



## Albert Camus: Resume for Today

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It has been four years now since a car crash outside Paris took the life of Nobel Prize winner Albert Camus, years which have witnessed conscientious reappraisals of this unique personality's thought. Last year saw the publication of the first of a trio of his private journals under the title *Notebooks 1935-1942*; when the other two volumes appear, we will have the complete writings of this young French Algerian and then some final assessments may be possible. If this first volume with its diary-like entries dating from his years at the University of Algiers and including his early writing efforts and war time concern for peace, has done anything for students of his thought, it has directed attention back to his Algerian experience. For those who have become acquainted with Camus through his last

major essay *The Rebel* (1951), these reflections have the special value of emphasizing the importance of Camus' earlier philosophical position. It would seem appropriate at this time to review the youthful thought of Albert Camus and indicate the general tenor of his writing at the time of his tragic death, along with the areas of discussion current among his commentators.

Camus, who has been called—perhaps too simply—a “Pascal without Christ,” rightly ranks with the more controversial of contemporary thinkers. His work, taking the form of both fiction and philosophical essay, utters a pagan message which many observers feel may in time be set beside the great paeans of antiquity. Outside France, Camus is probably best remembered for his novels: *The Stranger*, *The Plague* and *The Fall*. The less known philosophical underpinnings for these novels were developed in his long essays *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*. It is Camus' curious misfortune, however, that his reputation as a “littérateur” has served to obscure his role as philosopher. It was true, especially after his famed quarrel with Sartre, that Camus would not refer to himself as a philosopher. But as his friend Germaine Brée has pointed out, if we can think of a writer whose essential effort was directed toward elucidating his own experience as a “philosopher,” then Camus could have indeed laid claim to the title.<sup>1</sup>

It is only natural when considering a writer of Camus' calibre to look for that conception, that central theme which gives his work its recognizable character. For Camus' commentators here and on the Continent this is not proving a simple task. Today, little unanimity regarding even the relative importance of the several leitmotifs woven throughout the tapestry of his work has been achieved. This much seems clear: there are two broad cycles in Camus' thought. His earliest concern was with a certain theory of the Absurd (l'absurde), elaborated in his writings of the late 1930s and early 1940s; his mature thought centered on a philosophy of moderation and was based upon a theme of rebellion or revolt (la révolte). This latter, in an ever developing form, occupied him from the war years until his death. In all, there is now a Camus library covering twenty-five years, 1935 to 1960. One difficulty in dividing this span into “periods” is that Camus' thought was always well ahead of his most recently published work, and far outdistanced the English translations.

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<sup>1</sup> Germaine Brée, *Camus* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1959), p. 8.

### The Vision of Absurdity

Between 1937 and 1943 Camus published *The Stranger*, two volumes of essays and wrote two theatre pieces in addition to his main absurdist thesis set forth in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. These early essay collections, which fluctuate in style between philosophical foray and biographical short story, were *L'Envers et l'Endroit* and *Noces*. The titles are usually transliterated *Betwixt and Between* and *Nuptials*; the former will soon appear in English translation. Camus' *Caligula* and *The Misunderstanding* date from this period, but can be classified as production of the "theatre of the Absurd" only with reservation: in each case Camus was attempting to portray victims and not heroes of absurdity.

What did the notion of the Absurd entail for Albert Camus? First of all, it must be noted that absurdity was by no means an original theme in his writings. He could freely admit in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that the notion was a commonplace in contemporary philosophy. In fact, he diagnosed the divorce between an automatic assumption of certain values in life and the actual non-conformity of the world to those values as the intellectual malady of the pre-war period. His commentators differ regarding the depth of Camus' involvement with the "cult of absurdity." Although he denied all concern for developing a full philosophy of the Absurd, claiming he was interested solely in the description of the "mal du siècle," it has been widely noted that during these early years he gave himself to the idea with considerable abandon. The more modest view of Camus' posture regarding the Absurd would seem to deny the evident conclusions of *The Myth of Sisyphus*. If he progressed beyond many of the positions established during the years of his absurdist concern, he himself claimed that he always remained faithful "to the exigency which prompted them."<sup>2</sup>

And what was this exigency? The notion of absurdity, as refracted in Camus' writings until the Hitlerian tragedy exposed its naivete, can be described initially as the relationship existing between man's mind, on the one hand, as it reaches out to grasp the meaning of his own and all existence, and the innate unknowableness of the world around him, on the other. It is a unique opposition between man desiring total knowledge and unity in his experience, and the world which does not—indeed, cannot—satisfy humanity's desperate need for clarity.

