Albert Camus Study Guide

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Biography

Article abstract: Camus’s philosophical and literary writings established his reputation as the moral conscience of France during the 1940’s and 1950’s. With understated eloquence, he reaffirmed the intrinsic values of individual freedom and dignity in the face of such evils as Nazism, Stalinism, and colonial exploitation.

Early Life

Albert Camus had a very difficult childhood. When he was born on November 7, 1913, his parents Lucien and Catherine were living in the small Algerian city of Mondovi, where his father worked for a vineyard. His parents were very poor. The very next year, Lucien was drafted, and he died in October, 1914, as a result of wounds received during the Battle of the Marne. His widow Catherine, already partially deaf, suffered a stroke soon after Lucien’s death, and this stroke permanently affected her speech. She moved to Algiers with her two sons, Albert and Lucien. They lived with her domineering mother, Catherine Sintes, in the working-class neighborhood of Belcourt. The harsh conditions of Camus’s youth taught him to value independence, personal responsibility, and human dignity.

Camus did very well in grammar school and earned a scholarship to the prestigious Grand Lycée of Algiers, where he developed a profound interest in philosophy and literature under the guidance of his teacher, Jean Grenier, to whom he would later dedicate both a volume of essays, L’Envers et l’endroit (1937; The Wrong Side and the Right Side, 1968), and a philosophical essay, L’Homme révolté (1951; The Rebel, 1956). At the age of seventeen, however, he became gravely ill with tuberculosis, from which his lungs never fully recovered. Camus did, however, resume his studies, and in 1936 he defended his master’s thesis on the problem of evil in the writings of Plotinus and Saint Augustine. Although his mother was Catholic, Camus was an agnostic. His medical problems prevented him from being offered a teaching position in Algeria.

Between 1935 and his move to France in 1942, he worked as a journalist in Algiers. He also became involved with a theatrical troupe there, first as an actor and then as a playwright and director. He wrote his first play, Caligula (English translation, 1948), in 1938. He temporarily joined the Algerian Communist Party, but he soon became disillusioned with communism. His distrust of communism greatly influenced his political opinions. In 1940, he married Francine Faure. Two years later, he moved permanently to France in order to join the French Resistance. Francine stayed in Algeria from 1942 until 1944. She rejoined Camus in 1944 after the liberation of Paris. Camus and Francine had two children—twins, Catherine and Jean, born in 1945.

Life’s Work
Although Camus did publish in Algiers two well-crafted volumes of short stories, *Betwixt and Between* and *Noces* (1938; *Nuptials*, 1968) in the 1930’s, his work was then appreciated only in Algeria. His international reputation as a writer and philosopher dates from the publication in occupied Paris of *L’Étranger* (1942; *The Stranger*, 1946) and *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942; *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Stories*, 1955).

*The Stranger* is a first-person narrative whose principal character, Meursault, does not even have a first name. Meursault, an Algerian office worker, is alienated from society. He is incapable of expressing strong emotions even at his mother’s wake and burial. He has no real ambition or sensitivity to the feelings of his lover Marie. Meursault does not truly respect the dignity of other people. Raymond, a close friend, is a pimp, and Meursault sees nothing wrong with this amoral profession. Meursault kills an Arab who has been following Raymond. Although Meursault is clearly guilty, he still should receive a fair trial. Impartial justice, of course, no longer existed in occupied France. The presiding judge overtly favors the prosecutor, who is allowed to introduce numerous irrelevant and damaging remarks about Meursault, whose incompetent or corrupt lawyer never protests effectively. Nazi collaborators in France denounced *The Stranger* as a dangerous novel because it held the French judicial system up to ridicule. In an early essay on *The Stranger*, Jean-Paul Sartre noted perceptively that these collaborators had not fully understood *The Stranger*. This novel clearly condemns the legal injustices committed by the Nazis and their collaborators, but it also reaffirms the French republican ideals of “Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity.” The Nazis wanted nothing to do with the moral values of the French Third Republic, which they had destroyed in 1940.

Camus’s next major work was his 1942 philosophical treatise *The Myth of Sisyphus*. According to Greek mythology, Sisyphus was condemned for eternity to push a large rock to the top of a mountain. Every time he reached the summit, his rock rolled back into the valley. Despite the apparently absurd nature of his task, Sisyphus never gave in to the forces that were trying to destroy his spirit. Camus imagines that Sisyphus was being punished because he had rebelled against the arbitrary power of the gods. Camus transforms Sisyphus into a moral hero who resists evil. Many readers have interpreted *The Myth of Sisyphus* as an ethical defense of the French Resistance. In the last paragraph of this work, Camus describes Sisyphus at the bottom of his mountain. Sisyphus must decide whether it is worth the effort to continue his fight for human dignity. Sisyphus will not give in to evil. Camus ends *The Myth of Sisyphus* with the thought-provoking remark, “We must imagine Sisyphus to be happy.” Sisyphus realizes that he is morally superior to the evil forces that seek to destroy him.

Three years after the liberation of France, Camus published his most extended reflection on the evil of Nazism. His powerful 1947 novel *La Peste* (*The Plague*, 1948) takes place in the walled Algerian city of Oran. *The Plague* is technically a series of diary entries, but readers do not discover until the very last chapter that Dr. Bernard Rieux kept this diary. Camus describes Oran as a typical modern city with which any reader can identify. The plague suddenly breaks out and the walls of Oran are closed in order to prevent this epidemic from spreading to other cities. For the inhabitants of Oran, this plague symbolizes the absolute evil against which they must fight. The political and moral implications of *The Plague* were clear to Camus’s contemporaries. The closed walls of Oran may represent the closed frontiers of those countries occupied by the Nazis or they may refer more directly to the walls around the Nazi death camps. In plague-ridden Oran, crematoria are used to dispose of the numerous corpses. This clearly reminds Camus’s readers of the crematoria used by the Nazis in their concentration camps.

For highly diverse reasons, characters such as the agnostic Dr. Rieux, the journalist Rambert, and the modest civil servant Joseph Grand all decide to fight the plague. The incredibly destructive power of evil is illustrated when Camus describes the painful death of Judge Othon’s young son. The screams from this dying child cause Father Paneloux to question his belief in a just God, and they almost destroy Judge Othon’s will to live. The gruesome death of his young child is reminiscent of the millions of equally innocent children and adults whom the Nazis murdered. At the end of this novel, the plague itself is over but its effects will last for years and generations to come. Camus ended this powerful novel by reminding his readers that evil can never be
permanently eradicated, because a plague may break out at any time in another “happy city.” *The Plague* was such an extraordinarily effective novel that the members of the Swedish Academy seriously considered giving Camus the Nobel Prize in 1947. Camus was then only thirty-four years old, and the youngest previous Nobel laureate had been Rudyard Kipling, who was forty-three years old when he received his Nobel Prize in Literature in 1907. In 1957, the Swedish Academy would honor Camus with the Nobel Prize in Literature.

During the last twelve years of his relatively short life, Camus became very involved in the theatrical life of France. His plays stressed both the absolute need to respect human life and the danger of political theories that try to justify the use of violence as a means of changing society. Among his most important contributions to the theater were *L’État de siège* (1948; *The State of Siege*, 1958), *Les Justes* (1950; *The Just Assassins*, 1958), and his 1956 adaptation of William Faulkner’s *Requiem for a Nun* (1951). His major philosophical work from this period was his 1951 book *The Rebel*, in which he argued against all uses of violence as a technique for social change. *The Rebel* provoked an extremely negative reaction from Jean-Paul Sartre, who believed that violence was sometimes justifiable. Camus considered Sartre’s arguments to be both specious and dangerous. The rupture between Camus and Sartre would be permanent. In 1956, Camus published his last complete novel, *La Chute* (*The Fall*, 1957), a marvelously ironic book about an amoral lawyer named Jean-Baptiste Clamence. During the last year of his life, Camus worked on a novel entitled “Le Premier Homme” (the first man) about his own youth. When he died in an automobile accident on January 4, 1960, the unfinished manuscript of “The First Man” was found in Camus’s attaché case. Although he died at the relatively young age of forty-six, Camus was a very prolific writer with extremely varied interests.

**Summary**

Albert Camus was an eloquent “man of letters” in the finest sense of the term. His intelligence, modesty, and fierce commitment to moral values created a very favorable impression on contemporaries from Africa, Europe, and other continents as well. Since his death in 1960, his writings have continued to inspire much creative scholarship, and his analysis of the human condition still fascinates readers from around the world.

His refusal to propose simplistic answers to complex moral and social problems alienated Camus from many French intellectuals on both the political Left and Right. He refused, however, to compromise his ethical beliefs in order to placate even influential critics such as Jean-Paul Sartre and François Mauriac. Personal integrity was indispensable for Camus. He courageously resisted all attempts to limit basic freedoms. He fought in the French Resistance; he was once expelled from his native Algeria because of newspaper articles he had written to denounce the mistreatment of Arabs by the French colonial authorities, and he frequently criticized political abuses in such countries as Francisco Franco’s Spain and communist Hungary and East Germany. When he received the Nobel Prize in Literature in December, 1957, his acceptance speech stressed that a conscientious writer should convey to others the interrelated values of truth and liberty. His profound insights into the human condition have enriched the lives of readers from many different cultures.

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**Additional Biography: Biography**

Albert Camus was born on November 7, 1913, in Mondavi, Algeria. His French father, Lucien Auguste Camus, was killed less than a year later at the Battle of the Marne in France during World War I. Camus was then raised by his mother Catherine (who was of Spanish descent) in a working-class area of Algiers. He attended the lycée (secondary school) until graduation in 1930, after which he studied literature and philosophy at the University of Algiers.

In 1930, Camus had his first attack of tuberculosis, from which he suffered all his life. In 1933, as Hitler came to power in Germany, Camus joined an anti-Fascist organization in Algiers, and in the mid-1930s he became a member of the Communist Party, helping to organize the Marxist-based Workers’ Theatre. But a year after his graduation with a degree in philosophy in 1936, he broke with the communists. Until the beginning of World War II in 1939, Camus was a journalist with a left-wing Algerian newspaper.

It was during the 1930s that Camus published his first books. *The Wrong Side and the Right Side* (1937) consisted of five short stories. *Nuptials* (1939) was a collection of four essays. Both volumes received only small circulation in Algeria.

In 1934, Camus married Simone Hié. The marriage broke up two years later. In 1940, he married Francine Faure.

From 1942 to 1945, Camus lived in Paris under the German occupation. He was a member of the French Resistance and edited an underground newspaper, *Combat*. He also published a novel, *The Stranger* (1942), a philosophical essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1943), and two plays, *The Misunderstanding* (produced in 1944) and *Caligula* (produced in 1945). In 1944, Camus met Jean-Paul Sartre and associated with Sartre’s group of existentialists, although he denied that he was an existentialist. After the war, Camus received a Resistance Medal from the French government for his wartime activities.

In 1948, Camus published *The Plague*, which was a great commercial success. He became a major literary and political figure in France. *The Rebel*, a philosophical work in which Camus elaborated on some of the issues presented in *The Plague*, followed in 1951. The hostile reception of the work by existentialists led to Camus’s break with Sartre, which lasted until Camus’s death.
Camus wrote little for several years following the attack on The Rebel. Then in 1956, he published The Fall, a short novel, followed by Exile and the Kingdom (1957), a collection of short stories. In 1957, Camus was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature.

In 1958, Camus’s play, The Possessed, adapted from Dostoevsky’s novel, was produced, and the following year he was appointed director of the new state-supported experimental theater.

Camus was working on a novel to be called The First Man, when he was killed in an automobile accident in France on January 4, 1960, at the age of forty-six.

**Additional Biography: Biography**

Albert Camus was born of a peasant mother of Spanish descent and an Alsatian father who was killed in World War I. He received a degree in philosophy from the University of Algiers in 1936. He had a brief membership in the Communist Party at that time. He pursued a varied career as actor, producer, journalist, and schoolteacher. An active participant in the French underground during World War II, he first came into national prominence after the war, when it was revealed that he had been the editor of the famed clandestine newspaper Combat. He made many political and literary enemies after the war by chastising the Communists and his erstwhile friend and fellow writer Jean-Paul Sartre. A position as editor in a publishing house, lecture tours in the United States and South America, and government posts followed until his untimely death in an automobile accident in 1960.

**Additional Biography: Biography**

Albert Camus was born in Mondovi, Algeria, on November 7, 1913, to Lucien Camus and the former Catherine Sintès, a frail, unlettered woman of Spanish ancestry. Following the death of the elder Camus in battle during 1914, Albert grew up among his mother’s family in Belcourt, a working-class suburb of Algiers. A talented scholarship student, Camus soon earned the interest and attention of various gifted teachers, including the writer and scholar Jean Grenier, with whom Camus was to maintain an often problematical friendship for the remainder of his life. At twenty, with one year left to go at the University of Algiers, Camus married Simone Hié, an attractive, brilliant, but highly unstable young woman who was also a known morphine addict. The marriage foundered within three years but did not formally end in divorce until 1940, when both parties sought the freedom to remarry.

Directed toward a teaching career, Camus was ironically disqualified from the coveted aggregation for reasons of health. Although an accomplished athlete, he had been tubercular since childhood. Supporting himself at a variety of odd jobs, Camus joined the Communist Party during 1935 and soon found himself in charge of the propagandist Théâtre du Travail. Too resolutely proletarian of background to have had much prior exposure to the theater (which, for all practical purposes, had not hitherto existed in Algiers), Camus soon discovered what would become a lifetime enthusiasm. Through active participation in the theater as actor and director, he rediscovered much the same team spirit and camaraderie that had drawn him to participate in sports. After leaving the party in 1937, he lost little time in founding his own company, known as Le Théâtre de l’Équipe. Steady employment, however, continued to elude Camus until 1938, when a group of his friends founded the liberal newspaper Alger-Républicain and invited him to join its staff. The paper, with Camus as a valued contributor, survived until 1940, when conscriptions and the threat of military censorship brought operations to a halt.

Throughout his association with Le Théâtre de l’Équipe and Alger-Républicain, Camus had tried his hand at essays, drama, and fiction, with two volumes of essays already published by 1940. Caligula, The Myth of Sisyphus, and The Stranger remained in draft or outline form; the collapse of Alger-Républicain gave Camus
both the time and the need to establish his literary reputation. Meanwhile, he was engaged to marry Francine Faure, the woman who would eventually bear him twin children and still later become his widow. Reluctant to leave Francine in Algeria before he was free to remarry, Camus nevertheless departed for Paris to seek fame and fortune (or at least employment) with the help of Pascal Pia, a former editor of Alger-Républicain. Once there, he joined Pia in the layout department of Paris-Soir, a mass-circulation daily of reactionary sympathies that neither man shared or could even tolerate. After the fall of France and subsequent occupation of Paris, Paris-Soir relocated its offices in the city of Lyon, as did most other Paris newspapers; Lyon was still part of the so-called Free Zone. Camus, meanwhile, continued in Lyon the task of revising and polishing his extant manuscripts, in particular The Myth of Sisyphus.

Soon after his marriage to Francine on December 3, 1940, Camus was laid off from his job at Paris-Soir. The couple then returned to Algeria, to Francine’s hometown of Oran—the future setting of The Plague—where they eked out a living as teachers. During the summer of 1942, Camus’s tuberculosis recurred, and it was deemed suitable that he take the mountain air at Le Panelier, in the Massif Central not far from Lyon, where some relatives of Francine happened to own a boardinghouse. Francine, however, was obliged soon thereafter to return to Oran, where her teaching duties were both more demanding and more secure than those of her husband. Subsequent changes in the wartime political situation isolated Algeria from metropolitan France, making Francine’s return to Le Panelier impossible and communication nearly so. As his health improved, Camus began finding his way to Paris to check on his manuscripts. It was there that he met Maria Casarès, a beautiful and talented Spanish stage actress. Barely twenty years old at the time, Maria was the daughter of Santiago Casarès Quiroga, an eminent anti-Franco politician then living in exile. Already established as an actress by the time Camus met her, her intelligence and talents closely matched to his own, Casarès would become the most significant woman in Camus’s life as an artist, although her temperament and convictions forbade any permanent disruption of Camus’s marriage to Francine. Toward the end of 1943, Camus joined the resistance organization Combat and assumed an active role in the publication of its eponymous underground newspaper—once again following in the footsteps of his older friend Pascal Pia.

With the liberation of France in 1944, Combat became a freely circulating daily with Pia and Camus more or less at the helm. Soon thereafter, Camus was reunited with Francine, who bore him twins, a son and daughter, in September, 1945. Meanwhile, Camus’s reputation as a writer was beginning to resemble fame. Public esteem for his work was sufficient, in any case, to offset the relative failure of The Misunderstanding during the final months of the Occupation. During the spring of 1946, Camus set off for the United States, on a lecture tour sponsored by the Cultural Services of the French Embassy. It was around this time, suggests Camus scholar Patrick McCarthy, that Camus’s public utterances and perceived “image” began seriously to diverge from what the author actually thought or had written, setting in motion an insidious process that would culminate in the backlash of public opinion during the years immediately following Camus’s death. Even during Camus’s lifetime, the partially self-invited designation as a kind of secular saint became a burden often difficult, if not impossible, to bear.

To a large extent, the difficulty of Camus’s postwar existence had to do with politics—an area in which he was temperamentally ill suited to serve as an expert, or even worse, as a sage. Although resolutely to the left of center, Camus had few unshakable convictions and even fewer proposed solutions. His approach, if such it may be called, was to study the lessons of history from a variety of disinterested perspectives, rejecting most known choices in favor of a more broadly construed if ill-defined humanitarianism. Predictably, Camus’s reluctance to choose a specific political allegiance angered a number of his former left-wing colleagues in the Resistance and elsewhere, who believed that Camus had turned conservative on them. Still other former associates, such as Pia, themselves turned conservative and denounced Camus as a mindless liberal. Camus’s ruptures with Sartre and with Pia, equally (if opposingly) rooted in ideology, proved particularly bitter and lasted well beyond Camus’s lifetime. Camus, meanwhile, continued rather quixotically to advocate a vaguely outlined “third choice” located somewhere between the established poles of capitalism and communism.
Following the resounding success of *The Plague*, Camus devoted himself to intensive reading in preparation for his planned political statement, a discursive essay called *The Rebel*. Reflecting broad, occasionally deep but oddly uncritical reading in history, philosophy, and literature, *The Rebel* devotes considerable rhetoric to a distinction between “revolt,” the logical consequence to one’s desirable awareness of “the absurd,” and “revolution,” the institutional manifestation of revolt that tends inevitably toward totalitarianism and a consequent reassertion of “the absurd.” The fundamental question raised, quite rhetorically indeed, is whether the ends, in a political context, may be said to justify the means—the same question posed in dramatic terms by *The Just Assassins* some three years earlier. Unfortunately, the admixture of high-mindedness and careless thinking to be found in *The Rebel* sufficed to alienate such of Camus’s leftist friends as remained, provoking a bitter debate that raged for several months in the pages of Sartre’s review *Les Temps modernes*.

Still more political problems awaited Camus in the developing crisis of an Algerian bid for independence. His reluctance to take sides, understandable in view of his status as a *pied-noir* or North African-born Frenchman, nevertheless angered many of those who had come to see in Camus a tireless champion of human rights. Camus remained unconvinced that any proposed political solution could possibly be the proper one. Having for years advocated serious liberal reforms in the French administration of Algeria, he initially underestimated the force and convictions of the newly formed Nationalist Front, or FLN. As matters escalated, Camus lent his welcome support to the negotiation of a civil solution acceptable to both sides—characteristically expressing his mistrust of political “solutions” together with his hatred of violence and bloodshed. When a negotiated truce proved unworkable, Camus found himself condemned to inaction, torn between his pronouncements on one side, and loyalty to his own people—the French of Algeria—on the other. As a writer, he produced the enigmatic *The Fall* and the short stories of *Exile and the Kingdom* and distracted himself with the adaptation of other writers’ texts for the stage. Biographical evidence suggests that Camus in his early forties may well have fallen victim to what a later generation would call the “midlife crisis.” At the very least, he was severely depressed by the Algerian situation and entertained serious doubts concerning his future as a writer. The Nobel Prize in Literature awarded to him in 1957, with the war for Algerian independence still in progress, was a mixed blessing; although among the youngest of Nobel writer-laureates, Camus was all too aware of the common wisdom that the Nobel is awarded in recognition of a body of work already considered complete—or at least finished.

Unbeknown to Camus, only two years and a few months of life remained to him after his recognition by the Swedish Academy. Having recently revised (or re-revised) his extant plays in anticipation of a new American edition, with an author’s preface, Camus in 1958 began campaigning in earnest to establish a theater of his own in Paris, hoping no doubt to recapture some of the spirit of Le Théâtre de l’Équipe. Now living apart from his family at Lourmarin, in the south of France, he spent most of his visits to Paris in pursuit of his new project. He had also recently finished several years’ work on the stage version of Fyodor Dostoevski’s novel *Besy* (1871-1872; *The Possessed*, 1913) and by mid-1959 was well launched on a new novel, set in the Algeria of his youth and tentatively entitled “Le Premier Homme” (the first man). He was killed instantly on January 4, 1960, when a car driven by his friend and publisher Michel Gallimard collided with a tree. A valid rail ticket found on his person suggested that Camus had planned to travel from Lourmarin to Paris by train, as usual, changing his mind only at the last minute; in any case, the circumstances of his death lent themselves readily to comparison with Camus’s own concept of the absurd. (“After all,” commented one observer, “to be killed by one’s own publisher?”) Gallimard himself died several days later of injuries sustained in the wreck, although the car’s two other passengers survived.

