpretation
of repetition may betray a critical desire to find meaning where there
is none, as the novel suggests. Most insistently, Meursault repeats his
refusal, unwillingness or inability to speak. Variants of ‘Je n’ai rien dit’
and ‘je n’ai rien répondu’ recur throughout the text; and this absence of
response – the spoken declaration of withheld speech – is associated with
an absence of meaning. ‘Cela ne veut rien dire,’ Meursault tells us in the
first paragraph (p. 141); when asked by Marie if he loves her, he insists
that ‘cela ne voulait rien dire’ (p. 161). What is pressingly repeated here is
the senselessness of repetition itself, as the text both describes and enacts
an encounter with a world without value or meaning.

- The damaged social bond. The novel describes a world without social
cohesion. Human relations are devoid of friendship or love. Meursault
desires Marie but does not seem particularly fond of her; Raymond beats
his lover and Salamano beats his dog; the police are brutal, the judges are
bombastic zealots and the courts are depicted as Kafkaesque travesties. The epitome of the isolated human subject is the ‘femme automate’ who appears to be more of a robot than a human being. Individuals are mere ciphers, each substitutable by others: ‘Le chien de Salamano valait autant que sa femme. La petite femme automatique était aussi coupable que la Parisienne que Masson avait épousée ou que Marie qui avait envie que je l’épouse. Qu’important que Raymond fût mon copain autant que Céleste qui valait mieux que lui? Qu’important que Marie donnât aujourd’hui sa bouche à un nouveau Meursault?’ (p. 212). The final sentence of the novel says that the only way for Meursault to feel less alone is for the spectators at his execution to greet him ‘avec des cris de haine’ (p. 213). The only conceivable emotion which would bind individuals together is hatred.

_The Stranger_ depicts a world which has lost its moral bearings, where communication falters and individual subjects are isolated and detached from the meaning of their own lives, powerless and lacking agency. Even at the crucial moment when Meursault shoots the Arab, he describes the event as something which happens to him rather than an act which he determines: ‘Je ne sentais plus que les cymbales du soleil sur mon front et, indistinctement, le glaive éclatant jailli du couteau toujours en face de moi. […] La gâchette a cédé, j’ai touché le ventre poli de la crosse et c’est là, dans le bruit à la fois sec et assourdissant, que tout a commencé’ (pp. 175–76). The novel both describes and embodies a massive breakdown of sense. It withholds answers, never allowing its reader access to an elusive core of truth. And it points towards a post-traumatic aesthetics and a post-traumatic subjectivity which are indelibly marked by a catastrophic collapse of meaning. Catherine Malabou does not refer to Meursault directly in her description of the post-traumatic subject, but her account of alienation and apathy resonates strikingly with aspects of _The Stranger_:

> Quand un traumatisme survient, c’est toute la potentialité affective qui se voit touchée, la tristesse n’est même plus possible; le patient tombe en deçà de la tristesse, dans un état d’apathie qui n’est plus joyeux ni désespéré. C’est alors à sa propre survie qu’il devient indifférent. A celle des autres aussi. L’indifférence au meurtre ne s’explique pas autrement. (Ontologie de l’accident, p. 31)

It would be as mistaken to explain this post-traumatic collapse solely in relation to the Second World War as it would be to overlook the link altogether. Meursault’s race crime is an enactment in miniature of the crimes being prepared and perpetrated in Europe at the same time. His crime, like those of the European anti-Semites, is possible only because
the moral compass which might have prevented it has been smashed. If, then, it is plausible to read L’Étranger as a traumatized response to war, it is striking how different it is from Lettres à un ami allemand. Despite the death and injustice caused by war, the letters reassure their readers – indeed, they insist – that meaning is intact; the rational subject retains its sovereignty; a certain idea of France and of Europe has not been destroyed; justice and morality are still possible; and the community will emerge strengthened in its values once the enemy has met its certain defeat. The war may be awful, but it is not traumatic in the sense of undermining the foundations of subjectivity, community, ethics and communication. L’Étranger, by contrast, depicts an irrevocably broken world where there would appear to be no prospect of solidarity and little point in resistance. Of course, we are dealing with quite different kinds of text here. As a novel published in occupied France, L’Étranger could not openly deal with the war; and as clandestine journalism aiming to rally and hearten their readers, the letters could not afford the rampant scepticism of Camus’s first novel. But this does not, I suggest, fully explain the differences between the two texts. Camus’s journalistic polemic is a necessary accompaniment to and disavowal of his novel. Neither he nor his compatriots could allow themselves to succumb to the traumatic collapse of meaning instantiated in L’Étranger. If there were to be a future for the subject, for France and for ethics, the persistent doubts of the novel had to be drowned out by the confidence of the letters.

In terms of classical trauma theory, it is important that L’Étranger comes before the Lettres à un ami allemand. The notion of belatedness would predict that the traumatic corrosion of subjectivity and sense should come after a period of incubation. The achievement of Camus’s novel is that it registers the blunt senselessness of history with striking immediacy. Without referring directly to the war, it captures its violent intensity together with the accompanying sense of subjective powerlessness and incommunicability. Rousso’s ‘Vichy syndrome’ describes a period after the war when the most painful aspects of it were forgotten, before they would return to haunt the French people. The implicit and perhaps necessary disavowal of the blunt senselessness of L’Étranger in Camus’s later Lettres à un ami allemand suggests that repression had already begun before the war was over. L’Étranger bears an insight that the letters cannot allow themselves to acknowledge: something has happened which will have enduring consequences on sense, subjectivity and community. Meursault is a post-traumatic being, unaware even of the causes and extent of his own damaged subjectivity.