His English speaking reader has a grammatical difficulty in under-

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<sup>2</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, translated by Justin O'Brien (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), p. iv. Hereafter, M. S.

standing Camus' notion of the Absurd. The word itself has only an adjectival usage in our language; for Camus it had a substantive character yet remained a relationship between two terms. Paradoxically, it is a relationship based on incongruity, non-correspondence and unresolved clash. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus insisted that we retain the intensity of this dichotomy; we are to place the notion itself in neither man's yearning nor in the world. Rather, absurdity demands the presence of both and depends as much on human reason as on the silent hostility of the world.<sup>3</sup> True human living, as Camus' youth on the sunlit beaches of the Mediterranean and in the tenements of Algiers convinced him, consists in keeping this opposition alive: ". . . vivre, c'est faire vivre l'absurde."<sup>4</sup>

### The Roots of Absurdity

A young man's thought is seldom his own. Any enumeration of the fonts for the Absurd in Camus' work would have to include the thought of the older generation of French atheists and the Greek mythology to which this son of the Mediterranean was so devoted. As early as 1926, Andre Malraux had spoken of an absurdity dominating the Western world during this century in *La Tentation de l'Occident*; he had made Garine, hero of his *Les Conquerants*, a man who rejects all association with normal society because of its denial of the one essential reality: the fact of meaninglessness. Although, throughout his life, Camus claimed he was seeking to avoid the pit of nihilism, at the beginning of his career he chorused with Malraux the singular belief that the world will always escape humanity's feeble attempt to subdue it with the weapon of understanding. It is this impossibility, Camus felt in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, that makes all hope futile and all emotion a mere display of immaturity. We find this thought expressed artistically in his novel *The Stranger*. As the story opens, its hero Meursault is telling us: "Mother died today. Or, maybe, yesterday: I can't be sure."<sup>5</sup> It is not difficult to see parallels between Garine and Meursault.

In 1932 Céline had contributed to the absurdist theme with his *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, a bitter denunciation of the senselessness of life. No doubt Camus was familiar too with the work of Montherlant and St.-Exupéry, writers who had attempted to build sets of personal values upon

<sup>3</sup> M. S. p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942) p. 76.

<sup>5</sup> Camus, *The Stranger*, translated by Stuart Gilbert, (New York: Vintage Books, 1959) p. 1.

absurdist foundations. Sartre's *La Nausée*, appearing in 1939 gave us that thinker's view of absurdity. Sartre differed from Camus in the content of the Absurd; for the older writer the Absurd signified "the universal contingency of being which is, but not the basis of that being."<sup>6</sup> For Sartre then, absurdity is a quality in the existing thing, an idea quite apart from the relationship of the thing to the mind of which Camus speaks. Despite the variations on the theme in the work of each of these thinkers, all would agree with Camus in relating the Absurd, in some way, to the apparent irreducibility of the experienced world to satisfactory rational explanation.

Camus' absurdist thought also conforms to the familiar mythical portrayals of man's plight in relation to his world. The life situation of the absurdist is similar to that of Tantalus tormented by cool water and fruit-laden trees which must remain forever just beyond his reach. His is a plight like that of Prometheus who, permanently chained, became eternal food for the vulture. It was the figure of Sisyphus, however, that Camus chose as his main absurdist paradigm. Having blandly ignored the commands of the gods—a trait Camus especially admired—Sisyphus was condemned to roll a huge stone up a steep hill, only to have it slide again and again to the bottom. It is during the regular pause while he watches the rock's slow descent that Sisyphus interests Camus.

In these few moments Sisyphus is supremely conscious of his destiny and therein lies both his tragedy and his victory; if he nourished any hope that he would ever finish his task, the labor would lose its torment. But in Camus' interpretation of the Homeric tale, Sisyphus knows that this will never happen and this lucid recognition *is* his triumph. With such an understanding of his plight, Sisyphus has become his own master. What is more, Camus writes in these early years with the conviction that his absurdist hero is happy, for "the struggle toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart."<sup>7</sup>

### The Emergence of Revolt

But when confronted with Nazi terrorism, Camus could only conclude that his notion of happiness as vigorous struggle against insurmountable odds was not enough for man after all. A re-working of his thought became necessary as Europe plunged into war. If in 1936, the absurd had been "the precise word which, midway between horror and silence, would

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<sup>6</sup> Sartre, *Paru* (December, 1945).