**Additional Biography: Biography**

Although he was born in the interior village of Mondovi, near Constantine, Algeria, Albert Camus was actually brought up in the big city, in a working-class suburb of Algiers. His widowed mother, who was from Algiers, took her two sons back there to live after her husband was killed early in World War I. Albert, the
younger of the two sons, was not yet a year old when his father died, and he was to grow up with a need for relationships with older men, apparently to replace the father he never had. It was important to Camus that his father’s forebears had immigrated by choice to Algeria from France in the nineteenth century, since it made him feel that his roots were authentically both French and Algerian. Because his mother was of Spanish extraction, Camus felt himself to be even more authentically Algerian, for Spanish blood gave him his share of that passionate Mediterranean temperament that he felt made French Algeria distinctive and unique. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the great bulk of Camus’s writing is set in Algeria or relates directly to that country. Being Algerian was the central fact of Camus’s consciousness.

In his early twenties, Camus began to write essays for a leftist political journal published in Algiers; his subject was the political and economic plight of Algeria in its role as a colony of France. During those same years, he helped to found a theater group, for which he acted, directed, and did some writing, and he was a candidate for an advanced degree in philosophy at the University of Algiers. At times, he had to interrupt his studies because of ill health; he had contracted tuberculosis in 1930, at the age of seventeen, and was subject to periodic attacks from it for the rest of his life. When only twenty-one, he made a rather impulsive marriage that ended in separation within a year and eventual divorce. He worked at a number of odd jobs before becoming a full-time journalist, and he was active enough in politics in the 1930’s to have become, for a few months, a member of the Algerian Communist Party. Altogether, his Algerian youth had been a difficult and turbulent experience, yet it had also been a time of growth and self-discovery, and he looked back on those years ever after with a special nostalgia for the sun, sand, sea, and simplicity of life that he felt had formed him and made him what he had become.

Early in 1940, with a war in progress and the newspaper for which he worked closed down, Camus found himself forced to leave Algeria in order to make a living. He went to Paris to work for a Paris newspaper—a job procured for him by his older friend Pascal Pia, with whom he had worked on the Algiers newspaper before it folded. Within a year, the Paris job ended, and Camus, who had married again, returned to Algeria with his wife. They lived in Oran, his wife’s hometown, and while she worked as a teacher, Camus worked at his writing projects, completing both the novel The Stranger and the essay The Myth of Sisyphus and arranging for their publication in Paris by Gallimard.

By late 1942, Camus was so ill with tuberculosis that his wife persuaded him to seek a more favorable climate in the mountainous area of central France, which was then unoccupied territory. He went there alone, to continue writing, and found himself cut off from all contact with his family when the Allies invaded North Africa and the Germans occupied the rest of France as a defensive measure. During this period of isolation, Camus began to sketch out his next novel, The Plague. He also began to make frequent trips to Paris to see literary friends. His publisher, Gallimard, not only sent him royalties for The Stranger, which sold quite well, but also helped Camus by putting him on the Gallimard payroll as a reader—a position he enjoyed so much that he continued to fulfill it for the rest of his life.

Late in 1943, Camus moved to Paris to be where the literary action was, increasingly associating with those friends who were in the Resistance movement, with which Camus was strongly sympathetic. Before long, Camus joined the Resistance and was assigned the task of writing for the Resistance newspaper Combat. After the liberation of Paris in 1944, Combat went aboveground as a daily newspaper, and Camus was for a time its editor. He had become part of the Paris literary world, had met its best-known figures—Sartre, André Malraux, and many others—and had achieved a certain fame. By that time, it was clear that he would never go back to Algeria to live. As soon as it was possible for her to do so, Camus’s wife joined him in Paris, and in September of 1945 she gave birth to twins, a boy and a girl. By war’s end, Camus was not only a confirmed Parisian but also a domesticated one, with a family to support.

In the postwar years, Camus’s fame quickly began to spread outside France—The Stranger appeared in English translation in 1946 and was an immediate sensation—and Camus took up the life of a lionized man of
letters, dropping all employment except for his work with Gallimard and making lecture tours to foreign countries, including the United States. The publication of The Plague in 1947 was hailed by critics as the fulfillment of his great promise as a writer, and that book became one of the best sellers of the postwar era, making Camus economically secure for the first time. Success and fame seemed to make him artistically insecure, however—there were suddenly too many demands from admirers, too many intrusions into his privacy and working time, and, above all, too much self-doubt about his own powers for him to be able to live up to his public’s expectations of him. Camus soon began to experience a crisis of literary sterility. It took him until 1951 to complete the essay The Rebel, begun nearly ten years earlier, and throughout the first half of the decade of the 1950’s he published nothing and was rumored to have a permanent case of writer’s block. The outbreak of violence in Algeria and the campaign for independence, which began in 1952, added severely to Camus’s troubled state, and the controversial articles he wrote in that period on the Algerian question certainly lost him many friends and much support. His unhappy attempt to be the voice of reason and conciliation at a time in the dispute when opinions had already become hopelessly polarized (“If you are not with us, you are against us”) is poignantly described in the powerful tale “The Guest,” one of the best stories in the collection Exile and the Kingdom.

Camus emerged from this period of intense personal suffering and frustration by venting his feelings in the short, bitterly satiric novel The Fall, published in 1956—his first work of fiction in nearly ten years, as his detractors were quick to point out. Nevertheless, the comic verve of the work attracted many readers, even though its intended meanings often seemed obscure to them. The book sold well, and Camus’s reputation rebounded somewhat, especially outside France. The publication of the volume of short stories Exile and the Kingdom the following year earned for him additional respect as a writer who still had something to say. Internationally, his reputation peaked with the award of the Nobel Prize later that same year.

Reinvigorated by the successes of 1956 and 1957, Camus was, as the decade ended, once again confidently and productively at work, with the usual three or four projects going simultaneously, one of which was an autobiographical novel about his youth in Algeria, to be called “Le Premier Homme” (the first man). His “block” seemed to be definitively overcome, and friends and family who spent Christmas of 1959 with him at the country retreat he had purchased in southern France recalled that he was in a generally optimistic frame of mind about his career. Fate, however, abruptly shattered that optimism. Camus’s career came to a premature—and, he would have said, absurd—end only a few days after that happy Christmas. On January 4, 1960, Michel Gallimard, nephew of Camus’s publisher, lost control of his car, in which Camus was riding as a passenger, just outside the tiny village of Villeblevin, and crashed into a tree. Camus, who had passed his forty-sixth birthday only two months before, died instantly. The evolution of the author’s work strongly suggests that a banal motor accident cut him off when he seemed, finally, to have mastered his craft and to be entering his prime creative years.

Additional Biography: Biography

Author Profile

Camus went to Paris in 1940 to work as a journalist. In 1943, he became a reader for the publishing firm Gallimard. He worked there until the end of his life to subsidize his writing. His writings can be divided into three periods: first, the period of the absurd or the antihero; second, the period of man in revolt, or the hero; and finally, the period of man on the earth. During the period of the absurd, which is best exemplified by the novel The Stranger, man kills and is killed in turn by the state in a relatively senseless existence. During the second period, characters who are larger than life defy the world’s absurdity and find meaning in life. In both The Plague and The Rebel, heroic men fight to overcome the evils of totalitarianism. The struggle reveals possibilities of goodness and principled existence hitherto not present in Camus’ work. During the final period, Camus often portrays characters who are wounded by their existence in the world. Yet these characters
are often able to find some measure of human happiness and redemption in everyday life. Camus received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1957. He died in an automobile accident in 1960.

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important friendships.

**Additional Biography: Biography**

Albert Camus (kah-MEW) was born on November 7, 1913, in Mondovi, a village in the interior of Algeria, which, since 1830, had been under the administration of France. Camus’s father, Lucien, was a winery worker; his mother, Catherine Sintès, could not read or write. Shortly after the outbreak of World War I, Lucien Camus was mobilized in a North African regiment. Wounded at the First Battle of the Marne, he died on October 11, 1914, before Albert’s first birthday. Catherine took the family to Belcourt, a working-class section of Algiers, to live with her mother, Marie Catherine Sintès. Catherine, who worked in a munitions factory and then as a cleaning woman, suffered a stroke that left her deaf and partially paralyzed. Albert lived with his mother, his older brother Lucien, and several relatives in a three-room apartment without electricity or running water, sharing a toilet with two other apartments.

At the local primary school, a teacher named Louis Germain took an interest in young Camus, providing him with extra instruction and entering him into competition for scholarships. As a subsidized day-boarder at a secondary school, Camus excelled in sports and began a lifelong friendship with teacher Jean Grenier, who encouraged him in his study of philosophy. In 1930, Camus developed the first symptoms of tuberculosis and moved out of his family apartment. In 1932, he published four articles in the Algerian journal *Sud*.

In 1934, Camus married Simone Hié, a fellow student, and also joined the Communist Party, which assigned him the task of proselytizing Muslims. Exempt from military service because of his lungs, he studied philosophy at the University of Algiers, financing his education through loans and a variety of odd jobs that included auto accessory salesman, municipal clerk, and research assistant with the university’s meteorological service. Poor health, however, prevented him from pursuing a teaching career. His marriage was dissolved in 1936.

Cofounder of the blue-collar Théâtre du Travail, Camus collaborated in 1936 in writing the play *Révolte dans les Asturies* (revolt in the Asturias), the performance of which was banned. As an actor for Radio Algiers, he toured the countryside. In 1937, he began writing for the liberal newspaper *Alger-Républicain* and was expelled from the Communist Party in a dispute over policy. His first book, *L’Envers et l’endroit* (1937; “The Wrong Side and the Right Side,” 1968), a collection of essays, was also published in 1937. In 1939, Camus cofounded the literary review *Rivages* and, when France declared war on Germany, attempted to enlist but was turned down because of his tuberculosis. He moved to Paris to work on the staff of *Paris-Soir*, relocating in the south of France when the Germans occupied the north. In December, 1940, he quit his job at *Paris-Soir* and returned to Algeria with his new wife, Francine Faure, a math teacher from Oran.

In 1942, to recover from an attack of tuberculosis, he traveled with Francine to Chambon-sur-Lignon in the mountains of central France. Camus remained there while Francine returned to Oran, and, after the Allied landing in North Africa, he became separated from her until the liberation of France. He joined the Resistance network Combat in the Lyons region. In 1942, he published his first novel, *L’Étranger* (1942; *The Stranger*, 1946), and his philosophical work *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942; *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 1955). Camus moved to Paris, where he joined the editorial staff of Gallimard, a publishing house, and worked on the underground newspaper *Combat*, becoming its editor. His writings for *Combat* were published posthumously as *Camus à Combat: Éditoriaux et articles, 1944-1947* (2002; *Camus at Combat: Writing, 1944-1947*, 2006). He became acquainted with Jean-Paul Sartre and other influential intellectuals.

His play *Le Malentendu* (*The Misunderstanding*, pr., pb. 1948) was produced in Paris in 1944, after the city’s liberation from German Occupation. In 1945, his play *Caligula* (wr. 1988-1939, pb. 1944, pr. 1945; English translation, 1948) was produced, and he visited Algeria to report on atrocities committed by the colonial
French government. He also became father to twins, Jean and Catherine.

Camus visited the United States in 1946 and, the following year, published La Peste (1947; The Plague, 1948) to great acclaim. A 1948 production of L’État de siège (pr., pb. 1948; State of Siege, 1958) was not successful. Camus spoke out against French repression of a popular rebellion in Madagascar and in defense of Greek Communists who were sentenced to death. Through written deposition, he testified for the defense in a trial of Algerian nationalists. In 1951, publication of L’Homme révolté (The Rebel, 1956) provoked heated controversy and led to Camus’s break with Sartre and other Marxist critics of his work.

After the 1954 outbreak of armed rebellion by Muslim Algerians against French administration, Camus became increasingly distraught over the escalating cycle of violence and reprisals. In 1955, he attempted to mediate a truce but was rebuffed. In 1956, he protested Soviet repression of the Hungarian Revolution and published La Chute (The Fall, 1957). In 1957, he published L’Exil et le royaume (Exile and the Kingdom, 1958), a volume of short stories, and “Réflexions sur la guillotine” (“Reflections on the Guillotine”), a plea for the abolition of capital punishment. On October 17 of that year, Camus became the ninth Frenchman and second youngest author of any nationality to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.

His health and mood fluctuating, Camus worked on Le Premier Homme, an autobiographical novel he never completed. On January 4, 1960, he was killed instantaneously when a car driven by his publisher Michel Gallimard crashed into a tree near the French village of Sens. Amid the wreckage was the working manuscript of Le Premier Homme, a slightly fictionalized account of Camus’s own impoverished childhood in Belcourt. Though for a long time the author’s heirs restricted access to the material, Le Premier Homme (1994; The First Man, 1995) was finally published more than three decades after his death.

**Additional Biography: Biography**

More than most other authors, Albert Camus both reflected and shaped his zeitgeist, the spirit of an era plagued by tyranny, invasion, genocide, and colonialism. A child of the Algerian proletariat living among the Parisian intelligentsia and writing about human alienation, he stood both inside and outside history. He was a champion of lucidity and honesty in an age whose public rhetoric camouflaged savage realities. The sparely styled fiction, drama, and essays that Camus produced during a relatively brief career offer the paradox of tonic disillusionment, an exhilaration over candid contemplation of the absurd. In North America, perhaps even more than in France, Camus remains read and loved long after the works of many of his contemporaries have fallen out of favor and print.

**Additional Biography: Biography**

Albert Camus was born in 1913 in Mondavi, Algeria. His father died in World War I and he was raised in poverty by his mother and grandmother. As a scholarship student he completed secondary school and planned to begin university studies before falling seriously ill at seventeen with tuberculosis, an experience which shaped his understanding of human vulnerability to disease and death. He worked in Algeria as a journalist, co-founded a theater group, and in general became part of the intellectual community in Algeria before World War II. In 1934 he joined the Communist Party, but broke with it a year or two later over the issue of Algerian nationalism. During much of World War II he was in Paris as an active member of the French resistance. He published some of his most important novels, including L’Etranger (1942; The Stranger) and La Peste (1947; The Plague) in the 1940s, when his reputation as a writer and an intellectual was at its peak. He remained in Paris after the War and worked as a reader at the publishing company Gallimard.

In 1952 his close friendship with Jean-Paul Sartre was broken when the two men disagreed over the legitimacy of communism in the face of the Soviet purges and labor camps. Camus bore the brunt of Sartre’s
bitter personal attacks in the public press. His refusal to back any political movement which called for violence or which restricted human freedom drew more criticism from both the Left and the Right political factions in Paris during the Algerian conflict. French government officials and Algerian nationalist leaders both looked to him for support and were frustrated by his refusal to make public endorsements of either side. To some extent, the schoolmaster’s reluctance to take sides in “The Guest” may reflect some of Camus’ own sense of frustration with the polarized and violent Algerian conflict.

For much of the 1950s Camus suffered writer’s block, depression, and ill health. In 1956 he published La Chute (1956; The Fall) and shortly thereafter, the collection of stories L’exil et le royaume (1957; Exile and the Kingdom) from which “The Guest” is taken. That same year he won the Nobel Prize for literature.

### Additional Biography: Biography

Albert Camus (kah-mew), the Algerian-born French writer of novels, short stories, dramas, essays, and journalism, was one of the most significant literary figures of the twentieth century. He recoiled from the dogmas of totalitarianism and organized religion that dictated human behavior, from existentialism’s despairing emphasis on anxiety and forlornness, and from nihilism’s insistence that human behavior did not matter. Instead, he achieved a literature of exigent moral questioning that clung to a Hellenistic faith in individualism, seeking a formula through which a person could live in dignity and decency within a godless, irrational, “absurd” universe.

Camus grew up in poverty. After his father died of war wounds ten months after the boy’s birth, his illiterate mother was forced to earn a meager living as a cleaning woman. Encouraged by a remarkable teacher in grade school, he won a scholarship to an Algerian lycée, where he studied philosophy and read widely but also played soccer and swam. In 1930, he had the first of what were to be many attacks of tuberculosis. In 1934, he entered a disastrous one-year marriage. He also joined the Communist Party, only to leave it three years later.

During the mid-to late 1930’s, Camus began the notebooks that he kept from then on; he also wrote journalistic essays, founded a theatrical company, and wrote his first novel, A Happy Death (though it was not published until 1971), which can be considered a preliminary study for The Stranger. In 1939, he was rejected for military service because of his tuberculosis. Camus married the Algerian-born Francine Faure in December, 1940. Possessed by a Don Juanesque need to conquer women, however, he had many affairs, as well as a liaison with the actress Maria Casarès that lasted intermittently from 1944 until his death in 1960.

In 1942, Camus left Algeria for Paris, working there as a journalist and publisher’s editor; in 1943, he became editor of the resistance newspaper Combat. That same year, Camus also published what were to prove his two most influential texts: The Stranger and The Myth of Sisyphus. Together with his play Caligula, these works develop, narrate, and dramatize his core concept of absurdism. For Camus, the absurd is the void between the human need for a universe that is coherent, lucid, and rational and the reality of the universe as largely incoherent, meaningless, and irrational.

In The Myth of Sisyphus, Camus argues that human beings should renounce any nostalgia for a divinely ordered world and should instead adopt an ethic of heroic hedonism, of passionately lucid living. Accordingly, the protagonist of The Stranger, Meursault, recognizes the world’s conventions and codes as arbitrary and senseless. He comes to realize that he has loved life intensely for its physical pleasures and therefore greets his death by execution exultantly. In Caligula, the Roman emperor seeks to educate his subjects for an absurd world by torturing and killing a large number of them, finally inciting the patricians to rebel against his monstrous rule and murder him.
The next cycle of Camus’s works centering on the absurd is best represented by his long essay *The Rebel* and his novel *The Plague*. In *The Rebel*, Camus rejects both the metaphysical attempts to abolish an absurd universe incarnate in religion and the political attempts to cancel absurdism exemplified by totalitarian political regimes. In *The Plague*, he presents a variety of human responses to the plague’s toll of undeserved suffering and unjust death.

Camus’s career in the 1950’s was characterized by extreme tensions. His friendship with the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre ended in a sharp public dispute because Sartre condoned Stalinism, which Camus vehemently condemned. When Algeria’s Muslims demanded that the land of his birth become a nation independent of France, Camus found himself unable either to support or to oppose their uprising. His notebooks show that his mood during this decade was frequently depressed. He developed a writer’s block that lasted for years and was only partially thawed by the composition of what was to be his last complete novel, *The Fall*.

*The Fall* is an ironic, deceptive book in which the first-person narrator, Jean-Baptiste Clamence, tells his life story to an unnamed, silent auditor who may well be humankind. Overcome by guilt from not aiding a suicidal woman, Clamence seeks to expiate his failure by attempting to baptize his listeners into a tyranny of universal sin and shame. For Camus, such a judgment amounts to a false clemency; he regarded guilt as accidental, relative, and individual, whereas personal freedom and dignity were a human being’s most cherished values.

In 1957, Camus, then forty-four, was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature; he was its second-youngest recipient. He thereupon began work on what he announced would be his first long novel, to be entitled *Le premier homme* (the first man). He had written approximately one hundred pages of the work when on January 4, 1960, the sports car in which he was riding as a passenger crashed into two trees, killing him instantly. After his death, Camus’s reputation fluctuated, with the Anglo-American world continuing to admire his work and the younger generation of French readers almost ignoring it. His stature as a courageously committed humanistic writer, impatient with mysticism and skeptical regarding all ideological claims, however, should survive the ebb and flow of popular sentiment.

### Additional Biography: Biography

Albert Camus lived in a period of remarkable turmoil in the world—two world wars were fought, and colonized countries, notably India and Algeria, began independence struggles. Camus was born in the latter, a French colony in North Africa, in Mondovi, on November 7, 1913. When he was almost one, his father, Lucien Auguste Camus, was killed in the outbreak of World War I. Left fatherless, Albert lived with his mother Catherine Stintes Camus, his older brother Lucien, his Uncle Etienne Stintes, and his grandmother. They lived in a three-room apartment in the working-class Belcourt district of Algiers.

Camus’s mother was a silent woman who rarely showed her sons affection and who expected Camus to work when he was old enough. Fortunately, there were two forces that helped Camus despite his mother’s silence—school and sports. Albert excelled in school with the assistance the state provided him as a child of a fallen French soldier: he received free health care and money for his education. In fifth grade, his teacher, Louis Germain, became Albert’s patron. Germain helped Camus to overcome the family’s opposition to the pursuit of an education. He also assisted Camus with scholarship applications. The other formative force in the making of Albert Camus was soccer. Through team sports he developed social skills which his family life did not encourage.

His athletic career ended when he was diagnosed with tuberculosis in 1930. The doctor suggested that Camus move in with his Uncle Acault, who was a butcher. It was hoped that the access to red meat would help his
condition. Uncle Acault also had more money to lend Albert for books. He withdrew his support, however, when Albert began seeing the scandalous Simone Hie.

Camus pursued a variety of activities throughout the 1930s. These included his studies, the beginnings of a literary career, active involvement with the Communist party, and writing for a theatrical troupe. Although Camus preferred drama to prose throughout his life, his plays are not as well known as his fiction. In 1933, he entered the University of Algiers, and submitted his thesis in 1936. From 1938 to 1940, he worked as a journalist with the Alger-Republicain. This occupation, as well as the popularity of American authors (like Hemingway), is reflected in the style of The Stranger, which Camus began at this time.

In 1940, Camus divorced his wife—they had been separated for some time—and married Francine Faure. When France fell to Hitler, Camus joined the resistance in Paris. He became editor of the daily newspaper Combat and became the “conscience of France” through his popular editorials. Two years later, he published The Stranger and The Myth of Sisyphus. When France was liberated, Camus returned to Algeria.

After the war, he published an enlarged edition of The Myth of Sisyphus, as well as his most significant play, Caligula. In 1947, another literary classic, The Plague, was published. During the rest of his life, Camus struggled with his health, critics, issues of the Algerian war, and the strain on his marriage caused by his affair with the actress Maria Casarès. His best novel, technically speaking, was The Fall, published in 1956. That novel was followed by a collection of short stories, Exile and Kingdom. In 1957, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Three years later, on January 4, 1960, he was killed in an auto accident.

**Critical Essays: Albert Camus Short Fiction Analysis**

Albert Camus published a single collection of short stories entitled Exile and the Kingdom near the end of his life. Its six stories are an important encapsulation of Camus’s humanistic philosophy enveloped in his quasirealistic style and dramatized by exotic backgrounds. According to Camus’s recondite views, the universe is meaningless; however, the human beings in it may become significant (even happy) if they can acquire and maintain a clear awareness of its ultimate absurdity. Each story in Exile and the Kingdom unfolds a situation which brings the protagonist to an intimation of the lack of lawfulness and coherence in his or her life and depicts the protagonist’s response to this traumatic realization. Some of the stories go no further than this; others move away from understatement and describe wrong-headed or perverse reactions; and the last story offers a solution which seems to step beyond mere awareness of absurdity.

Readers of Camus’s novels and plays will recognize the cavalcade of alienated heroes, the metaphysical paradoxes, and Camus’s own preoccupation with criminals and their police counterparts—all tendered in lucid, tight prose which differentiates him from the strained cerebralisms of more philosophically rigorous existentialists such as Sartre. This collection of short stories also avoids the imperious eloquence and plain sententiousness which often mar Camus’s longer works.

**“The Adulterous Woman”**

“The Adulterous Woman,” first published in English in Redbook magazine, portrays the mounting depression of a housewife (Janine) traveling with a husband (Marcel) who is almost wholly absorbed in selling wools and silks to disdainful, according to Marcel, Arabs who are reluctantly emerging from the wintry Algerian landscape.

Janine is pictured as tall and “thick,” yet possessing a languid sensuality which attracts the desultory glances of bus passengers, pedestrians, and hotel guests. She often returns a look, and in spite of the characteristic prejudices of her class against Arabs she can spontaneously admire one of that race who is striking in his
slender virility. She frequently counters the ennui of the endless bus rides by basking in the adoration of her husband. He can speak of little else but the volume of dry goods he can move, how much profit he will reckon by dispensing with the middleman, and how much he loathes his customers. He has made Janine his refuge from the sordidness and triviality of his life, however, and becomes instantly solicitous when prodded.

Thus, after another day of selling in yet another ordinary town, Janine rebels at the thought of retiring to their icy room for the customary nap before supper. She proposes to follow the hotel manager’s suggestion to “climb up to the terrace around the fort to see the desert,” and Marcel automatically assents. A marvelous description of the twilight desertscape is counterposed against Marcel’s impatient complaint that he is cold and there is nothing to see anyway.

That night, however, Janine slips out of bed to return to the fort. There, alone under the chilly and vast firmament, she suffers a moment of awareness—an epiphany. She feels the sensual presence of her body, and she encompasses the sky full of stars stretched out over her as she lies against the cold parapet. This encounter with the night sky is her act of “adultery,” which she does not share with Marcel, who is oblivious of her absence and only awakes to reach for a bottle of mineral water.

In all this, however, there is a note of disconcerting ambivalence. The distant tone of the narration raises the possibility that the reader has been “taken”: Is this story actually only revelatory of Janine’s disconsolate banality? More important, has Camus played a joke on readers by forcing them to choose between two diversely wretched characters?

“The Guest”

These questions also arise in “The Guest,” the best story in Exile and the Kingdom, also set in North Africa—specifically in the snows of the Atlas Mountains in Algeria. Daru, an Algerian schoolteacher of French extraction, has fully provisioned himself to weather an expected blizzard which has emptied his one-room schoolhouse of its Arab pupils. He is comfortably awaiting its onset when he observes two figures, one on horseback, toiling up the steep slope leading toward the school building. The man on horseback is Balducci, a gendarme dragging behind him a trussed and cowering shepherd who killed his cousin with a billhook during a squabble over a share of grain.

Balducci asks the astonished Daru to safeguard the prisoner for the night and deliver him the next morning to police headquarters at Tinguit, twenty kilometers away. He explains that the Algerian revolt is on and police manpower is stretched thinly over the plateau. When Daru protests that delivering criminals is not his job, Balducci counters by insisting bitterly that “In wartime people do all kinds of jobs.” Then he leaves Daru a revolver and departs.

Daru has little physical fear of the obviously spent murderer but knows full well that he is caught in an impossible situation: Delivering his charge will assure the probably lethal (in view of his isolated circumstances) enmity of the local Arab population; releasing him will make him a rebel and a traitor to his European countrymen. In the first case, his life would be in jeopardy, in the second his career and perhaps his freedom. Daru also feels morally affronted by the repugnant nature of his imposed task. The next day Daru escorts the felon to a trail juncture where he hands him a food package and a thousand francs. He gives him the choice of walking east for two hours to Tinguit and the police, or walking south across the plateau where nomads will shelter him according to their laws of hospitality.

On the way back to his schoolhouse Daru looks behind him and discerns the black dot of the Arab moving toward the police station. Arriving at the schoolhouse he reads a message chalked over his drawing of the four main rivers of France: “You handed over our brother, you will pay for this.”
Thus the paradoxical title of this collection is explained. Daru, like his “guest,” was born and has lived his life in this inhospitable plateau—this is his kingdom. Yet an accidental turn of events has transformed his kingdom into a place of exile. His strategy for eluding this onrushing absurdity has been unavailing; worse, Daru will become a casualty with little time left to savor his newly acquired awareness of the meaninglessness of the universe.

“The Guest,” because of its artistic virtuosity, is a landmark which forces comparisons for English-speaking readers with such pinnacles of the adventure story with moral and epistemological overtones as Jack London’s “To Build a Fire” and Stephen Crane’s “The Blue Hotel.” Apropos of this analysis, however, “The Guest” is an excellent and mercifully succinct distillation of Camus’s outlook and provides a take-off point for an important criticism of it in line with the previous discussion of “The Adulterous Woman.”

At least one critic, John K. Simon, writing in Studies in Short Fiction, shifts the focus of attention from the unsolvable quandary facing Daru to an assertion that Daru himself is morally flawed for abandoning the Arab under the pretense of giving him a choice when it is patent that this outcast is neither morally, psychologically, nor physically (a walk to the police station is shorter than one across the plateau) able to decide on a proper course of action. Daru’s obsession with solitude—as exemplified by the fact that at one point Balducci calls him “cracked,” and also by the puzzling observation that Daru’s hostility toward the Arab and toward his new role as policeman cannot be fully accounted for within the text—explains his abandonment of the prisoner and reinforces the suspicion that Daru does not understand social process. If all this is true, then Camus’s philosophic message becomes irrelevant and Daru is not a victim of an indifferently cruel universe, but rather he is a man who has been consistently guilty of social omissions and blunders.

“The Growing Stone”

The last story in the collection, “The Growing Stone,” has an overtly neopagan motif, a recurring interest of Camus which critics have attributed to his North African upbringing. D’Arrast, a French engineer descended from an aristocratic family, is chauffeured by a Brazilian named Socrates across the jungle to a seaside town where he will build much-needed jetties and roads. During the all-night drive they pass through the town of Registro, which is populated by Japanese immigrants who still dress in their kimonos. Arriving at Iguape, D’Arrast is effusively received by the town officials, who are grateful for his services. The welcome is spoiled, however, by the inexplicable belligerence of the drunken police chief, who loutishly proclaims that D’Arrast’s passport is not in order. D’Arrast insists on touring the quarters where his future laborers reside, and while there, he encounters a ship’s cook who tells him that he survived a shipwreck after making a promise to St. George to carry a one-hundred-pound stone at the forthcoming procession.

D’Arrast also meets a “black Diana” who lures him to a ceremonial dance held the night before the procession. The poor of the town crowd into a large hut and engage in a frenetic, obscene, grotesque, and at times sinister ritual which at first nauseates D’Arrast but then bewitches him. At a certain point, D’Arrast is asked to leave. The ship’s cook, contrary to his resolve to get a good night’s sleep, stays on. The next day the weary cook falters while carrying the rock to the church. In an inspired moment D’Arrast wrests a cork mat from the encouraging crowd and shoulders the stone. Being young, strong, and well rested, he bears it easily; but nearing the portals of the church he veers away from them dramatically and, ignoring the enraged and mystified commands of the mob which dins “to the church,” he heads for the cook’s hovel and hurls the rectangular block onto the glowing fire in the center of the room, where it immediately becomes another idol.

This then is Camus’s tentative answer to the problem of absurdity: In the face of the prevailing incongruity, arbitrariness, and disorganization, human beings can strive for an emotional coherence which sidesteps the question of absurdity, which Camus now views as merely an intellectual problem.

“The Renegade”
“The Renegade” depicts in the first person the psychotic state of mind of a missionary who, after mental and physical torture, surrenders morally to the Saharan heathens he has come to civilize. His tongue cut out, the renegade conducts a frenzied interior monologue as he waits to ambush the priest sent to replace him. Is this tour de force Camus’s revenge upon Christianity? Can it also be construed as an attack upon the paganism which is more favorably presented in “The Growing Stone”? “The Silent Men” is more mundane. Set in a French city, it narrates how a crew of coopers returning to work after a failed strike decide not to communicate with their boss in an attempt to salve their humiliation. In spite of Camus’s socialist sympathies, this story remains one of his few treatments of skilled craftsmen who, in this case, practice an obsolete craft.

“The Artist at Work”

Finally, “The Artist at Work” is notable only because it contains the only humor in the collection. It is an overlong cataloging of the distractions of wife, children, and zealous friends, all of whom drive a moderately talented painter to isolation and artistic impotence. “The Artist at Work,” like the other stories in Exile and the Kingdom, presents themes that are central to Camus’s philosophy. They demonstrate the world of human suffering, solitude, humiliation, and isolation in an absurd world.

Critical Essays: Albert Camus Drama Analysis

Given the depth and scope of Albert Camus’s other published work, it is difficult to consider his plays without reflecting on what they might, or probably should, have been. Surely no other novelist in recent memory has been better suited or more disposed to write for the theater, and none (with the possible exception of Thornton Wilder) has been assured of a potentially more welcoming or receptive audience. Camus’s ideas and pronouncements were a highly marketable commodity in the 1940’s, and it is ironic that his dramatic output failed to meet the flexible standards of what was prepared to be an appreciative audience, perhaps worldwide. The key to the problem may well reside in the discrepancy, noted by McCarthy, between the public and private Camus. In all likelihood it is the private, instinctive Camus who allowed his voice to be heard through the plays, even as audiences might be expecting to hear the somewhat misconstrued author of The Stranger and The Plague. Nor do Camus’s plays, like certain other works initially misunderstood, appear to have improved with age; with the possible exception of Caligula, they remain every bit as baffling and unworkable as they were at their first presentation and are rarely, if ever, revived in production.

It is ironic that Camus, truly a “man of the people” and proud to be one, sought to express his proclaimed “search for modern tragedy” in the accents of neoclassical kings and princes, themselves an upwardly mobile and decidedly artificial convention of seventeenth century France. People in contemporary France, regardless of class, simply do not speak in the simple past or imperfect subjunctive tenses, yet Camus’s characters do, almost without exception. Indeed, the most frequent criticism leveled against Camus’s dramatic characters is that they appear wooden—owing no doubt in part to the stiffness of their verbal expression—while stopping far short of true caricature, a technique that has worked for, and not against, such disparate contemporary dramatists as Jean Anouilh, Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, and even Wilder. Nor did Camus, like Bertolt Brecht, adopt the strategy of setting his characters deliberately against the audience. Quite to the contrary, he appeared to be soliciting the identification of his audience with characters who provide no motivation for bestowing it. Even the most potentially sympathetic spectator is likely to conclude that most of Camus’s characters are little more than ideas with legs—and ill-articulated legs at that.

As Ionesco, Anouilh, and others have amply proved, tragedy need not be couched in eloquent language in order to be effective. Sartre, making no claim to tragedy, nevertheless “crossed the footlights” with his often melodramatic use of street speech and occasional vulgarisms; even if certain of his plays rarely merit classification as literature, Sartre achieved communication with his audience, his ideas readily accessible—a goal that continued to hover just outside the reach of Camus’s dramatic talents. Only in Caligula did Camus
achieve anything resembling credible characters; it is no coincidence that, alone among Camus’s plays, it is also a rousing piece of theater.

**Caligula**

The first of Camus’s plays to be written and the second to be performed, *Caligula* is unquestionably the finest of Camus’s original dramatic efforts, owing in part to its genesis as a production planned for Le Théâtre de l’Équipe by its twenty-five-year-old founder and director. Although not actually staged until its author was past thirty, *Caligula* is, as Camus freely admitted, a young man’s play—with all the predictable strengths and weaknesses. First performed during 1945 with the eventually famous Gérard Philipe in the title role, *Caligula* draws on the sensational accounts of Tranquillus Suetonius, today considered to have been a Roman precursor of what later would be known as yellow journalism. Unfortunately, more responsible observations concerning the reign of Gaius Caesar, alias “Caligula” (12-41 c.e.), have been lost to history; what survives is the dubious testimony of Suetonius, a publicist likely to stress the lurid aspects of any subject matter that fell beneath his hand. For Camus, less interested in sensationalism per se than in a certain perceived logic behind the emperor’s behavior, Caligula emerged as a nearly ideal test case for the limits of human freedom. Strongly influenced by recent and intensive reading in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, Camus projected onto the documented madness of Caligula a highly lucid, logical intelligence. Here, as with the later *The Just Assassins*, Camus disclaims any intention of writing a historical play, despite his appropriation of historical characters and setting. His intention in each case is to bring forth a play of ideas based on, but not necessarily faithful to, the data of history. In Caligula’s case, Suetonius’s account indicates that the emperor was indeed insane, as a result of physiological causes, and had been so for years. In Camus’s version, Caligula has served as the most progressive and humane of rulers until he experiences a sudden blinding vision of the absurd, rather like a religious conversion in reverse. Other characters and situations similarly undergo subtle changes, less in the interests of stagecraft than to elucidate the author’s thinking. As found in Suetonius, the life of Caligula lends itself readily to dramatic presentation. Camus, as actor and director, for once had the instinct not to meddle with an otherwise sure thing. Such recorded incidents as Caligula’s travesties and his awarding of military medals to the most frequent customers of the public brothel are carried to the stage pretty much intact, carefully placed so as to provide support for the author’s basic premise.

As seen by Camus, the youthful emperor Caligula suddenly perceives, on the death of his sister and of his mistress Drusilla, that life has no meaning apart from the sole certainty of death. Wrongly construed as simple grief by the sycophants and nonentities in his entourage, Caligula’s malaise goes far deeper than grief and is metaphysical rather than emotional in origin. From the basic awareness that “men die and are not happy,” Caligula proceeds to question the discrepancy between human reality and human aspirations that Camus would later, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, characterize as the absurd.

Traditionally, it is outsiders and social rejects such as Dostoevski’s “Underground Man” who form such questions, with precious little effect on society, but in the present case the questioner is the most powerful monarch in the so-called civilized world, presumably better able than any other mortal to transform his ruminations into reality. Devoid of hope, Caligula decides instead to live in logic—using his absolute power to ensure that the rest of the world will join him. Irritated, for example, when the imperial treasurer interrupts him in conversation, Caligula chooses to take the man at his word and assumes, as he puts it, that “the treasury is of capital importance.” Soon thereafter, his pun takes on added grisly significance when he orders that all private citizens rewrite their wills, designating the State as the beneficiary; when the government happens to need or want money, it will execute a citizen or two. Borrowed almost verbatim from Suetonius, the Treasury incident acquires new power and eloquence in Camus’s version. In one master stroke, the seemingly mad emperor both ridicules the petty interests of self-important bureaucrats and substitutes his own logic for the incomprehensible caprice of an indifferent universe. After all, he observes, the people in question would all die sooner or later, but perhaps at an inopportune time; far better, he observes, to make their deaths serve some useful purpose.
Throughout the remainder of his reign, Camus’s Caligula continues thus to turn the world on its head, curiously assured of the spectator’s sympathy because he happens to make more sense than most of the characters around him. When taken to task for his atrocities, he points with justifiable pride to the fact that he has waged no wars during his reign, adding that the “smallest war” undertaken by a “reasonable ruler” would in fact have taken ten times the toll in lives exacted by his drastic measures. True, acknowledges his interlocutor, but at least people would understand, wars being a somehow more acceptable way to die. The passage in question is vintage Camus, foreshadowing both The Stranger and The Plague and resounding through the spectator’s mind long after the moment has passed. Why, indeed, should wars be somehow “acceptable”? Why should death in battle or by pillage be accepted as “natural”? In Camus’s terms, the ultimate tragedy of Caligula is that his single-minded pursuit of logic precludes any remnant of solidarity or fraternity with the remainder of the human race; his behavior, therefore, is presented as thought-provoking but hardly exemplary. Caligula’s assassination, onstage as in life, is amply prepared throughout the action as the only logical—and doubtless chosen—result of his bizarre experiment, which is in fact little more than a cosmic form of suicide. Unlike his historical counterpart, however, Camus’s Caligula leaves in his wake an exemplary, memorable, and oddly inspiring message, exhorting the spectator to share in the best parts of his peculiarly distorted dream.

Sufficiently rich in spectacle to counteract its relatively heavy burden of thought and exposition, Caligula, although the first of Camus’s plays, is not only his finest but also markedly superior to the routine work of dramatists who are judged to be greater than he. The dialogue, although formal, moves quickly, with frequent wit and repartee, animated by a playfulness of spirit that either deserted Camus soon thereafter or at least turned backward on itself, producing such tortured distortions of irony as those to be found in The Misunderstanding.

The Misunderstanding

Presumably helped in its initial performances by the versatile Maria Casarès, generally considered to be the love of Camus’s life but here cast ironically against type, The Misunderstanding nevertheless failed in its premiere and continually defied its author’s efforts to revive it, either in text or in production. Despite several highly memorable scenes—as memorable as some of the best in Caligula—The Misunderstanding remains academic and wooden, peopled with characters who somehow fail to achieve credibility despite their frequent claims to suffering and their occasional outbursts of violence.

Enigmatically and ironically referred to in Camus’s early notes as a “comedy,” The Misunderstanding may be seen as a parody of traditional comic procedure, with clues left hanging and double meanings that fall on deaf ears. Jan, the would-be protagonist in a comedy that is of his own making, becomes a minor and expendable character in “an order . . . where no one is recognized.” Totally dehumanized by the hard work and squalor from which Jan has come to rescue them, his mother and sister Martha are barely speaking the same language that he is; at any rate, all the words seem to have different meanings. Better tuned to the accents of the absurd, Martha and her mother can make little sense of the smiling traveler from warmer, sunny climes, and even less can he make sense of them. Recalling Camus’s description in The Myth of Sisyphus of the absurd as “this divorce between the actor and his backdrop,” Jan often appears as a witless comedian who has somehow stumbled into the wrong theater. Traveling under an assumed name, as if in a spirit of playfulness, he will wait in vain to be recognized; the simple truth is that his mother and sister are past caring. His death at their hands is utterly devoid of any recognition that might afford him tragic stature; oblivious to what is happening, he simply drifts off into drugged sleep before being drowned in the river.

The basic outline of The Misunderstanding is to be found in the novel The Stranger, in the form of a faded news clipping read and reread by Meursault in his prison cell. Considerably expanded for the stage, the bleak folktale nevertheless is little changed; unable to get inside the characters, the spectator is likely to agree with Meursault that “the fellow probably deserved it a little” and that “one must not play games.” The only truly
accessible character in *The Misunderstanding* is Jan’s wife, Maria. Yet as critic Edward Freeman observes, Maria’s very humanity tends to intervene between the spectator and a deeper understanding of the other characters. Even less attuned than her husband to what is actually happening, Maria somehow invites the audience to share her helplessness rather than probe more deeply, for example, into the murderous character of Martha.

A distant spiritual cousin of the homicidal Caligula, Martha is perhaps the most intriguing, if ultimately the least successful, of Camus’s characters in any genre. Unlike Caligula, a man of power and some presumable education, Martha simply cannot be made much more thoughtful or lucid than she is and still remain in character. If she is to be credible at all, her instinctive awareness of, and complicity with, the absurd must appear preverbal, perhaps even preconscious—a cosmic and ultimately malevolent indifference. Unlike such other bloodstained ladies of the stage as Medea and Lady Macbeth, she must appear less villainous than simply hollow or dehumanized—even at the risk of appearing merely boring. Although to a lesser degree, the mother and Jan present a similar potential weakness, failing fully to elicit the spectators’ involvement; given the spareness and austerity of Camus’s exposition, spectators simply do not know enough about the characters to interest themselves in their fate.