<sup>7</sup> M. S., p. 123.

express the conscious certainty of a death without hope,"<sup>8</sup> it was an idea which by 1941 did not suit Camus' mood, nor that of the free French spirit under the heel of an occupation army. Realizing the effete nature of absurdist thought and its consequences for humanity, Camus made a cryptic notation in his journal on March 15 of that year: "The Absurd and Power—develop (cf. Hitler)."<sup>9</sup> Little comfort it was for victims of war to learn that it was "essential to die unreconciled and not of one's own free will."<sup>10</sup> A younger Camus could write of the incongruity of life and lack of human destiny, of the preposterous wish that is human hope for a brighter tomorrow, but the sensitive part of this man would win out in the face of a deeper human yearning.

Where could he turn for life-values now? Years later, in the Introduction to *The Rebel*, Camus recounted for us the process of his change in emphasis. This Introduction might be called the hinge between the early and later philosophy of Albert Camus, and it is clearly not so much a preface to *The Rebel* as it is a caution about the Absurd. The problem of war was murder, and absurdist thought, Camus decided, was powerless in aiding us to decide, as he knew we must, that murder is illegitimate. Therefore, the Absurd could only have been "a point of departure, a criticism brought to life—the equivalent of systematic doubt."<sup>11</sup>

As does the Cartesian, in his method of doubt, the absurdist, by re-examining his position, finds a new field of investigation. If I proclaim the fact of absurdity, says Camus, and do not doubt the validity of this proclamation, then I am compelled to believe at least in my own protest. This spirit of protest or revolt at the human situation first appeared as a consequent of absurdist thought in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Now, in the midst of war, it reappears in a new guise. Revolt is not merely rebellion in a purely personal epistemology, the refusal to surrender to a notion of intellectuality the individual finds incomprehensible; it need not be limited to an attitude of defiance which brings with it a greater sensation of the value of struggle and effort in life. Rather, the idea of revolt can be projected into the public forum and given a community meaning. The intolerable situation in which we find ourselves is not just intellectual; it is, on a

<sup>8</sup> Camus, *Notes* (Algiers: Charlot, 1937) p. 35.

<sup>9</sup> Camus, *Notebooks 1935-1942*, translated by Philip Thody, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963) p. 190.

<sup>10</sup> M. S., p. 55.

<sup>11</sup> Camus, *The Rebel*, translated by Anthony Bower, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954) p. 10.

broader plane, social. Camus found in short, that *revolt* is a concept harboring unsuspected political implications useful in our contemporary fight against tyranny and human degradation. What was previously a simple property of absurdist reasoning (*la raisonement absurde*) became the prime value in Camus' writings of the mid-forties.

This was the thought-direction he exposed for us when he wrote in *The Rebel*: "Two centuries of rebellion, either metaphysical or historical, present themselves for our consideration."<sup>12</sup> Many of his commentators felt that with this break-through, Camus had reached a preliminary but firm plateau on his solitary journey towards a true meaning for human living. Others, equally attracted by his growing concern for social justice, quietly questioned the validity of the absurdist foundation on which it plainly rests.

Camus seems to have been aware of this weakness and, at what we now know to have been the climax of his career, did not favor logical examination of the early writings. The traditional philosopher, while sympathizing with Camus' transition from the solipsism of the Absurd to the social consciousness of revolt, looks in vain for adequate clarification from the author of such pouting statements as: "What I fail to understand is nonsense."<sup>13</sup> Although clearly called for, drastic revision of the absurdist motif was neglected in favor of orchestral detail. As a result, Camus' opus strikes his audience as earnest, plaintive, but unsupported.

There are those who saw in Albert Camus another Augustine, a child of Africa with restless heart. While the allusion is not without value, since both thinkers forced themselves beyond the realm of the physical in their search for life's meaning, there seems little enough in the present evidence to warrant hope that Camus would have found himself in Christianity through his own torturous concern for man's dignity.

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> M. S., p. 27.