With the possible exception of *Caligula*, *The Misunderstanding* is the most often reworked and revised of Camus’s plays, and some commentators suggest that Camus was planning still another revision at the time of his death. As in the cast of *Caligula*, however, later does not necessarily mean better, and the latest extant version of *The Misunderstanding* may well be the least effective. Prepared soon after Camus’s translation of Dino Buzzati’s *Un Caso clinico* (1953), a truly absurdist play, the 1958 text of *The Misunderstanding* reflects Camus’s exposure to the new idiom in ways that detract from his original concept of comedy parodied. In its final form, *The Misunderstanding* thus remains even more baffling than before and almost totally ineffective on the stage.

**State of Siege**

Following the success of his novel *The Plague*, Camus was invited by the actor and director Jean-Louis Barrault to adapt some of the novel’s premises for the stage. Working closely with Barrault, who at the time was interested in adapting some of the dramatic theories of Antonin Artaud, Camus eventually developed *State of Siege*, an elaborate, spectacular political parable set in medieval Cádiz. Despite the best efforts of Barrault, Casarès, and a number of other distinguished performers, the play was a resounding failure and is still considered the weakest of Camus’s original efforts for the stage.

**The Just Assassins**

Considerably more successful, and effective, was *The Just Assassins*, mounted the following year. As in the case of *Caligula*, Camus in *The Just Assassins* borrows from history, not to re-create it, but to explore the possible thoughts and motivations of historical characters.

The characters honored in the play’s title are the Russian insurgents who sought to overthrow czarist rule in 1905—to Camus’s view, a far more honorable group than the revolutionaries who actually succeeded twelve years later. Reflecting many of the concerns to be addressed in his essay *The Rebel*, then in progress, the play draws a fine distinction between revolution and revolt, the former being a corruption of the latter. The main historical figure in *The Just Assassins* is Ivan Kaliayev, a poet and student who renounced his first attempt on the life of a grand duke in order to spare the lives of two children, the duke’s niece and nephew, who happened to be traveling with him. (His second attempt, two days later, with the children absent, succeeded, whereupon Kaliayev delivered himself up to a swift trial and certain execution.) In retrospect, it is easy to see that the figure of Kaliayev would hold particular appeal for the author of *The Plague*, in which Dr. Rieux expresses his inability to believe in a God “who allows children to suffer and die.”
In Camus’s play, the assassination and execution take place offstage, narrated rather than portrayed; for Camus, the real interest resides in the characters’ motivations and emotions. Somewhat less stylized than the verbal barricades of The Misunderstanding, the debates and interactions of The Just Assassins produce more than their share of true dramatic satisfaction. Kaliayev, Dora Brilliant, and the others emerge as rounded characters worthy of the spectator’s interest and sympathy. (The single wholly fictitious character, Stepan Fedorov, serves primarily as a terrorist counterpoise to Kaliayev’s considerably more moderate views.) Indeed, in this play, Camus nearly arrived at the creation of modern tragedy.

The Just Assassins was to be Camus’s last original work for the theater; for the remainder of his brief life, he would devote his playwriting talents to the adaptation of other people’s work for the stage, frequently with considerable success, and to the revision of his own plays.

**Critical Essays: Albert Camus Long Fiction Analysis**

Two persistent themes animate all of Albert Camus’s writing and underlie his artistic vision: One is the enigma of the universe, which is breathtakingly beautiful yet indifferent to life; the other is the enigma of man, whose craving for happiness and meaning in life remains unextinguished by his full awareness of his own mortality and of the sovereign indifference of his environment. At the root of every novel, every play, every essay, even every entry in his notebooks can be found Camus’s incessant need to probe and puzzle over the ironic double bind that he perceived to be the essence of the human condition: Man is endowed with the imagination to conceive an ideal existence, but neither his circumstances nor his own powers permit its attainment. The perception of this hopeless double bind made inescapable for Camus the obligation to face up to an overriding moral issue for man: Given man’s circumscribed condition, are there honorable terms on which his life can be lived?

**A Happy Death**

In his earliest attempt at casting these themes in fictional form, Camus made use of the traditional novel of personal development, or bildungsroman, to describe one young man’s encounters with life, love, and death. The result was an episodic novel, obviously based on his own experiences but composed in the third person and so lacking in unity and coherence as to betray the central idea on which he wished to focus: the problem of accepting death. He called the novel A Happy Death and showed his hero resolutely fixing his consciousness on the inanimate world around him, striving to become one with the stones and achieve a happy death by blending gently and painlessly into the silent harmony of the universe while retaining his lucidity until his last breath. The book’s last sentence strives to convince the reader by rhetoric that the hero has indeed achieved the happy death he sought: “And stone among the stones, he returned in the joy of his heart to the truth of motionless worlds.”

Camus seems to have sensed, however, that the rhetoric was unconvincing and that the ideal of a happy death was an illusion. Perhaps he even recognized that his hero’s struggle to remain conscious of life until his last breath was, in reality, a protest against death and a contradiction of his desire to make the transition to death serene and imperceptible. It was doubtless some such sense of the book’s failure that convinced Camus not to publish this work, composed when he was not yet twenty-five. Its posthumous publication has given scholars the opportunity to see Camus’s first halting steps in trying to formulate the subtle and complex themes of the novels that were to make him great.

**The Stranger**

The Stranger, Camus’s second attempt at writing a novel, includes a number of the scenes, characters, and situations found in A Happy Death (Mersault, the hero of A Happy Death, becomes Meursault in The
Stranger). A detailed comparison of the two novels, however, makes it clear that The Stranger, which appeared in 1942, four years and many events after Camus abandoned A Happy Death, is a wholly different work in both conception and theme. No longer preoccupied with happiness in death, Camus turned his attention in The Stranger to the problem of happiness in life, to man’s irrational and desperate need to find meaning in existence. His protagonist, Meursault, is not the frail, sophisticated, death-haunted figure of the earlier novel, but rather a robust primitive who seems eerily devoid of the normal attitudes, values, and culturally induced feelings of his society, as though he had been brought up on some other planet—a “stranger” in the fullest sense of the word. Moreover, Camus hit upon the device of first-person narration as the most effective and dramatic means of confronting his readers with his disturbing protagonist, so alien to his environment. The famous opening words shock the reader into an awareness of the disquieting strangeness of the narrator: Mama died today. Or perhaps yesterday, I don’t know. I received a telegram from the home: “Mother passed away. Funeral tomorrow. Yours truly.” That doesn’t mean anything. Perhaps it was yesterday.

Shrewdly focusing on a mother’s death as a revealing touchstone of humankind’s most deeply ingrained social attitudes, these words achieve a double effect: They tell the reader that the son of the deceased mother can speak of her death without any of the expected symptoms of grief, but, at the same time, they remind the reader that the rest of society, having no familial ties with the deceased, habitually masks its indifference under empty rhetorical formulas such as the telegraphic announcement.

This dual perspective is fully developed in subsequent chapters as the basic theme of the book: While Meursault shows by his own forthright account of his life that he does not share his society’s conventional notions about death, religion, family, friendship, love, marriage, and ambition, he also manages to reveal—often without realizing it—that those conventional notions are often shallow, hypocritical, or delusory and constitute the pathetic inventions of a society desperate to invest its existence with a meaning it does not have. Thus, when Meursault, asked by his boss whether he would be interested in an assignment to establish a Paris office for his boss’s business, says that he has no interest in living in Paris, the reader recognizes that Meursault simply does not believe that material surroundings can make his life any different. At the same time, the boss’s dismayed reaction to Meursault’s indifference to opportunity subtly disturbs the reader with the suspicion that, after all, the boss may have a touching but misplaced faith in the value of ambition. A similar moment occurs when Meursault and his girlfriend, Marie, discuss love and marriage. The reader is surely made uncomfortable by Meursault’s casualness in saying that he does not know what love is, but that he is willing to marry Marie if she wants it. It is, however, a different order of discomfort that overcomes the reader when Marie insists that marriage is a very serious matter and Meursault calmly replies that it is not.

All of part 2 of the novel, devoted to Meursault’s trial after he has killed an Arab, brings additional and even more disturbing changes on the same dual perspective, with Meursault showing no awareness or acceptance of conventional beliefs about justice, murder, legal procedures, and the nature of evidence, while all the “normal” people involved show unexamined or self-deceiving convictions about all such matters. The ironic meaning that emerges from the novel is that although Meursault is guilty of taking a life, society sentences him to death not for his crime, with which it seems incapable of dealing, but for his refusal to live by society’s values, for not “playing the game.” As Camus himself laconically remarked, his novel means that any man who does not weep at his mother’s funeral risks being condemned to death.

Critics have regularly protested that, in The Stranger, Camus manipulates his readers’ emotions, inducing sympathy for Meursault even though he is a moral monster and ridiculing everyone else as representative of a society afraid to face reality, hence threatened by Meursault’s clear-eyed and unsentimental acceptance of the world. Such protests are justified, however, only if one assumes that Camus intended The Stranger to be a realistic representation of the world, holding the mirror up to nature. In fact, Meursault is not a believable human figure, the events of the novel are but dimly evoked and unconvincingly motivated, and the very existence of the text itself, as Meursault’s first-person account of events, is never explained. In The Stranger, Camus makes almost no concessions to the conventional procedures of realism, constructing instead a kind of
mythic tale of philosophical intent to dramatize an imaginary confrontation between man’s basic nature as a simple, sensual being and his grandly narcissistic self-image as an intelligent being whose every gesture has transcendent significance. Read as a kind of poetic allegory rather than as an exemplary tale of human conduct, *The Stranger* is seen as a powerful depiction of man’s painfully divided soul, at once joyous for the gift of life and miserable at the absence of any discernible purpose in that life and at the indifference of the surrounding universe. Viewed that way, *The Stranger* deserves its reputation as one of the great works of art of the first half of the twentieth century.

**The Plague**

The allegorical mode is given a much more detailed and realistically human foundation in Camus’s next novel, *The Plague*, regarded by many critics as his masterpiece. This time, Camus makes a concerted effort to create a strong sense of place in a real setting and to depict fully rounded and believable characters. With the vividness of concrete details and actual place-names, Camus takes the reader to the city of Oran, in Algeria—a city of which he had intimate personal knowledge, having lived there for an extended period—and describes the impact on that real place of an imaginary outbreak of bubonic plague. The reader shares the first frightening discovery of rats dying in the streets and apartment house hallways and experiences the spread of terror and panic as the first human victims of the plague appear in random locations around the city. Soon, the city is ordered closed, quarantined from the rest of the world, and the authorities try to mobilize the trapped population and lay down strict sanitation rules to try to limit the impact of a disease they know they cannot cure.

The heart of the novel is the depiction of the various ways in which individuals react to the fear and isolation imposed by this sudden state of siege, in which the invading army is invisible. To convey the variety of responses to such an extreme and concentrated crisis in human affairs, Camus deliberately eschews the convenient device of the omniscient narrator, making the depiction of every event and scene an eyewitness account in some form: the spoken words of reports or dialogues, the written words of letters or private diaries, and, as the main device, the written record of the daily observations of the novel’s main character, Dr. Rieux. Whereas in *The Stranger* first-person narration is primarily a device of characterization, used to portray an alien figure’s disconcertingly remote and hollow personality, in *The Plague* it is a device of narrative realism, used to reduce devastatingly incomprehensible events to a human, hence believable, scale by portraying the way these events are seen by a representative group of ordinary citizens.

*The Plague* differs from its predecessor not only technically but also thematically. Camus’s inspiration for *The Plague* was no philosophical abstraction but a specific event of his own life: the frustration and despair he experienced during the war, when the aftermath of the Allied invasion of North Africa trapped his wife in Oran (while he was in the Resistance organization in the Massif Central) and cut off all communication between them. That experience started the fictional idea germinating in his mind, and a literary model—Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722)—gave the idea more concrete form.

Central to the idea of *The Plague*, certainly, is the theme of man’s encounter with death rather than the theme of man’s interpretation of life, which dominates *The Stranger*. Indeed, with *The Plague*, Camus was returning to the preoccupation of his earliest work of fiction, *A Happy Death*, but with a major new emphasis. *The Plague* concerns not an individual’s quest in relation to death but a collectivity’s involuntary confrontation with it. In *The Plague*, death is depicted as a chance outgrowth of an indifferent nature that suddenly, and for no apparent reason, becomes an evil threat to humankind. Death in the form of a plague is unexpected, irrational—a manifestation of that absurdity, that radical absence of meaning in life that is a major underlying theme of *The Stranger*. In *The Plague*, however, Camus proposes the paradox that when death is a manifestation of the absurd, it galvanizes something in a person’s spirit that enables the individual to join with others to fight against death and thus give meaning and purpose to life. From evil may come happiness, this novel seems to suggest: It is a painful irony of the human condition that individuals often discover their own
capacities for courage and for fraternal affection—that is, for happiness—only if they are forced by the threat of evil to make the discovery.

The hint of optimism in this paradoxical theme—happiness is, after all, possible for some if the circumstances are dire enough—is, however, insufficient to offset the fundamental pessimism of The Plague. A glance at the fates of the main characters will make the basic bleakness of this work manifest. At the center of the action is Bernard Rieux, a doctor who risks his life every day to lead the fight against the plague and who, more than anyone else in the novel, experiences the satisfaction and the joy of finding himself equal to a heroic task and feeling with others a fraternal bond engendered by their common struggle. His satisfaction is brief and his joys few, however. He knows that he cannot cure victims of the plague and must suppress his sympathy for them if he is to be effective in palliating their suffering and in keeping them from infecting others. The result of this bind is that Rieux strikes his patients and their families as cold and indifferent; he ends up being hated by those he is trying to help. The fraternal bond with others who are trying to help develops in only a few instances, since most of his fellow citizens are too frightened or egocentric to join him in the effort. Moreover, where the bond does develop, it proves too tenuous to penetrate his natural isolation.

The limits of the fraternal bond are most graphically expressed by the moment in the novel when Rieux and Jean Tarrou (a traveler through whose journal part of the novel is related), seeing the first signs that the plague is receding, decide to go for a swim together, in celebration. The point is carefully made that, while each feels a sense of fraternity with the other as they swim in the same water, each is also conscious of being ultimately quite alone in the joy and freedom of moving serenely through the water and forgetting the plague for a short while. In spite of the shared emotion that unites them, each feels the swim to be predominantly a solitary experience. Finally, when the plague does end, Rieux finds himself strangely empty and alienated from the joyous crowds now once more filling the streets of Oran; the urgency of his task no longer exists to summon forth his courage. Indeed, because he has lost those dearest to him—his wife and Tarrou—he feels more alone than ever after the plague has gone.

The other important characters fare no better than Rieux: Tarrou is killed by the plague; Joseph Grand suffers from it but recovers and resumes his self-imposed task of writing a novel, of which he has yet to complete the first sentence, because he has endlessly revised and recast it in a fruitless search for perfection; Rembart, a journalist who is trapped in Oran by the plague, leaves when it is over, but without having written anything about it, having found his profession inadequate to such an awesome task; and Cottard, who engages in black-market profiteering during the plague, goes crazy when the plague ends, shooting citizens at random until he is caught and killed by the police. There is little in this novel to nourish an optimistic outlook, except for the hesitant and tentative statement of Rieux, at the end of his chronicle, that amid the ravages of pestilence, one learns that “there are, in men, more things to admire than to despise.”

The Plague is the longest, the most realistic, and artistically the most impressive of Camus’s novels, offering a richly varied cast of characters and a coherent and riveting plot, bringing an integrated world memorably to life while stimulating the reader’s capacity for moral reflection. In spite of its vivid realism, The Plague is no less mythical and allegorical in its impact than is The Stranger. When first published, The Plague was widely interpreted as a novel about the German Occupation and the French Resistance, with the plague symbolizing the evil presence of the Nazis. Since the 1940’s, however, more universal themes and symbols have been discovered in the book, including the frighteningly random nature of evil and the perception that humankind’s conquest of evil is never more than provisional, that the struggle will always have to be renewed. It has also been widely recognized that The Plague is, in significant degree, a profound meditation on the frustrating limits of human language both as a means of communication and as a means of representing the truth about human existence. The discovery of that theme has made The Plague the most modern of Camus’s novels, the one with the most to say to future generations of Camus’s readers.
For nearly a decade after the publication of *The Plague*, impeded by the consequences of fame, Camus struggled to find enough time and privacy to compose a new work of fiction and to complete philosophical and theatrical writings begun before he wrote *The Plague*. In the mid-1950’s, he began to compose a group of short stories with the common theme of the condition of the exile, and it was one of those stories that he was suddenly inspired to expand into a short novel written in the form of a monologue and published in 1956 as *The Fall*.

**The Fall**

The product of a troubled time in Camus’s life, *The Fall* is a troubling work, full of brilliant invention, dazzling wordplay, and devastating satire, but so profoundly ironic and marked by so many abrupt shifts in tone as to leave the reader constantly off balance and uncertain of the author’s viewpoint or purpose. This difficulty in discerning the book’s meaning is inherent in its basic premise, for the work records a stream of talk—actually one side of a dialogue—by a Frenchman who haunts a sleazy bar in the harbor district of Amsterdam and who does not trouble to hide the fact that most of what he says, including his name, is invented. Because he is worldly and cultivated, his talk is fascinating and seizes the attention of his implied interlocutor (who is also, of course, the reader) with riveting force. The name he gives himself is Jean-Baptiste Clamence, a name that evokes the biblical figure of the prophet John the Baptist as the voice crying in the wilderness (*vox clamantis in deserto*) and that coincides neatly with the occupation he claims to follow, also of his own invention: judge-penitent.

When Clamence remarks to his interlocutor, near the end of his five-day monologue, “I know what you are thinking: it is very difficult to distinguish the true from the false in what I am telling you. I confess that you are right,” the reader feels that Camus has suddenly made a personal intervention into the novel in order to warn the reader that he or she has been deliberately manipulated by Clamence’s playacting and has every right to feel bewildered. Camus thus signals to the reader that the book’s troubling impact has been calculated and deliberate from the start. Only in the closing pages of the novel does he clarify the purpose of Clamence’s invented narrative and the meaning of his invented calling, but the explanation comes too late—deliberately so, for the reader can never be free of doubt about whether Clamence’s entire performance has been designed to raise questions concerning what is true and what is false, what is good and what is evil.

Clamence’s “explanation” is, in fact, the most unsettling element in the book. He pointedly admits to his interlocutor that he has been penitently “confessing” his own sins in a carefully controlled pattern, only in order to induce his interlocutor to “confess” in turn, thus enabling Clamence to play the role of judge. Clamence begins his “confession” by describing his successful career in Paris as a much-admired lawyer known for his defense of “widows and orphans”—that is, the helpless and disadvantaged of society. He had every reason to see himself as a man of virtue, he says, until he began to “hear” a woman’s mocking laughter whenever he looked at himself in the mirror with those feelings of self-satisfaction. The mocking laughter reminded him that his lawyerly altruism was only a mask for selfishness and forced him to recall an incident he had tried to forget: Crossing a bridge over the Seine one night, he had seen a young woman throw herself into the water and had made no effort to rescue her or to get help, instead walking hurriedly away without looking back. The mocking laughter was thus his conscience taunting him with the suppressed memory of his guilt: The admired man of virtue was in reality a fraud, a sinner like everyone else.

Clamence goes on to explain that thereafter he had found it increasingly difficult to continue his career in Paris and live with his guilt. At the same time, he could not give up his need to feel morally superior to others. His solution to this private inner conflict, he then declares, was his brilliant invention of a new career for himself as a judge-penitent. He closed his Paris office and moved to the harbor section of Amsterdam—which, he notes, is in the center of the concentric circles of Amsterdam’s canals, like the ninth circle of Hell in Dante’s *Inferno*, and is, moreover, “the site of one of the greatest crimes of modern history,” meaning the Nazi destruction of the entire Jewish community of Amsterdam. In these new surroundings, he
not only could assuage his guilt by the feeling that he was in the ninth circle of Hell, where he belonged, but also could have access to the endless succession of tourists who gravitated to that spot, whom he could “help,” in such propitious surroundings, to recognize their own guilt as well. His “help” consisted of a recital of his own sins, so arranged as to emphasize their universality, thus subtly prompting his listener to confess the same sins in turn. In this way, Clamence uses his perfected performance as a penitent to put himself in the deeply satisfying position of judge, hearing his listener’s confession while basking in the warm glow of his own moral superiority. Because everyone, without exception, is a guilty sinner, says Clamence, he has solved the dilemma of how to live happily with his nagging guilt. The essential secret, he says, is to accuse oneself first—and of all seven cardinal sins—thereby earning the right to accuse everyone else.

Clamence’s “solution,” which concludes The Fall, is a burlesque of moral reasoning, underscoring the bitterness of the satire that is at the heart of this novel. Like Camus’s other novels, The Fall is an exploration of man’s moral nature and his passionate search for happiness in a world that is indifferent to such spiritual values, but unlike any of his other works of fiction, The Fall is both unrelievedly pessimistic and irreducibly ambiguous. In Clamence’s confession, is Camus’s intention to castigate himself for having taken his own fame too seriously and thus expiate his personal sin of pride? Many critics read the book that way when it appeared in 1956. Or is he using Clamence, rather, to avenge himself on his enemies, whom he thought too quick to adopt a tone of moral superiority in judging his position on the Algerian Civil War? Many other critics saw The Fall that way. Generations later, it seems reasonable to suggest that both interpretations have validity. The Fall is a comic masterpiece, remarkably parallel in its tone, its themes, and its ambiguity to Camus’s short story “Jonas,” written about the same time—a story in which, everyone agrees, the author attempted to come to terms with his artistic sterility and with the conflict he felt between public obligation and the need for privacy.

“Jonas” ends with a celebrated verbal ambiguity: The painter-hero of the story, after long meditation, translates his thought to canvas by means of a single word, but it is impossible to discern whether that word is “solitary” or “solidary.” It is tempting to conclude, using that short story as analogue, that the ambiguity of The Fall is also deliberate and that Camus meant his work both as private confession and public condemnation. Those two meanings, the one private and the other public, are surely intended to combine retrospectively in the reader’s mind to form Camus’s universal condemnation of man’s moral bankruptcy. As the title is meant to suggest, The Fall is a modern parable about Original Sin and the Fall of Man.

There is reason to believe that the unrelenting pessimism of The Fall was not Camus’s final word on humanity but was rather the expression of a temporary discouragement that he had almost succeeded in dispelling at the time of his death. In 1959, he was at work on a new novel, to be called “Le Premier Homme,” the theme of which was to be a celebration of the formative experience of his Algerian youth. The First Man was not published until long after his death, in 1994; it addresses from a particularly personal perspective the subject that, at bottom, always animated Camus’s fiction—the enigma of human beings’ struggle against the indifference of creation and the unquenchable thirst for moral significance in life. Camus’s unforgettable contribution to the ongoing dialogue inspired by that vast subject is embodied in the three great novels he managed to complete before his untimely death.

**Critical Essays: Albert Camus World Literature Analysis**

When Camus received the Nobel Prize in 1957, the citation lauded him “for his important literary production, which with clear-sighted earnestness illuminated the problems of the human conscience in our times.” Camus died less than three years later without augmenting what was a relatively meager oeuvre: three novels and a handful of plays, short stories, and essays. It is possible to read his entire life’s work, including the posthumously published autobiographical fragment Le Premier Homme, in less time than it takes to absorb one novel by some of his more hermetic contemporaries.
Camus is widely read and fervently admired in a way few other twentieth century writers are. In a memoir of Robert F. Kennedy, journalist Jack Newfield recalls that the senator always traveled with a copy of Camus’s writings: “He discovered Camus when he was thirty-eight, in the months of solitude and grief after his brother’s death. By 1968 he had read, and re-read, all of Camus[‘s] essays, dramas and novels. But he more than just read Camus. He memorized him, meditated about him, quoted him and was changed by him.”

Heir to the French tradition of literary crusaders, of activist authors like Michel de Montaigne, Voltaire, Victor Hugo, and Émile Zola, Camus is the lucid moral conscience of his era. His fiction, drama, and essays pose fundamental questions about individual identity and social bonds that cannot be ignored in the century that produced Auschwitz and Hiroshima. Camus served in the underground Resistance to the Nazi occupation of France and after the war refused to confine himself to a purely literary role. He became embroiled in many of the most tumultuous political controversies of the time—colonialism, capital punishment, racism, and East-West alliances. Even posthumously, he remains a public figure challenging his readers to a stringent standard of candor and compassion.

“A novel,” wrote Camus in his review of Jean-Paul Sartre’s novel La Nausée (1938; Nausea, 1949), “is never anything but a philosophy expressed in images.” Camus’s own novels are probably much more than just a philosophy expressed in images but they are never anything less. The Stranger, The Plague, and The Fall are among the most popular and esteemed books ever published in France; translated into dozens of languages, they remain not only in print but also in demand long after most other books of their era have been forgotten. Their appeal is less in plot and characterization than in the utter honesty with which they pose questions of personal, social, and cosmic identity. The scrupulously austere style that Camus honed was an embarrassment to the temptations of bogus rhetoric.

Camus came to Paris in the 1940’s with a proletarian and Algerian background that set him apart from the erudite middle-class French intellectuals who befriended him. Along with Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Camus emerged as one of the leaders of existentialism, a philosophical movement that was extremely popular following World War II. Existentialism has its roots in the writings of German philosophers, particularly Edmund Husserl, Karl Jaspers, and Martin Heidegger, though its legacy can be traced back through Friedrich Nietzsche and Søren Kierkegaard to as far as the pre-Socratic Greek Heraclitus of Ephesus. Never a systematic philosophy, existentialism was, in fact, a product of skepticism toward the intellectual arrogance of rational systems. Existentialism was the embodiment of a postwar zeitgeist cynical toward the shibboleths and values that had facilitated and camouflaged global catastrophe. It insisted that existence precedes essence, that nothing is given—nothingness is the given. In the vast, indifferent universe, the individual is ineluctably responsible for creating his or her own identity. Five A’s—alienation, absurdity, angst, anomie, and anxiety—seemed indispensable to the vocabulary of anyone who aspired to speak the language of existentialism, and there were many.

For a while, particularly in philosophical writings such as The Myth of Sisyphus, Camus was a very prominent existentialist voice, and the Algerian newcomer whom Sartre later called a “Cartesian of the absurd” became a frequent companion of Sartre and de Beauvoir during the heady days following the liberation of Paris. Camus, however, became increasingly uncomfortable in the role of high priest of the new cult of the posthumous God. Rejecting the faddishness of it all, he began emphasizing differences between his ideas and those of Sartre and insisted that he was not an existentialist. Following their feud in 1951, he no longer even called himself a friend of Sartre.

Whether or not they are technically “existentialist,” and whether or not the term has ceased to have any clear definition, Camus’s books are an embodiment of the attitudes of many Europeans at the middle of the twentieth century. Behind novels that are tolerant of everything but falsehood lies widespread bitterness over the failure of the crusade to save democracy in Spain, the fall of France’s Third Republic, the Nazi genocide, and the prospects of nuclear annihilation.
“Phony” is Holden Caulfield’s favorite term of derision in J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, a popular novel published in 1951 during the peak of Camus’s career, and the term applies as well to everything that Meursault, Rieux, and Clamence despise in Camus’s fictional worlds. Camus, for whom metaphysical mutiny was a starting point for full awareness, saw a development in his own writings “from an attitude of solitary revolt to the recognition of a community whose struggles must be shared.” The evolution of his work was cut short by a fatal automobile accident. What he did leave behind is a legacy that Sartre recognized in the eulogy he published three days after his erstwhile comrade’s shocking death: “Camus could never cease to be one of the principal forces in our cultural domain, nor to represent, in his own way, the history of France and of this century.”

**The Stranger**

First published: *L’Étranger*, 1942 (English translation, 1946)

Type of work: Novel

*This terse account describes how a man kills a stranger and suffers the consequences of actions that he never intended or even understood.*

*The Stranger* offers one of the most striking openings in modern fiction: “Mama died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don’t know.” Immediately introduced is a character, Meursault, so disconnected from chronology and other human beings that he is one of twentieth century literature’s most memorable embodiments of alienation, of an absurdist world where social bonds are a sham. The British edition of Camus’s first published novel translates the title as *The Outsider*, and Meursault indeed finds himself a marginal figure in a decentered universe where private and immediate sensations have displaced objective norms.

Meursault, an employee of a shipping company, participates in the rituals of his mother’s funeral and, though he realizes he is supposed to be playing the role of bereaved son, cannot feel anything for the old woman’s corpse. Shortly after returning to Algiers, Meursault goes to the beach, picks up a woman, Marie Cardona, and takes her to the movies and then to bed.

The following Sunday, Meursault and Marie are invited by Raymond Sintès, a raffish neighbor, to spend the day at the beach. During the outing, they are trailed and menaced by two Arab men who are apparently resentful of the way in which Raymond has abused a woman. During a solitary walk along the shore, Meursault encounters one of the Arabs again. It is oppressively hot, and the knife that the Arab wields glistens blindingly in the sun. Without premeditation or reflection, Meursault takes the gun that Raymond has given him and fires five shots into the stranger.

Narrated in Meursault’s own affectless voice, *The Stranger* consists of two sections. The first recounts the events leading up to the fatal shooting, and the second reports its aftermath—Meursault’s imprisonment, trial, conviction, and impending execution. Part 2 is in effect a commentary on part 1, an attempt to find coherence in one man’s random actions. Marie, Raymond, the owner of the café that Meursault frequents, his mother’s elderly friend, and others testify in court about the events in part 1. Both attorneys attempt to find some pattern. In the story that Meursault’s lawyer tells, all the details paint the portrait of an innocent man acting in self-defense.

Yet the prosecutor finds a different design. For him, Meursault’s callousness about his mother’s death is symptomatic of a cold-blooded murderer, and it is that reading that the jury accepts when it sentences Meursault to death by guillotine. Meursault, however, rejects the specious patterns that both attorneys impose on events. He also refuses consolation from the prison chaplain, who offers him a kind of cosmic narrative in which everything is linked to a vast providential scheme.
Alone in his cell, Meursault realizes that despite the lies people tell to camouflage the truth, all are condemned to death. Uncomfortable with the florid rhetoric that distracts a reader from stark realities, he becomes a champion of candor. In his spare, honest style and his recognition that life is gratuitous and resistant to human attempts to catalog and rationalize it, Meursault is prepared to face extinction liberated from all illusions. He is, wrote Camus in 1955, “not a piece of social wreckage, but a poor and naked man enamored of a sun that leaves no shadows. Far from being bereft of all feeling, he is animated by a passion that is deep because it is stubborn, a passion for the absolute and for truth.”

The Plague

First published: La Peste, 1947 (English translation, 1948)

Type of work: Novel

Inhabitants of Oran, Algeria, are tested by an epidemic that devastates the city.

The Plague, which propelled Camus into international celebrity, is both an allegory of World War II and a universal meditation on human conduct and community. Organized into five sections, The Plague recounts the collective ordeal of Oran, Algeria, in the throes of an outbreak of bubonic plague. At the outset, even before the sudden proliferation of dead rats and sick humans that persuades reluctant officials to declare an epidemic, Oran is described as a drab, ugly city whose inhabitants are preoccupied with commerce.

Trapped within Oran after a quarantine is imposed are the novel’s principal characters: Bernard Rieux, a physician separated from the ailing wife he sent to a sanatorium before the outbreak of the plague; Raymond Rambert, a Parisian journalist on assignment in Oran; Jean Tarrou, a stranger who takes an active part in opposing the epidemic; Joseph Grand, a municipal clerk obsessed with composing a perfect sentence; Paneloux, a Jesuit priest who delivers two crucial sermons during the course of the plague; and Cottard, a black-market opportunist.

Camus begins his novel with an epigraph from Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe (1719) that invites readers to read the book as a veiled representation of something other than merely an epidemic in Oran. In a 1955 letter to critic Roland Barthes, the author specified the terms of the allegory; “The Plague, which I wanted to be read on a number of levels, nevertheless has as its obvious content the struggle of the European resistance movements against Nazism. The proof of this is that although the specific enemy is nowhere named, everyone in every European country recognized it.”

The book is, moreover, a meditation on human solidarity and individual responsibility. What is the logical and ethical response to a universe in which suffering prevails and effort seems futile? In the first of two sermons strategically positioned in part 2 and part 4 of the five-part chronicle, Paneloux posits an anthropomorphic God who has sent the plague as retribution for human sin. After witnessing the agonizing death of an innocent child, however, Paneloux revises his theodicy to reconcile unmerited torment with belief in a logical and benevolent Providence.

Tarrou, a magistrate’s son who left home in revulsion over state executions, remains forever opposed to a scheme of things in which cruelty triumphs. His selfless, if hopeless, dedication to the struggle against the plague—both the actual disease and the metaphorical plague he contends is the human condition—offers a sharp contrast to the egoism of Cottard, who exploits the misfortunes of Oran for personal advantage. Rambert’s initial reaction to the quarantine is concern for his personal happiness, for how he can escape from the city and return to Paris to the woman he loves. He learns, however, that his lot is also Oran’s, and he stays in the city to make common cause with the victims of the plague.
Under such circumstances, the flamboyant individualism that enlivens traditional fiction is inappropriate, and the novel, conceding that readers crave heroes, nominates the lackluster Grand, whose grandness resides in selfless, bootless dedication to writing a perfect sentence and ending the plague: Yes, if it is a fact that people like to have examples given them, men of the type they call heroic, and if it is absolutely necessary that this narrative should include a “hero,” the narrator commends to his readers, with, to his thinking, perfect justice, this insignificant and obscure hero who had to his credit only a little goodness of heart and a seemingly absurd ideal.

One of the novel’s most striking features is its handling of narrative point of view. The story is told in meticulously neutral prose, from a perspective that seems detached from the experiences it recounts. Less than a dozen pages from the end, however, when the plague has subsided and the gates of Oran have been reopened, Rieux steps forward to confess that he has been the narrator all along. Though the text’s preoccupation with exile and isolation are clearly the result of Rieux’s own enforced separation from his ailing wife, he as narrator has taken great pains to present an impersonal “chronicle,” the objective account of an honest witness. Writing himself into the story of his community is another way in which Rieux tries to overcome the solitude that is his lot as a widower and a human being.

In a universe in which “plague” is inexplicable and gratuitous, Rieux realizes that physicians are as ineffectual as anyone else. Yet he finds value in collective struggle, regardless of the outcome. The plague is never defeated. It merely, and mysteriously, recedes, and the reader is left with Rieux’s realization that eternal vigilance is necessary against an indomitable foe.

The Fall

First published: La Chute, 1956 (English translation, 1957)

Type of work: Novel

In an Amsterdam bar, a French lawyer imparts to a stranger his lessons in misanthropy.

The Fall is an extended monologue conducted over the course of five days by a man who calls himself Jean-Baptiste Clamence. The setting is Amsterdam, whose fogginess is miasmic and whose canals are likened to the concentric circles of hell. Like some infernal Ancient Mariner, the speaker attaches himself to a stranger who happens to wander into a raffish bar incongruously named Mexico City. A master of guile, Clamence deliberately piques the curiosity of his listener, who remains an unnamed “you.” Gradually, cunningly, he implicates him—and the reader—in his diabolical tale. Clamence infers that his auditor is a successful Parisian lawyer in his forties, and he tailors his story to appeal to and expose the weaknesses of the stranger.

Clamence claims that he, too, used to live in Paris, where, as a widely respected magistrate, he exuded self-confidence. He then recounts an incident that forever undermined his certainties about personal worth.

One November evening, walking across a bridge, he heard the cry of a woman who had thrown herself into the river. His reaction was to deny that he had heard anything and to continue walking. He remains, however, haunted by that dying cry and the fact that he evaded responsibility toward another human being.

Written at a troubled time in Camus’s own life, The Fall is the bitter fictional tirade of a brilliant misanthrope who dismisses civilization with a mordant epigram: “A single sentence will suffice for modern man: he fornicated and read the papers.” Clamence admits that his name is a cunning alias. Like the biblical vox clamans in deserto, the narrator is a voice crying in the wilderness mocking specious hope for clemency toward universal guilt. “Every man testifies to the crime of all the others—that is my faith and my hope,” declares Clamence. It is also the rationale for his narrative, a strategy of confessing his culpability and
coercing the listener—and reader—into acknowledging and sharing it.

Duplicitious Clamence has assumed the function of what he calls “judge-penitent,” a deft way of being both condemner and condemned. He eventually lures his listener to his apartment, where he reveals a stolen Van Eyck on the wall. The reader’s knowledge of the purloined painting now implicates the reader, too, in the crime. The subject of the work, _The Just Judges_, reinforces the novel’s theme of judgement even as it mocks the possibility of justice. It is not merely perverse bravado that impels Clamence to entrust his felonious secret to a stranger; he realizes that in a world devoid of innocence, no one dare judge anyone else. Yet he dreams of being apprehended, of finding release from his personal burden by a stroke of the guillotine. Jean-Baptiste longs for the decapitation that was the fate of his namesake John the Baptist: I would be decapitated, for instance, and I’d have no more fear of death; I’d be saved. Above the gathered crowd, you would hold up my still warm head, so that they could recognize themselves in it and could again dominate—an exemplar. All would be consummated; I should have brought to a close, unseen and unknown, my career as a false prophet crying in the wilderness and refusing to come forth.

Such redemption never comes. _The Fall_ portrays all as trapped in a fallen world. Like Sisyphus, Clamence is condemned to repeat his futile gestures. Every time he encounters another listener (and reader), he is compelled anew to spread his gospel of universal guilt, to confirm it by his very success in persuading readers to share his story.

_“The Guest”_

First published: “L’Hôte,” 1957 (collected in _Exile and the Kingdom_, 1958)

Type of work: Short story

A schoolmaster living on a remote Algerian plateau is torn by an order to deliver an Arab prisoner to authorities.

To translate the French word _hôte_—someone who either gives or receives hospitality—into English, it is necessary to sacrifice its ambiguity. “The Guest,” Camus’s most frequently anthologized short story, focuses on a character who, suspended between giving and receiving, fails at hospitality. It could as accurately, or ironically, be translated as “The Host.”

At the outset of “The Guest,” Daru, a schoolmaster of European stock who was born in Algeria, observes two figures, one on horseback and one on foot, slowly make their way through the desolate, snowy landscape toward the schoolhouse where he lives, alone. Balducci, the man on horseback, is a gendarme, and he is accompanying an Arab who has been arrested for killing his own cousin.

Balducci explains that because of civil unrest Daru is being conscripted to convey the prisoner to the authorities in Tinguit, a town located a few hours’ journey away, the next day. The teacher refuses this assignment, but Balducci leaves the unnamed Arab with him anyway. A reluctant host to an unwanted guest, Daru passes the night fitfully, fearful that the Arab might attack him and wishing for his escape. In the morning, the two set out for police headquarters in Tinguit. After walking a considerable distance but still two hours short of their destination, Daru parts company with the Arab, telling him to proceed alone, either to turn himself in to the police in Tinguit or to seek refuge among sympathetic nomads. The teacher watches somberly as the Arab continues alone along the path to prison. On returning to his schoolhouse, Daru, who has tried not to take sides, discovers a message threatening revenge against him for having delivered the Arab to the authorities.
In “The Guest,” the third of six short stories in a collection titled *Exile and the Kingdom*, Camus continues his examination of longing and alienation. The final word of the story, “alone,” emphasizes the work’s central theme of solitude. Just like the French Algerian Camus, who was rebuffed by both sides when he attempted in 1955 to mediate between France and the Algerian separatists, Daru finds himself condemned to solitude, uncomfortable either among his fellow colons or within the indigenous Arab community. A drawing of the four rivers of France on the schoolroom blackboard indicates that his job is to inculcate his North African pupils with the culture of a European colonial power. However, Daru’s loyalties are not so much torn as eroded. The only bond that he feels is, ironically, with the vast, forbidding landscape that remains indifferent to the human beings who put in brief appearances. Like much of the rest of Camus’s fiction, “The Guest” employs spare, incisive language to depict a universe of disconnected human beings who are tormented by the illusion of free choice.

**The Myth of Sisyphus**

First published: *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, 1942 (English translation, 1955)

Type of work: Essays

The Myth of Sisyphus is a meditation on an ancient Greek figure who, condemned for eternity to a futile task, is seen by Camus as representative of the human condition.

*The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus’s most explicit philosophical pronouncement, begins by dismissing all reflection that evades the question of why people live. “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide,” he declares. “Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.”

*The Myth of Sisyphus* includes several miscellaneous pieces—a discussion of Franz Kafka, a self-interview on the responsibility of the artist, and four personal evocations of the landscape of Algeria that were also published elsewhere. The most remarkable and influential section of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, however, is its title essay. In it and the supporting chapters, Camus appropriates the ancient Greek story of the king of Corinth who was punished by the gods for failing to show them sufficient respect. Sisyphus is condemned for eternity to push a boulder up the side of a steep mountain. Whenever he is about to reach the summit, the boulder rolls back to the base, and Sisyphus is obliged to begin his endless, pointless task again.

Camus seizes on this myth as an emblem of the human condition. Life, he contends, is absurd. Devoid of purpose, existence is an endless, empty series of compulsive repetitions with no possibility of attaining a goal. Sisyphus becomes the prototype of the “absurd hero,” a figure whose variations Camus traces in the roles of the philanderer, the actor, and the conqueror. Like Rieux, who rebels against a scheme of things he cannot accept but cannot change, Camus’s Sisyphus is a figure of admirable futility: “His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing. This is the price that must be paid for the passions of this earth.”

A literary meditation rather than a work of rigorous formal philosophy, *The Myth of Sisyphus* offers a vision of human contingency and self-authentication popularly associated with the term existentialism. It assumes a post-Nietzschean universe in which the obituary for God has been written. Refusing to accept external validation, Camus contends that individuals are responsible for their own situations. He insists that such responsibility begins with awareness, a consciousness that *The Myth of Sisyphus* is itself designed to encourage.

The essay “The Myth of Sisyphus” concludes with the provocative assertion that despite the futility and dreariness of his punitive task, Sisyphus is a figure of felicity: Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates
the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems
to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in
itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine
Sisyphus happy.

Sisyphus possesses the satisfaction of awareness, the modest pleasure of honest confrontation with the bleak
conditions of his existence. It is a gloss on the life and works of Camus himself, an obsessively lucid author
who refused the spurious consolations of actions and expressions that divert readers from the truth.

Camus, Albert: Introduction

Albert Camus

See also The Guest Criticism, Albert Camus Literary Criticism (Volume 1), and Volumes 2, 4, 9, 14, 32, 124.

Chronology

1882: Catherine-Hélène Sintès, the mother of Albert Camus, is born on 5 November in Birkadem, Algeria,
just south of Algiers.

1885: Lucien Auguste Camus, father of Albert Camus, is born on 28 November in Ouled Fayet, Algeria.

1909: Lucien Auguste Camus and Catherine-Hélène Sintès are married on 13 November in Algiers.

1910: Lucien Jean Etienne Camus, the couple’s elder son, is born on 20 January in Belcourt, a neighborhood
of Algiers.

1913: Albert Camus is born on 7 November just outside Mondovi, near Bone (now Annaba), in eastern
Algeria.

1914: Austria declares war on Serbia on 28 July after Serbia fails to comply with conditions demanded by
Austria following the assassination in June of Archduke Franz Ferdinand by a Serb. Austria’s declaration of
war marks the beginning of World War I. Germany declares general mobilization on 31 July. Lucien Camus
reports for military duty on 1 August, having moved his family to Belcourt, where his wife and their sons
settle in the home of her mother, Catherine Sintès, nee Cardona. Germany, having declared war against Russia
on 1 August, declares war on France two days later. Lucien Camus is wounded in the Battle of the Marne on 5
September; he dies on 11 October in a military hospital in Saint-Brieuc, Brittany.

1918: Albert Camus becomes a pupil in a private kindergarten; he learns to read and write.

1919: Camus begins attending the neighborhood school in Belcourt.

1921: On 7 May the Camus sons are declared “pupils of the nation,” with the right to free medical treatment
and scholarships, because of their father’s death in the war. Their mother is awarded a very small lifetime
pension and funds for each boy until he reaches eighteen years of age.

1923: Louis Germain becomes Camus’s teacher in October.

1924: In June or July, Camus takes the first part of the examination for the baccalaureate diploma.
In June, Camus passes the entrance examinations to the Grand Lycée in Algiers. He enters the Lycée on a scholarship in October.

1929: Camus enters the penultimate year of lycée course work, called première, in October.

1930: In June or July, Camus takes the first part of the examination for the baccalaureate diploma. In October, he begins his last year of lycée course work, called philosophie, with Jean Grenier as his professor. In December, having coughed and spat blood in August, Camus becomes too ill to continue his studies and leaves the lycée. Tuberculosis is diagnosed in the right lung, and he is hospitalized.

1931: In the winter Camus is taken in by his aunt Antoinette Sintès Acault, called Gaby, and her husband, Gustave Acault. The following summer (?), Camus meets Simone Hié through his friend Max-Pol Fouchet. Camus returns to the lycée to repeat his philosophie in October.

1932: Catherine Sintès dies. In March, Camus’s first published essay appears in Sud, a literary magazine with which Grenier is connected; other publications follow shortly. Camus receives his baccalaureate degree (second part) in the summer. In the autumn he enters the university-preparatory class called hypokhâgne at the lycée.

1933: Adolf Hitler becomes chancellor of Germany on 30 January. On 5 July, Camus receives the first prize in French composition and second in philosophy in hypokhâgne. That same month Camus, who has displeased the Acaults because of his involvement with Simone, moves in with his brother, Lucien. In October, Camus enters the University of Algiers to study for a license (degree) in philosophy, a four-part program. He receives a certificate in sociology and morale (ethics) on 6 November.

1934: Camus’s first piece of art criticism is published on 25 January in Alger-Etudiant, the university newspaper. On 16 June he and Simone are married in a civil ceremony. He is reconciled with Acault and Gaby, who, along with Simone’s mother, help support the couple. That same month, Camus receives a psychology certificate. He obtains a position with the Préfecture d’Alger (the French administration in Algeria) in the summer. Camus fails the physical examination for compulsory military service in October and is thus exempted. At the university he begins attending lectures by Jacques Heurgon, a professor of classics and an acquaintance of André Gide. On 8 November, Camus obtains his third certificate, in études litteraires classiques (classical literature). He finishes his essay “Les Voix du quartier pauvre” (Voices from the Poor Neighborhood) on 25 December. The essay is an important autobiographical text, some portions of which reappear in L’Envers et l’endroit (1937; translated as “Betwixt and Between” in Lyrical and Critical, 1967).

1935: Camus begins keeping his carnets (notebooks or journals) in May. On 4 June he obtains his fourth certificate, in logic and general philosophy. In July, André Malraux delivers an impassioned anti-Fascist speech in Algiers, which Camus is believed to have heard. Simone and Camus, who are undergoing domestic difficulties, decide that she should go for a retreat, or cure, to the Balearic Islands because of her drug addiction. In August, while sailing with friends along the North African coast to the east, Camus falls ill, coughing and spitting up blood, and has to return to Algiers. Later he makes a brief trip to the Balearic Islands to meet Simone. He joins the Algerian Communist Party in the autumn and becomes associated with the theater group Theatre du Travail (Labor Theater).

1936: On 25 January the Théâtre du Travail gives the first performance of Camus’s dramatic adaptation of Malraux’s Le Temps du mépris (1935; translated as Days of Wrath, 1936). In the spring Camus and three friends rent a house above the bay in Algiers, “La Maison Fichu,” or “La Maison devant le monde” (House Above the World). In May, Edmond Chariot publishes Revolte dans les Asturies (Révolt in Asturias), a collaborative venture, with text by Camus and others. In the summer Camus obtains his diplôme d’études supérieures in philosophy with a thesis titled “Métaphysique chrétienne et néoplatonisme” (Christian
Metaphysics and Neoplatonism), directed by René Poirier. Camus and Simone travel with Yves Bourgeois in France, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Germany, and Italy. Camus discovers Simone’s infidelity by opening a letter from a doctor in Algiers. They quarrel and separate definitively upon returning to Algeria in September.

1937: *L’Envers et l’endroit*, Camus’s first volume, is published by Chariot on 10 May. Camus sails for Marseilles on 29 July; he visits Paris for the first time, spends a month in Embrun for his health, and visits Italy. Upon returning to Algeria, he turns down an appointment to teach in Sidi Bel-Abbés, about fifty miles south of Oran. In August he begins drafting *La Mort heureuse*, which is published posthumously in 1971 (translated as *A Happy Death*, 1972). In the autumn, having resigned from the Algerian Communist Party, Camus founds the theater group Théâtre de l’Equipe. He becomes better acquainted with Francine Faure, whom he met earlier.

1938: In May the Théâtre de l’Equipe stages *Les Fréres Karamazov*, an adaptation by Jacques Copeau of Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879-1880). Late in the summer, Camus meets Pascal Pia and begins working for the newspaper *Alger Républicain*, which is first published on 6 October. A review of Jean-Paul Sartre’s first novel, *La Nausée* (1938; translated as *Nausea*, 1949) appears in the 20 October edition of the *Alger Républicain* over Camus’s signature.

1939: Camus’s *Noces* (translated as “Nuptials” in *Lyrical and Critical*) is published by Chariot on 23 May. The first installment of his “Misère de la Kabylie” (Poverty in Kabylia) appears in the *Alger Républicain* on 5 June; others follow shortly. Camus, who has a ticket to travel to Greece by boat with Francine on 2 September, must cancel the journey after Germany’s invasion of Poland on 1 September, which marks the beginning of World War II. Two days later, France and Great Britain declare war on Germany after ultimatums expire without reply. Camus volunteers for armed duty but is rejected for reasons of health. On 15 September he and Pia found *Le Soir Républicain*, which is associated with the *Alger Républicain*. Throughout the summer of this year and into the following winter, Camus works simultaneously on three texts, which will be published as *L’Etranger* (1942; translated as *The Stranger*, 1946), *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942; translated as *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 1955), and *Caligula* (1944; translated, 1947).

1940: Publication of *Le Soir Républicain* is suspended on 10 January by police order, after repeated censure. A divorce court issues a decree on 20 February dissolving the Camus marriage, effective 27 September. Camus arrives in Paris on 23 March to join Pia on the staff of *Paris-Soir*, a daily. Camus finishes the manuscript of *L’Etranger* in the spring. On 10 May, German forces invade the Netherlands, Belgium, and France. French forces fall back badly. The French government leaves Paris for Bordeaux on 10 June. The same day, members of the Paris-Soir staff, including Camus, depart for Clermont-Ferrand. On 22 June, French representatives sign an armistice with Germany, agreeing to all terms imposed, including the division of France into two zones: “Occupied,” under direct German control; and “Free,” under the control of the new, collaborating French government under General Philippe Pétain. (Pétain’s government is called the Vichy government for the name of the town in central France where it is based.) In August or September Paris-Soir and its staff move to Lyons. Camus arrives there sometime after early September. On 3 December, Francine reaches France from Oran, Algeria; she and Camus are married in the city hall of Lyons.

1941: Camus and Francine return to Oran in January. Camus earns money by doing editorial work for Chariot and teaching at a private school at which the pupils are Jewish and have been banned by Vichy laws from attending public schools. Francine also teaches. Inspired in part by a recent typhus epidemic in Algeria, Camus begins taking notes for *La Peste* (1947; translated as *The Plague*, 1948). He finishes the manuscript of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* on 21 February. In September, with Pia and Malraux serving as intermediaries, Camus submits three manuscripts to the publisher Gallimard: *L’Etranger*, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, and *Caligula* (an early version).
1942: Camus falls seriously ill in January, spitting blood; tuberculosis is found in the left lung as well as the right. Gallimard brings out *L’Étranger* in a printing of 4,400 copies on 15 June. *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* is published later in the year. To escape Oran’s humidity, Camus and Francine obtain a travel pass and sail to France in August. They settle in a hamlet called Le Pannelier outside Chambon-sur-Lignon. In order to be in Oran in time for the opening of school, Francine returns there shortly, expecting Camus to join her soon. On 8 November, British and American troops land at several locations in North Africa. Germany takes possession of the Free Zone of France, and all travel and correspondence between the country and Africa cease. Camus is obliged to remain in France rather than follow Francine to Oran.

1943: Camus visits Paris in January and meets Jean Paulhan, who has published Camus’s two books under the Gallimard imprint, and other figures connected to the *Nouvelle Revue Française* prior to the fall of France. He also meets the actress Maria Casarés. In February, Sartre publishes his assessment of *L’Étranger*. Camus visits Paris again in June. At the première of Sartre’s play *Les Mouches* (1943; translated as *The Flies*, 1946) he meets Sartre for the first time. Later, Simone de Beauvoir and Camus become acquainted at the Café de Flore. Hired as a reader by Gallimard in November, Camus moves to Paris. He begins working for *Combat*, the underground newspaper of the Combat Resistance movement. He publishes the first of his *Lettres à un ami allemand* (1945; translated as “Letters to a German Friend” in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, 1961) and other short texts in clandestine magazines.

1944: Camus’s *Caligula* is published. With Sartre, Beauvoir, Michel Leiris, Georges Bataille, Armand Salacrou, Georges Limbour, Jacques Lacan, Dora Marr, and others, Camus participates in a private reading of Pablo Picasso’s play *Le Désir attrapé par la queue* (Desire Caught by the Tail, 1941) in Leiris’s Paris apartment in March. Sartre’s play *Huis clos* (1945; translated as *No Exit*, 1946), in which Camus was originally to play the role of Garcin, has its première on 10 June. That same month, Camus moves into the studio of the Left Bank apartment of Gide, who has been in Tunisia for much of the war. The first above-ground edition of *Combat* is published in Paris on 21 August. Camus’s play *Le Malentendu* (translated as *Crass Purpose*, 1947) receives its first performance on 24 August. On the same day, French troops under General Philippe Leclerc and other Allied troops enter Paris and complete the liberation of the city on the following day; insurgents also participate in the liberation. Camus is publicly named editor in chief of the new *Combat* in the autumn. Francine arrives in Paris from Oran.

1944-1945: Camus maintains close ties with Sartre, Beauvoir, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

1945: Camus’s health being gravely compromised, his doctor orders rest in January; briefly, Camus ceases to write for *Combat*. In February the last pockets of German resistance in eastern France are cleaned out by Allied troops. Camus returns to Algeria in April, his first time there since 1942. He tours the territory for three weeks and files eight reports for *Combat*. World War II ends in Europe on 8 May with the surrender of Germany. On the same day massacres of indigenous Algerians by the French take place in Setif and Guelma following earlier rioting. Jean and Catherine, twin children of Francine and Albert Camus, are born on 5 September. *Caligula* has its première, with Gérard Philipe in the title role, on 26 September.

1946: Camus journeys to the United States and Canada. In the summer he vacations in Lourmarin in Provence.

Late 1940s: Camus attempts to persuade his mother, brother, and brother’s family to settle in the south of France; they agree to a trial stay, which is not successful.

1947: Camus breaks with *Combat* in the wake of financial difficulties and disagreements over what course of action the paper should take. In June his *La Peste* is published.
1948: Camus travels to Algeria. His play L’Etat de siège (translated as State of Siege, 1958) has its premiere on 27 October, starring Jean-Louis Barrault.

1949: Camus, in poor health, travels in South America from June to August. His play Les Justes (translated as The Just Assassins, 1958) is premièred on 15 December and stars Serge Reggiani and Casarés.

1950: Camus takes a year-long sick leave from Gallimard. He spends part of the time on the Riviera. Actuelles (Topical Pieces, or Timely Pieces), Camus’s first collection of journalistic work, is published. He and his family settle in an apartment in the rue Madame.

1951: An article by Camus on Friedrich Nietzsche is published in Sartre’s monthly Les Temps Modernes in August. Camus’s L’Homme révolte (translated as The Rebel, 1953) is published in October.

1952: In May a review of L’Homme révokê by Francis Jeanson is published in Les Temps Modernes. In it Jeanson accuses Camus of betraying the Left. Camus’s reply to Jeanson’s review is published in Les Temps Modernes in August. The reply takes the form of an impersonal letter to “Monsieur le Directeur” (Sartre) and is followed by replies from Camus and Jeanson.

1953: Francine is stricken with depression or some other mental illness, which becomes worse throughout the spring and summer. Camus’s Actuelles II, a second collection of journalistic pieces, is published. In the summer Camus acts as unofficial director of the Festival d’Art Dramatique in Angers, replacing the deceased Marcel Herrand. The offerings include the première of Camus’s adaptations of Pierre de Larivey’s Les Esprits (Spirits, 1579) and Pedro Calderon’s La devoción de la cruz (Devotion to the Cross, 1625). At a Paris rally on 30 June, Camus deplores the brutal suppression by Soviet forces of an uprising in East Germany by workers protesting the Communist regime. On 14 July, in a clash between Paris police and demonstrating Muslim workers, seven Muslims are killed and many others wounded; policemen are injured as well. Camus, in a letter to the newspaper Le Monde, demands an official investigation of the incident, including identification of those responsible for firing on the crowd.

1954: Camus’s L’Été (translated as “Summer” in Lyrical and Critical) is published in the spring. In September, at a sale of manuscripts and books organized by North African writers in Paris to benefit the city of Orleansville, Algeria, which was heavily damaged by an earthquake, the manuscript of Camus’s L’Etat de siège is sold for 15,000 francs (less than $100 at the time). On 1 November, Algerian insurgents attack police outposts and government offices in Algeria. That same month, Camus visits Italy for the first time since 1937. On 14 December he returns to Paris, having been ill during some of his stay in Italy.

1955: Camus flies to Algiers on 18 February, returning to Paris on 1 March. Dino Buzzati’s play Un Caso clinico (1953) is adapted for the stage by Camus as Un Cas intéressant and has its première in Paris on 12 March. Camus begins writing for the weekly political newsmagazine L’Express on 14 May, with his first major articles appearing in July. In September he meets William Faulkner in Paris.

1956: In Algeria, Camus makes a public speech on 23 January in which he calls for a civil truce to the fighting between the French and Algerian rebels. In a disagreement over editorial policy, he ceases contributing to L’Express in February. Following domestic difficulties in the spring, Camus moves out of the apartment he shares with Francine and the children in the rue Madame and takes a small apartment of his own. His La Chute (translated as The Fall, 1956) is published in May. Faulkner’s Requiem for a Nun (1951), adapted for the theater by Camus, has its opening night on 22 September, with Catherine Sellers starring as Temple Drake. Uprisings in Budapest on 23 October mark the start of the Hungarian revolution against Soviet domination. Camus delivers a speech on 30 October at a meeting honoring the exiled Spanish republican statesman Salvador de Madariaga. In an appeal published in the 10 November edition of the newspaper Franc-Tireur, Camus calls for the United Nations to debate the genocide occurring in Hungary as a
consequence of the Soviet crackdown, which began on 4 November.

1957: The Battle of Algiers, the most intense period of fighting in the Algerian war, begins in January, pitting French troops against a terrorist network solidly ensconced in the city. Camus’s L’Exil et le royaume (translated as Exile and the Kingdom, 1958) is published in March. His “Réflexions sur la guillotine” (translated as Reflections on the Guillotine: An Essay on Capital Punishment, 1959) is published in the Nouvelle Revue Francaise in June. On 17 October the Swedish Academy announces the award of the Nobel Prize in literature to Camus, the ninth French writer to receive the prize and the youngest recipient after Rudyard Kipling. On 10 December, after the prize ceremony and banquet at the Stockholm City Hall, Camus gives his short Nobel Prize speech. On 14 December he delivers a lecture at the University of Uppsala titled “L’Artiste et son temps” (translated as “The Artist and His Time,” 1961).

1958: Camus’s Actuelles III, a collection of articles and other texts concerning Algeria, is published in June; his health is poor. On 9 June he leaves with Casarés for Greece. In the autumn Camus buys a house in Lourmarin.

1959: Camus’s stage adaptation of Dostoyevsky’s novel The Possessed (1871) has its première on 30 January; he also directs. In November, working in Lourmarin, he drafts part of Le Premier Homme, which is published posthumously in its unfinished state in 1994 (translated as The First Man, 1995).

1960: On 4 January, while riding in a car driven by Michel Gallimard, nephew of the publisher Gaston Gallimard and a member of the publishing firm, Camus is killed instantly in an accident near Villeblevin. On 10 January, Gallimard dies while undergoing surgery as a consequence of the accident. Camus’s mother dies in September.

1962: French and Algerian representatives sign the Evian Accords on 18 March, bringing to an end the Algerian war and providing for Algerian independence. On 1 July, Algerian voters approve the terms of the Evian Accords, already ratified by a referendum in France, and thereby Algeria becomes an independent nation.

1970: Camus’s first wife, Simone, dies, having been married a second time and divorced.

1979: Francine Camus dies on 24 December.

Camus, Albert: About Albert Camus

- INTRODUCTION
- FAMILY BACKGROUND, CHILDHOOD, AND EARLY YOUTH
- UNIVERSITY YEARS; FIRST MARRIAGE; BEGINNINGS OF A CAREER
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INTRODUCTION

To many readers both in France and elsewhere, Albert Camus is one of the most likable and approachable of mid-twentieth-century French authors. He may also be the most famous: while books by the well-known Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir sold in the hundreds of thousands in French and in various translations, Camus had two titles on a top-ten list of twentieth-century French best-sellers assembled in 1970, L’Etranger (1942; translated as The Stranger, 1946) and La Peste (1947; translated as The Plague, 1948).
Only Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, whose premature death in 1944 deprived the nation of one of its most beloved authors, had more best-sellers in France (three). More than six million copies of L’Étranger—the greatest success of its publisher, Gallimard—have been sold, and the novel has been translated into more than forty languages. A study of course readings in three thousand French secondary-school classes for the period September-December 1997 showed that L’Étranger was among the eight literary works most studied in these schools; the novel is said to attract two hundred thousand new readers each year. The 1999-2000 edition of Books in Print lists twenty-nine editions and printings of various works and collections by Camus. There are some sixty-one listings of Camus’s work in the French Livres disponibles, and there are likewise many editions in German, Spanish, Italian, and other book catalogues. When French readers are polled about the authors they prefer from a list of eminent national literary figures, Camus always occupies an honorable place next to such great French writers as Pierre Corneille, Molière, and Honoré de Balzac. According to one poll, if French readers are asked simply to volunteer a name among twentieth-century authors, Camus is at the head of the list. In North America and Europe during the last decade of the twentieth century, the name of Camus could be found frequently in a wide variety of publications, from mystery novels, such as The Moth (1993) and The Black Hornet (1994) by James Sallis, to memoirs, such as Frank McCourt’s ’Tis (1999). Camus’s name has also cropped up in professional journals dealing with general issues in higher education, such as Academic Questions. Bookstore staff report that sales of volumes by Camus continue to be brisk, especially among young people. His work has attracted the attention not only of literary critics but also of intellectual historians, theologians, psychiatrists, and philosophers.

It can even be suggested that Camus is too well known, cited carelessly and incorrectly, used for purposes and in senses foreign to the spirit of his work, and cheapened. To many people, the use of the words stranger and absurd in almost any contemporary literary context conveys, whether correctly or not, a Camusian note, whereas other authors have also stressed the sense of alienation between man and the universe. Some of these have been modern writers, such as Andre Malraux, and some from much earlier periods, notably Blaise Pascal. Indeed, the recognition of irrationality in the world is ancient, going back to Sophocles, the Psalms, and Ecclesiastes. The ordeals of the Greek mythological hero Sisyphus, while mentioned in modern times by other authors also, including Paul Valery in France, are known to many chiefly through their treatment by Camus in Le Mythe de Sisyphe (1942; translated as The Myth of Sisyphus, 1955). Mention of plague in a literary context often evokes Camus and Camus alone because of La Peste, as readers overlook other works on the same subject, such as Giovanni Boccaccio’s Decameron (1348-1358), Samuel Pepys’s Diary (which recounts the bubonic plague in London in 1665), Daniel Defoe’s A Journal of the Plague Year (1722), and Jean Giono’s Le Hussard sur le toit (1951; translated as The Horseman on the Roof, 1954). An e-mail address, dated 2000, for the literary magazine Gestalt includes the term meursault, in reference to the hero of L’Étranger and his search for happiness without apparent concern for what the rest of the world may think. Few philosophies have been less well understood and yet more frequently mentioned than the existentialism with which Camus is persistently, if somewhat falsely, associated in the public mind. It must be Camus whom the popular vampire novelist Anne Rice, writing as Anne Rampling, had in mind in her Exit to Eden (1985), a pornographic novel, when she mentions “a sense of the absurd as the French philosophers call it.”

This popularity does not mean that Camus has been without his critics. They have been harsh, particularly in France, from at least 1945, when his play Le Malentendu (1944; translated as Cross Purpose, 1947) was attacked for its nihilism, through his death in 1960 and for years afterward. The eminent critic Bertrand Poirot-Delpech, writing in Le Monde, finally asked the French public to judge Camus less harshly, pointing out that he was, after all, a great literary figure. Some years later Brian T. Fitch, a Canadian, noted that Camus’s status as one of the classics of French literature would be disputed only “precisely within the boundaries of his native land”; Fitch ascribed this situation to ideological considerations.

FAMILY BACKGROUND, CHILDHOOD, AND EARLY YOUTH
The most important fact of Camus’s life, in his own eyes, was that he was, as the term was then used, an Algerian. (Around the mid twentieth century, and especially since the independence of Algeria in 1962 and the enforced departure from the country of almost all those of European descent, the term has been used for indigenous residents of Arab or Berber extraction, mostly Muslims.) Born on 7 November 1913 just outside Mondovi, a village in Algeria, fifteen miles due south of Bone (now Annaba) and approximately twenty-five miles from the Tunisian border, Camus was thus a pied-noir (blackfoot)—a Frenchman from Algerian territory. (Algeria had been claimed by the French in 1830; by the middle of the nineteenth century, French troops had conquered and pacified most of the claimed territory, and thousands of French settlers were established there.) As an Algerian of European descent, Camus had French citizenship; but to him, Algeria, not France, was his home, although he lived in mainland France almost exclusively starting in 1940. When he referred in his Nobel Prize speech to his “terre natale” (native land), he meant Africa, not the France of Europe.  

His friend Jules Roy underlined this in a tribute to Camus titled “Un Africain” (An African, 1960). In his memorial article, Gabriel Audisio similarly underlined the point by calling Camus “L’Algérien” (The Algerian).

Camus’s attachment to his native Algeria sheds light on his entire life—his journalistic and political activities, the characteristics of his literary production, and his particular unhappiness and public difficulties in the mid and late 1950s at the time of the Algerian war. While there is no perfect analogy to convey to Americans the peculiar position in which he found himself in Paris, one can suggest that it was something like that of a Southerner, Southwesterner, or Westerner, formed by and attached to his home, who chooses, despite reservations, to make his literary career in New York, which he considers alien territory. Camus felt great nostalgia for his homeland, illuminated in his mind by sun and childhood happiness, and suffered from feelings of separation that made him uneasy in Paris: “Algérie. Je ne sais pas si je me fais bien comprendre. J’ai le même sentiment a revenir vers l’Algérie qu’à regarder le visage d’un enfant” (Algeria. I don’t know if I am making myself understood. I have the same feeling looking back toward Algeria as when looking at a child’s face). As the Algerian rebellion began in 1954 and its repression developed, Camus’s situation grew to resemble even more closely that of the American Southerner, whether during the Civil War or later, who deplored the bloodshed of the war and embraced principles of humanity and justice, yet could not bring himself to denounce his home and people.

Other crucial facts of Camus’s biography concern his family. His father, Lucien Camus, orphaned at an early age, was an agricultural supervisor on the grape-producing farm of Saint-Paul outside of Mondovi, which at that period had approximately 2,800 inhabitants; he was responsible for the pressing, storing, and shipping of the wine. His mother, Catherine-Hélène Sintés Camus, like many North African settlers, was of Spanish (Catalonian) blood since her family had come from Minorca. Although Camus honored her deeply, his relationship with her was sometimes difficult. She was totally illiterate, doubtless in part because of family circumstances (she came from a large family that struggled to survive, especially after her father’s death) but also because she was nearly deaf. The exact causes of her deafness remain unclear; she appears to have had a childhood disease, the effects of which were perhaps compounded by the shock of learning of her husband’s death from battle wounds in World War I. She never read a word of Camus’s writings. His only sibling, a brother named Lucien, was two years older than he.

Being of Spanish blood on one side presumably reinforced in Camus a tendency that was marked among many other Algerian men: a powerful and obvious male pride. Various commentators, including Roy and Camus himself, have viewed this as a Mediterranean trait, as indeed it appears to be, deriving from the large number of settlers of Mediterranean blood in Algeria (Spanish, Maltese, Italian, southern French, and other strains) and from the society of the native Arabs and Berbers, among whom the cult of the masculine is traditionally strong and the position of women inferior. Camus spoke of the Algerians as “fiers de leur virilité, de leur capacité de boire ou de manger, de leur force et de leur courage” (proud of their virility, their capacity to drink or eat, their strength and their courage). This attitude may be compared loosely to one aspect of the frontier mentality of the American West, where being manly was a source of pride and indeed, practically
speaking, a necessary trait. The term *un homme* (a man) was charged with meaning. Readers of *L’Etranger* will recall that at the trial of Meursault, Céleste tells the court that Meursault is “a man”; when asked what “being a man” means, he answers that everyone knows what that means. This notion of masculinity included a strong element of honor and responsibility, albeit exercised in a narrow range: “on ne manque pas à sa mère” (you don’t let your mother down); “celui qui touche à mon frère, il est mort” (he who touches my brother is dead). It also involved vanity—Camus was not without it, being quite attentive to his dress as a young man and aware of his masculine features and demeanor as well as anxious to show off his feminine conquests. A passionate character entered into the type, and a tendency to excess, as well as a touchy honor, which Camus identified as *castillanerie* (Castillian, or Spanish, pride). Men of this type saw or imagined insults easily and were quick to defend themselves, by a donnade (fistfight) if necessary. Such battles

visaient en effet à vider une querelle ou l’honneur d’un des adversaires était en jeu, soit qu’on eût insulté ses ascendants directs ou ses aïeux, soit qu’on eût déprécié sa nationalité ou sa race, soit qu’il eût été dénoncé ou accusé de l’être, vole ou accusé d’avoir volé…. (were aimed at ending a squabble where the honor of one of the adversaries was at stake, whether his immediate family or ancestors had been insulted, his nationality or race deprecated, or he had been denounced or accused of it [denouncing others], or had stolen or been accused of stealing….)

MACHISMO

“Camus accused me of having ridiculed the French male [in Le Deuxième Sexe]. A Mediterranean, cultivating a Spanish pride, he granted a woman equality only in her difference, and obviously, as George Orwell would have said, he was the more equal of the two. He had merrily admitted to us in the past that he did not like the idea of being assessed, judged by a woman: she was the object, he the gaze, the consciousness. He laughed over it, but it was true that he did not allow reciprocity.”

*Simone de Beauvoir*


Feminists have denounced this machismo or cult of male values, including approved violence, and Camus’s male chauvinism or *phallocratie*, since they seem to contribute to ethnic and national aggression and since the principle of defending not only one’s mother but women in general implies condescension and paternalism. Camus never abandoned this cult; it was part of his image of himself. When he received a British trench coat as a gift in 1953, he wrote, “Tant de poches, de brides, de courroies, etc., comblent la plus vieille de mes nostalgies…. J’ai un air divinement ‘tough,’ ce qui est, comme tu sais, mon idéal dans l’existence” (So many pockets, button loops, straps, etc., fulfill my oldest desire…. I look marvelously “tough,” which is, as you know, my ideal in life).

When World War I began, Camus’s father was called up; he was wounded in the Battle of the Marne and died in a hospital in the autumn of 1914. Thus, like Sartre, whose father died when he was fifteen months old, Camus never knew his father. Moreover, he learned little about the man, principally because his deaf mother, though not literally mute, spoke infrequently; she herself may have known little about her late husband. The few facts that Camus did learn he clutched onto as mysterious, precious bits. The only story of substance concerned his father’s attending the execution (by guillotine) of a farmworker convicted of murdering a family. According to the story, his father vomited upon returning from the execution. This incident clearly impressed Camus, who used it later in his writing.
Commentators have not overlooked the importance of this missing father, who appears directly and extensively only in the posthumously published *Le Premier Homme* (1994; translated as *The First Man*, 1995), and whose shadow can be glimpsed only occasionally elsewhere, as in *La Peste*. Unlike Sartre, Camus did not boast that the absence of a father and a strong memory of him had freed him from a paternal complex. On the contrary, there is a sense of nostalgia for the unknown figure, especially moving in *Le Premier Homme*. Those critics who favor psychoanalytic readings have on occasion made much of the paternal absence, attributing to it features of Camus’s personality and work, including his relationship with his mother. One Camus specialist devoted his thesis to the “search for the father” in Camus’s writing. Another has noted the fact that all quasipaternal figures in *L’Etranger* (boss, judge, and priest) have unpleasant characteristics.

For other critics, Camus’s relationship with his mother is problematized separately. It is not a clearly defined Oedipal relationship according to the classic definition, like that visible in the works of Charles Baudelaire and Marcel Proust, for instance, whose fascination with their mothers seems to have been related to their difficulties in functioning according to accepted norms of behavior and the unusual forms taken by their sexuality. All the declarations Camus made in his own name express reverence for maternal figures and devotion to his own mother, a devotion displayed by his return journeys to Algeria. The word *mere* often bears considerable weight in his writing, as when it is paired with *truth*: “ma mère et ma vérité” (my mother and my truth). A mother appears in Camus’s earliest essay collection, *L’Envers et l’endroit* (1937; translated as “Betwixt and Between” in *Lyrical and Critical*, 1967), and in *Le Premier Homme*; mothers play peripheral but not irrelevant roles in *L’Etranger* and *La Peste*; and he mentioned his mother explicitly in some of the most important statements of his career, including a controversial interview with a journalist subsequent to his receiving the Nobel Prize in 1957.

Textual evidence can be marshaled to support the view that Camus was haunted by his mother and the maternal idea, and his work, including *L’Etranger*, suggests that the relationship was not an easy one for him. It seems to have been connected to self-discovery and self-affirmation but also to a need for pardon. In 1951 he wrote to his friend Roy, “Ce sont nos mères qui justifient la vie, c’est pourquoi je souhaite de mourir avant la mienne” (What justifies life is our mothers; that’s why I wish to die before mine)—a wish that was granted, though not in the way he expected, presumably. Alluding in his notebooks to *Le Premier Homme*, Camus notes that the hero (who as an adult returns to visit his mother in Algiers) “refait tout le parcours pour son secret: il n’est pas le premier. Tout homme est le premier homme, personne ne l’est. C’est pourquoi il se jette aux pieds de sa mère” (must go along the entire path to discover his secret: he is not the first. Every man is the first man; no one is. That is why he throws himself at his mother’s feet).

Camus had difficulty in particular with the fact that his mother could neither read nor write (nor could his maternal grandmother and Etienne, the uncle who lived with them). This illiteracy complicated their relationship, and it, or Camus’s reaction, is doubtless not alien to the issue of human communication in his work. In another notebook entry, he wrote: “J’aimais ma mère avec désespoir. Je l’ai toujours aimée avec désespoir” (I loved my mother despairingly. I have always loved her despairingly). He was also, on occasion, ashamed of his poverty and his mother, and he was ashamed of this shame.

Without resources, Catherine-Hèlène Camus was obliged upon her husband’s departure for the war to resettle with her own widowed mother, Catherine Sintès, in Belcourt, an outlying district of Algiers, a city with a population of more than 150,000 in the 1906 census. Camus’s mother first worked in a cartridge factory; after the war, she became a domestic, cleaning in houses and shops. Social security was almost nonexistent: as a war widow, she received only a small pension beginning late in the war and, starting in 1921, extremely modest assistance for her sons, who also received scholarships and medical care. Though the family income from Catherine-Hèlène and Etienne was supplemented by another uncle, Joseph, during the years he resided with them, they lived on the edge of dire poverty. Their small apartment had neither electricity nor running water, not even an oven, so that prepared dishes had to be taken to the baker’s for cooking. The sanitary facilities consisted of a *toilette turque* (a hole). Etienne had been mute as a boy and spoke only with difficulty. He worked in a cooperage, where Camus assisted some in the summer; a group photograph shows the boy.
with other barrel-makers.

The grandmother, an unbending, perhaps jealous person, ruled the household and managed the money. Catherine-Hélène was in the shadow (often literally so; lighting was expensive). Thus, another noteworthy parallel between Camus and Sartre is that both were raised in households in which a grandparent ruled and the real parent was either marginalized or infantilized. In the Sintés household, poverty dictated to some degree, surely, the grandmother’s tyrannical ways, but she also had a hard character—her own life had been difficult—and she ruled with an iron hand, a hand that not infrequently wielded a nerf de boeuf (a whip). In one of his earliest essays, the highly autobiographical “Voix du quartier pauvre” (Voices from the Poor Quarter, 1934), Camus depicts a grandmother asking her grandson in front of an outsider to state whether he loves her or his mother more; the former answer is expected.

The poverty and strict discipline marked the childhood of the two boys. Characters in Camus’s fiction are often of modest means, as in L’Etranger and “La Femme adultère” (“The Adulterous Woman”) and “Les Muets” (“The Silent Men”) from L’Exil et le royaume (1957; translated as Exile and the Kingdom, 1958). His first major journalistic series concerned poverty among the Kabyles, a tribal people from the Kabylia region to the east of Algiers and one of the larger divisions of the Berber peoples. When challenged by Sartre for being and thinking like a bourgeois—an unpardonable sin to the bourgeois-baiting and often antagonistic Sartre—he was able to point out that he had come from the most modest of backgrounds and had known genuine poverty, unlike Sartre, a son of the bourgeoisie. Yet, Camus said that his boyhood was not unhappy; he often depicted it as a time of joy, both “miserable et heureuse” (poverty-stricken and happy). Life beyond the somber confines of home furnished numerous pleasures. He liked the streets, with their varied activities and faces (European Algerians, Arabs, and Berbers), and where he spoke the peculiar slang of Algiers, called pataouète (or sometimes langage de cagayous, after a popular fictional character who appeared in the late nineteenth century). The port, always busy, attracted Camus. He was fonder still of the beach, where, violating his grandmother’s prohibition (she feared he would drown), he played on the sand and in the water. He learned to play European football (soccer), the street game of the period—though it too was prohibited (shoes wear out quickly in rough play on pavement). Later, he was an enthusiastic team member, playing goalie, for many years. In his adulthood, he continued to enjoy hiking and swimming, and also took in spectator sports, including rugby and French bullfighting; boxing, soccer, and swimming are mentioned in his writing. Camus made friends easily, being of an open, cordial character. School, where he did well, was, like the streets and beaches of Algiers, a counterworld that offset the silence, reprimands, and beatings at home.

Camus’s success earned him a scholarship to the Grand Lycée, one of two high schools in Algiers and the only one that included the uppermost grades. (He later dedicated his Nobel Prize speech to Louis Germain, his elementary-school teacher, who had encouraged and tutored him before the competitive examinations.) Against the opposition of his grandmother, who wanted him to go to work full-time, but with the support of an uncle by marriage, Gustave Acault, Camus enrolled. One of his teachers was Jean Grenier, later his philosophy professor at the University of Algiers, an author of lyrical essays and a longtime mentor and friend. Under Grenier’s guidance, he read the writings of the pre-Socratic philosophers, along with those of St. Augustine, Pascal, Søren Kierkegaard, and Friedrich Nietzsche. Camus had no religious belief; his family members were not practicing Catholics, and his first Communion was chiefly a symbolic step, which left little mark on him.

Camus illustrates through his career both the appeal and the powerful imprint of the French school system under the Third Republic (1870-1940). His education was essentially a lay and humanistic one. The laws completing the separation of church and state in France were passed in 1905, but even before this separation, public education had become essentially a rival system to church schools and to religious authority’s self-consciously so, owing greatly to the leadership of the politician Jules Ferry (1852-1893). Ferry, as some-time Minister of Education, looked upon the schools as a nursery of civic virtue and a bulwark of the republican regime, in direct opposition to the views of religious conservatives and to the civil authority of the
Roman church as proclaimed by Pius IX, an opponent of the Republic who was Pope from 1846 to 1878. Among those French who supported the republic, the *instituteur*, or schoolmaster, was a revered figure, generally looked upon (whether he wished or not) as a rival to the local priest and honored by those who rejected religious authority. Education, especially above the lower grades, was widely viewed as an achievement, a sign of personal quality as well as a means of succeeding in a profession. The curriculum emphasized intellectual skills but also the French cultural tradition, with the Roman one behind it: virtue, law, national accomplishments, and the French as a people. Literature and history occupied a significant place in studies at all levels. For many pupils, school was a privileged place—a refuge from difficult home circumstances, a community, and an opening of horizons.  

**CAMUS AS A YOUNG MAN**

“He would go on and on, and it was a pleasure to listen to that young man using a language inspired by the eighteenth century and jumping from art to philosophy with equal felicity and erudition. He was able to cite the classics in the original, to draw metaphysical ideas from a momentary happening that to us would have appeared insignificant.”

*Louis Bénisti*


In his last decade Camus paid homage in *Le Premier Homme* to what he called “la puissante poésie de l’école” (the powerful poetry [poetic effect] of school) and to the role of the schoolmaster in his story “L’Hôte” (“The Guest”), from *L’Exil et le royaume*. He dedicated his Nobel Prize speech to his teacher Germain. Hostile critics might, however, point out that Camus never progressed beyond the limitations of the republican humanism of the Third Republic that he learned at school and that remained with him throughout his career. His disagreement with Sartre and other neo-Marxist thinkers over the use of violence to achieve political ends and his obstinate attachment to the land of his childhood may be attributed in part to the imprint of his schooling.

During the winter of 1930-1931, when Camus was seventeen, he was diagnosed with tuberculosis in his right lung. The previous August, *severe coughing fits had already suggested lung trouble*. The disease, an infectious malady caused by a bacillus, was then widespread and one of the chief causes of death worldwide. The bacilli damage the lungs, and occasionally other organs, by lodging in tissues, which then produce giant cells that congregate in masses and create tubercles. In all forms, tuberculosis occurred in the United States at the rate of 194 cases per 100,000 in 1900 and was the chief cause of death until 1909. Its occurrence was at that time more frequent in urban than in rural communities and was especially high in areas of poverty, where sanitation was inadequate and nutrition poor, rendering inhabitants more susceptible to any disease, and where many lived in crowded conditions. The bacilli from the sputum of infected persons, spread by minute droplets from coughing or sneezing, could last airborne for hours; infection could also spread through infected food, water, and even through the skin. The disease is relatively resistant to disinfecting agents and can withstand dry conditions for long periods. Though preventive inoculation against tuberculosis was introduced in France in 1921, it was not used on an extensive scale until some years later, and it seems unlikely that any inoculation program was carried out in Algeria during Camus’s youth.

Perhaps because of inadequate diet—likely deficiencies of proteins and vitamins—or conceivably because of fatigue resulting from excessive activity (study, sports, employment, and other activities), the young Camus did not have the strength to withstand the tuberculosis infection. As was the case with many others afflicted with the disease, his illness was revealed when he spat blood (hemoptysis); this problem recurred several times in his life. He was obliged to drop out of the lycee. Thenceforth he lived with the disease, for which there was no cure and no reliable and noninvasive treatment until 1945, when clinical use of the antimicrobial
agent streptomycin became common. Even then, the success of treatment with streptomycin was uncertain. Until that date, doctors prescribed rest, better diets, and fresh air. They also resorted frequently to pneumothorax, or collapse therapy—the procedure, practiced as often as every two weeks, of artificially collapsing the diseased lung in order to let it rest and heal; but this treatment brought only improvement, not cure. The procedure was used repeatedly on Camus. He was treated with streptomycin in 1949-1950, along with para-aminosalicylic acid, or PAS. Streptomycin could kill the bacillus, unlike other treatments, but it never succeeded for Camus, and it included certain risks. A later treatment, consisting of a “mineral cocktail,” seemed to help.

Such an illness was an enormous shock to a young man in love with life who liked sports and had a promising career ahead of him. Camus often, perhaps always, believed that the disease would kill him. He was taken in by Acault, who assumed responsibility for him, fed him a diet heavy in meat, and provided other material assistance. His uncle also lent him books—it was Acault who earlier had given him a copy of Andre Gide’s *Les Nourritures terrestres* (1897; translated as *The Fruits of the Earth*, 1949). To Camus, the absurd meant first of all the disparity between a young consciousness hungry for experience and crying out for meaning, and a body condemned to illness, ultimately to death. It is important to note, however, that he did not write illness directly into his works (of those published in his lifetime) except in *La Peste* and that none of his principal heroes is explicitly tubercular, although lung dis-ease is mentioned in his two posthumously published novels (where swollen glands appear also, though not in connection with bubonic plague). Thus, he may be contrasted with Gide, who directly transposed his own experiences with tuberculosis in one of his most searching works, *L immoraliste* (1902; translated as *The Immoralist*, 1930). Camus stands in contrast as well to the German novelist Thomas Mann, who made the disease central in *Der Zauberberg* (1924; translated as *The Magic Mountain*, 1927), where it stands for suppressed sexual desires and the hyperdeveloped artistic sensibility that springs from these desires.

**UNIVERSITY YEARS; FIRST MARRIAGE; BEGINNINGS OF A CAREER**

Despite his illness, Camus, having retaken his last year of lycee courses and spent a year in the university-preparatory class called *hypokhâgne*, was able to enroll in the University of Algiers in autumn 1933. In the philosophy classes of René Poirier, he heard lectures on Kierkegaard, Edmund Husserl, and Martin Heidegger; in his third year he wrote a thesis on Christian metaphysics and Neoplatonism for the *diplôme d’études supérieures* (diploma of advanced studies) and received his degree in 1936. For the rest of his life, the ancient Greeks, and Greece itself, would constitute a pole of his thinking, and a favorable one, in contrast to Rome—not the twentieth-century city of Rome, which he liked, but Rome as a cultural ideal, with its imperialism and emphasis on law, as well as the hierarchical, dogmatic, and militant Christian Church. Extensive brooding on his illness nourished Camus’s thought and work. What had been for the boy a marvelous relationship with nature—sky, sun, and sea—became both qualified and heightened by the ever-present prospect of death. Death gave value to life, which both Greek philosophy and what Camus called his Mediterranean outlook taught him to consider without illusion and with a serenity born of contemplation, in a setting where “le bonheur nalt de l’absence d’espoir” (happiness is born of the absence of hope).

**CAMUS AS A STUDENT**

“Was it only the diplome d’études supérieures that he did under the direction of [Jean Grenier]… that earned him this special consideration? The latter was rather different from the cordial and slightly condescending satisfecit that university professors grant in general to their good pupils. Camus was quite different. Of a maturity that abolished the difference in age, of a seriousness, without stiffness, that discouraged small talk, of a ceremonial courtesy that protected his quick sensitivity, he inspired in us a friendship based on respect. He had simply appeared among us like someone whose life was going to be important, who was going to start all over, starting from the beginning and without smugness, the great enterprise of being a man.
Outside the university Camus had time for love, friendships, politics, and theater. Through his friend Max-Pol Fouchet, originally from Normandy and later a well-known poet (and, like Camus, tubercular), he met Simone Hié, a beautiful but unstable woman who took morphine and never freed herself from the addiction. After Camus successfully won her away from Fouchet, their affair led to marriage in 1934. Although they appeared to practice a rather open union, it was not a happy one. In the summer of 1935 Simone traveled to the Balearic Islands for a cure, which, like all her other attempts at breaking her addiction, was unsuccessful; Camus, who had been ill, later joined her there. In the spring of 1936, when he was ostensibly living with Simone at her mother’s house, he spent much of his time at a house he had rented with three female friends, Marguerite Dobrenn, Christiane Galindo, and Jeanne Sicard. Called “La maison devant le monde” (The House Above the World), it had a splendid view overlooking the Bay of Algiers. Camus’s absence from the quarters he shared with Simone was paralleled by her frequent absences from home.

In the summer of 1936 the two traveled with their friend Yves Bourgeois through parts of Europe, going as far as Czechoslovakia. Camus discovered by chance that his wife and an Algerian doctor were having an affair when he opened a letter from the doctor. This revelation led to a quarrel and Camus’s resolution to separate from Simone. By autumn he had done so; the union ended officially with divorce in 1940. Camus was more fortunate in his friendships, including several with women, some of whom became his lovers. The friendship with Fouchet never revived, however. In 1935 Camus joined the Algerian Communist Party, remaining a member until 1937, when the party itself excluded him on political grounds. The match had not been right from the start, since Camus was interested mainly in advancing the status of Algerian Muslims and improving workers’ conditions, not in promoting the Stalinist platform for world revolution, a cause that was founded on cynicism, not principle.

During the time of his party membership, Camus worked at the Communist Maison de la Culture, a modest undertaking, and, with friends, founded the Theatre du Travail (Labor Theater), an amateur theater company. Later, after it separated from Communist Party sponsorship, it was called Theatre de l’Equipe (Team Theater). The company’s repertory included a stage adaptation by Camus of Malraux’s Le Temps du mepris (1935; translated as Days of Wrath, 1936), produced in 1936; and an adaptation by Jacques Copeau of Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s The Brothers Karamazov (1879-1880), produced in 1938. Camus acted, helped to write or adapt texts, and assisted with production. The group also wanted to produce a drama that had been conceived collectively (but written mostly by Camus, it was said later) titled Révolte dans les Asturies (Revolt in Asturias); the production was forbidden by the city government for political reasons, but the text was published in 1936. Thereafter, Camus always considered the theater the prime artistic experience, involving text, performance, and collaboration. He also composed a novel, begun in 1937 and published posthumously as La Mort heureuse (1971; translated as A Happy Death, 1972), featuring a hero named Mersault and dealing with themes that recur in his later work. Two collections of lyrical essays, L’Envers et l’endroit and Noces (1939; translated as “Nuptials” in Lyrical and Critical), were brought out by Edmond Chariot, the owner of a bookshop in Algiers called Les Vraies Richesses (True Riches), who was just beginning a modest publishing program. In the outstanding meditative pieces of Noces, Camus’s poetic yet sober style gave stunningly beautiful treatment to Mediterranean topics such as the sea, the desert, and death. L’Envers et l’endroit was, in contrast, a collection of narrative sketches on which he later drew or further developed.

In July 1937 Camus sailed for Marseilles, visited Paris for the first time, and spent a month in Embrun in the hope of strengthening his lungs. That autumn he was offered a teaching post in Sidi-bel-Abbés, about fifty miles south of Oran, Algeria; he visited the town with the intention of accepting, but fled at the last moment, fearful of being isolated there. In any case, a permanent professorial career, which otherwise he might have
At this time Camus decided to take up journalism. In the late 1930s he worked for a liberal daily newspaper, the *Alger Républicain*. Here he published his important, well-documented series of articles, “Misère de la Kabylie” (Misery in Kabylia), on economic hardships among the Kabyles. He closely studied the pricing of necessary foodstuffs and other supplies, as well as the effects of economic policies formulated in Paris. Shortly after World War II began in the fall of 1939, the paper was forced by the censors to close. In 1940 Camus and his colleague Pascal Pia, a longtime friend, moved to Paris, where they worked for *Paris-Soir*, a daily, and Camus established ties with several literary figures and members of the Gallimard publishing firm.

In 1937 Camus developed a romantic interest in Francine Faure, a student of mathematics whom he had met earlier and who visited the House Above the World before returning to Paris to pursue her studies at the lycee Fenelon. A native of Oran, a coastal city in western Algeria, she came from a family long established there and was one-quarter Jewish. Like Camus, she had lost her father early in World War I, in the very month of her birth, and the family was left without ample resources. In the spring of 1939, unable to finish her studies at the University of Algiers, she took a job as a substitute teacher in Oran. She was a competent pianist as well as trained in mathematics. Although her mother was not favorably impressed with the credentials of Camus—ill with tuberculosis, without family money, and not yet divorced from his first wife—Francine announced that she wished to marry him. At the same time, however, he was involved with Yvonne Ducailar, with whom he exchanged several letters. According to an eyewitness, Camus was in love with her, and she remained, perhaps, one of the great loves of his life. But Francine, it would appear, demanded marriage.

With the fall of France to German forces in June 1940, Paris-Soir transferred its operations to Lyons, in the Free Zone. (According to the terms of the armistice signed on 22 June, France was divided into two zones: “Occupied,” under direct German control; and “Free,” under the control of General Philippe Pétain’s new, collaborating French government, called the Vichy government for the name of the town in central France where it was based.) There, in December 1940, Camus married Francine, who had succeeded with difficulty in traveling to France. They sailed back to Oran, where work of any sort was difficult to find. Francine resumed teaching as a substitute, and Camus, unable to find remunerative work at first, read manuscripts for Chariot’s publishing house, organized some amateur dramatic readings, worked on his writing, and helped Pia plan a new magazine to be published in Lyons. Eventually he obtained a teaching position in a private school where the pupils were Jewish (they had been banned by Vichy laws from attending public schools).

In January 1942 Camus fell gravely ill, spitting blood; he had to undergo further pneumothorax treatments, and the doctors forbade him to swim. He was not well during the following summer, either. So that he might convalesce in a better climate than humid Oran, in August he and his wife returned to the mountains of south-central France, in the Free Zone. (It was believed that mountain air was good for people with tuberculosis.) They settled in Le Panelier, a village at an altitude of more than three thousand feet, outside of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, itself some distance from Saint-Etienne and Lyons. Francine left for Oran shortly; Camus expected to, but he was caught when the Germans overran the demarcation line in November and occupied the rest of France; no exit passes could be obtained. That same year Gallimard published Camus’s first two major works, *L’Etranger* and *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, which Pia had submitted for him by a roundabout route via Malraux, since packages could not be sent from the Free Zone to the Occupied Zone. Camus was thenceforth no longer an unknown writer.

**EARLY SUCCESS**

Camus found himself alone in France, in Le Panelier. The months he spent there in 1942-1943 were not happy ones. Separated from his wife and his Algerian friends, suffering doubtless from solitude as well as the drab winter, needing to grow stronger, often bored, and depressed by the war, he brooded. He read extensively among philosophic writers whose ideas interested him—especially Kierkegaard—while he kept his notebooks
and worked on *Le Malentendu* and *La Peste*. The depressive tone of both works certainly reflects his state of mind at the time, and the themes and circumstances of *La Peste* mirror some of the wartime conditions. He traveled to Saint-Etienne to see doctors and made occasional journeys to Lyons. He also made two visits to Paris, during the first of which he met the gifted actress Maria Casares. Acquaintances there pronounced him thin. No wonder: he was probably quite undernourished, like most French at the time, and he was ill. Through Michel Gallimard, a nephew of the publisher Gaston Gallimard and a member of the publishing firm, Camus met an extraordinary Dominican priest, R.-L. Bruckberger, a maverick with independent ideas, who had fought in the war. In Lyons he became acquainted with the little-known poet Francis Ponge, a modest fellow and a Communist, later recognized as a highly original author. Both Ponge and Bruckberger became close friends of Camus.

Meanwhile, *Paris-Soir* had been obliged to close in Lyons, and Pia had moved to Paris. Finally, in November 1943, Camus, who was hired as a reader by Gallimard and thus assured of an income, joined him there and began to help produce the underground Resistance paper *Combat*, then edited by Pia. Francine was not able to join her husband until the autumn of 1944. After the liberation of Paris in August 1944, the paper, with Camus as editor in chief, appeared openly as the leading journal of opinion. The first issue produced in the open was dated 21 August, a few days before the arrival of the Allied troops. Camus wrote the editorials day after day during many months. Among them are a short series that make up “Ni victimes ni bourreaux” (Neither Victims nor Executioners), dealing with the burning issues of the time: death as punishment, socialism, pacifist movements, and Communist dictatorship. His articles, many of which were collected in the series *Actuelles* (1950-1958; translated in part in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, 1961), were viewed by many as the very conscience of France. One of the issues that had bothered Camus in the months following the Liberation but before Allied victory was that of the punishment of collaborators. For reasons of health he withdrew from the paper temporarily in the winter of 1945. There were also periods when, in apparent disagreement with editorial policy and especially with the views of Raymond Aron, who was then on the staff, he ceased writing. Camus resigned in 1947, principally, it appears, over policy matters involving the paper’s finances and not because he was forced out by Pia, although some coolness existed between them.

During 1944 and the next few years Camus was a highly visible figure in the Paris neighborhood of Saint-Germain-des-Prés and a frequent companion of Sartre, Beauvoir, Arthur Koestler and his wife, and others in their circle. They spent entire nights at parties or out drinking, going home only at dawn (before the end of the Occupation, curfews prohibited anyone from being on the streets late at night). Beauvoir’s memoirs show her appreciation for Camus’s charm, although she and Sartre judged him to have “only a mediocre training in Marxism.” He appreciated her less, calling her a garrulous bluestocking. All of these figures subsequently stated that they had not been truly close friends, with identical viewpoints on many issues and a genuine intellectual communion. This judgment was, to be sure, colored by their subsequent disagreements. Though she denied doing so, it is obvious that Beauvoir wrote Camus into her novel *Les Mandarins* (1954; translated as *The Mandarins*, 1956) in the guise of Henri Perron, a journalist.

**CAMUS ON SARTRE**

“I find in Sartre the greatest and most persuasive of talents, but his books have never had the slightest influence on me for the very simple reason that our intellectual climates are incompatible. From the artistic point of view, let us say simply that the sky of Le Havre [which served as the model for the city where Sartre’s *La Nausée* is set] is not that of Algiers. From the ideological point of view, Sartre was brought up on German philosophy, which he knows admirably, whereas I have always preferred Plato to Hegel.”

*Albert Camus*

Shortly after the end of World War II, Camus and Francine’s twin children, Jean and Catherine, were born. Camus’s plays Le Malentendu, produced in 1944, and Caligula, produced in 1945, which deal with the absurd, attracted further attention to the author of L’Etranger. The second of the two plays was a stage success. His morality play L’Etat de siege (translated as State of Siege, 1958), produced in 1948, was a complete failure. Les Justes (1949; translated as The Just Assassins, 1958), which played to mixed reviews, suggested to the left-wing public Camus’s unwillingness to subordinate traditional ethics to militant revolutionary ethics without criticism; at the least, he insisted that if the end is to justify the means, they must be roughly proportional. Whatever the reviews, this experience in the theater was a tonic to him: he was involved to some degree in the productions and had the satisfaction of seeing his characters brought to life by eminent directors and actors. He was involved in a romantic liaison with Casarés, who appeared in some of his dramas. The affair, which caused great marital tension, was itself somewhat stormy but endured on one footing or another until Camus’s death.

In 1946 Camus, now a famous man, visited America, principally New York but also Washington, D.C.; Philadelphia; and Montreal. He suffered from a fever during the entire visit. Unlike Sartre and Beauvoir, both of whom liked New York and appreciated its vitality and urban design, Camus found the city dreadful. Steady rain did not help. He lectured at several sites, including Columbia University; Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York; Brooklyn College; and also in the Philadelphia area, at Bryn Mawr College. He met A. J. Leibling of The New Yorker, Etienne Gilson (a French Thomistic philosopher whom Camus had mentioned in his notebooks), Claude Levi-Strauss (a French anthropologist), Consuelo de Saint-Exupery (widow of the author Antoine de Saint-Exupery), Waldo Frank (an American critic), and Justin O’Brien, who later translated various works by Camus into English. Camus also became involved with Patricia Blake, a student about to graduate from Smith College. She was one of the principal female figures in his life after the war. In 1947 his next novel, La Peste, on which he had worked during the war, was published; it met with the approval of many readers but with a cool, even critical reception from many more.

Camus’s trip to North America was complemented in 1949 by a long journey to South America, with stops in Brazil, Uruguay, and Chile. He declined to go to Argentina because he would not have been free to criticize the regime of Juan Peron. Camus began the journey in a dreadful depression and again felt ill much of the time. As often before and after, he thought of suicide—seriously, it appears, thus carrying out his premise in Le Mythe de Sisyphe that suicide is the only true philosophical problem. The official appearances he was obliged to make annoyed him, but he discovered some of the local customs with delight, especially in a town called Iguape in Brazil. During one of his interviews, he spoke of William Faulkner as the greatest contemporary author and compared Sartre to Denis Diderot, perhaps the greatest philosopher and literary figure of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment in France.

Admired by many, by the end of the 1940s Camus was nevertheless in a difficult ideological situation, exacerbated by Cold War polarization. His moderate positions, his disapproval of Soviet rhetoric and practice, and his humanism, agnostic but warm, awakened hostility in the pro–Communist camp; yet, being basically a man of the Left, he was not entirely in the Western camp either, and certainly not a voice of conservatism or reaction.

FAME AND STRIFE

“J’ai échappé à tous … et j’ai voulu d’une certaine maniere que tous m’échappent” (I have escaped from everyone, and in a certain way I wanted everyone to escape from me), wrote Camus toward the end of his last decade. The statement reflects the perception that he had escaped from categorization and wholesale appropriation by one political faction or another, and that he had preserved a kind of artistic autonomy under great pressure, remaining disponible (available), as Gide had counseled. The observation also reflects malaise: an artist completely comfortable in his situation and with his public would probably not make such a declaration. Beyond expressing a somewhat ambiguous attitude toward those around him, it also bespeaks the
difficulty of remaining uncommitted in a highly factionalized historical moment.

The first major signs of Camus’s political predicament and malaise appeared in 1951, when *L’Homme révolté* (translated as *The Rebel*, 1953) was published. This long political essay, which had cost him great pains during composition, marked him in the eyes of radicals as ideologically simpleminded, utopistic, lacking in philosophical rigor, and essentially having betrayed the Left. Camus’s published answer to a review by a disciple of Sartre, Francis Jeanson, in *Les Temps Modernes* (Sartre’s monthly), occasioned a retort by Sartre and definitively ended their association.

The sort of moderation and compromise that Camus favored was especially untimely as an uprising in Algeria developed from isolated incidents into full-fledged guerrilla warfare, compounded by terrorism. Pressure was put on him to speak against French repression and for Algerian autonomy. Although he had campaigned for what he considered fairer treatment of indigenous peoples, he could not, as a pied-noir who considered Algeria French, support independence. As a man of justice, he could not approve repression and the intransigence of the French hard-liners, or ultras. When he went to Algiers in 1956 to make an appeal for a civil truce, an angry crowd of ultras outside the hall where he was to speak yelled “A mort Camus” (Death to Camus). The danger was real; it is now known, moreover, that the committee that organized his visit was manipulated by the anticolonial extremists of the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale), who used him as their puppet.42

Camus’s was the dilemma of fame, which, originating with the public, depends on continued public approval and often finds renewal difficult. “Tout accomplissement est une servitude,” he wrote in 1951. “Il oblige à un accomplissement plus haut” (Every accomplishment is a servitude. It creates an obligation to achieve a higher accomplishment).43 Being lionized at a young age rarely helps a writer, even one who appears to like it and prosper in it. It was risky to be the public’s darling. In a study of Camus and his works published in 1963, Morvan Lebesque wrote that Camus experienced the worst for a writer: a dazzling fame but besieged by questioners. We, *writers of the twentieth century, will never again be alone*. Yesterday’s writer sat on the bleachers, from where he watched the spectacle of the world, this provider of *subjects*; today, the crowd requires him to descend into its midst. It accosts him, it demands an answer to everything. Camus became famous at the height of this curiosity and this confidence, at the time when a whole generation of youth, emerging from a nightmare, groped to find its masters. From one day to the next he was surrounded by avid looks. He did not hide how much this gaze weighed on him sometimes. Let us bear witness that he endured it with a dignity that remains, as much as his work does, the proof of his greatness.44

In Camus’s case, one of the results of his situation—a defensive measure, doubtless—was difficulty in writing: if one does not publish new works, then at least one cannot be attacked. His involvement in the theater throughout the 1950s, while reflecting a lifelong interest, may have been another way of deflecting the imperative to write and write well. Sartre, similarly in the public eye for a different sort of achievement, eventually circumvented the problem of fame to some degree by two stratagems. One was to denounce, in *Les Mots* (1964; translated as *The Words*, 1964), the boy he had been and the writer who earlier had come out of that boy, identifying what he had been and written as fraudulent, based on an unjustified belief in aesthetic values and his own genius. (Sartre continued, to be sure, to allow his earlier works to be reprinted and to accept royalties from them.) The second was to refuse the Nobel Prize in literature in 1964. Though Camus was dead before these literary moves were made, he would doubtless have recognized and wryly appreciated the ways in which Sartre both denounced his fame and increased it.

As, during the 1950s, health problems and recurring writer’s paralysis plagued Camus, the ideologically charged atmosphere and the burden of his renown were only part of the problem. Franchine, already depressed,
fell into deeper mental difficulties in the summer of 1953. This depression was almost surely brought on by the domestic difficulties between her and Albert and by her unhappiness at having to share him with Casarés. She sought psychiatric care and was hospitalized from time to time. Friends and her mother and sisters feared for her; Camus, too, was greatly concerned, as well as irritated and burdened with guilt. The couple lived apart for months; then together, without harmony, it would appear; then again separately. At one time Francine’s mother (whom Camus called Moby-Dick in private) and sisters ordered Camus out of the apartment. If she was cured, he said, he wanted to break with her completely. Friendships often imposed their own burden, to which was added that of his many involvements with women, including, in addition to Casarés, the actress Catherine Sellers and especially a woman known as Mi, twenty-two years younger than Camus, whom he met in 1957 and with whom he appeared to be passionately in love late in the decade. One of his last letters was addressed to her. In fact, Camus, something of a compulsive womanizer, could not be faithful to one woman only and sometimes had simultaneous involvements with three or four; but he claimed he could keep all of them happy.

Camus’s speech denouncing the Russian invasion of Hungary in 1956 provided a further excuse for attacks from the left wing, which reproached him for not condemning French repression in Algeria, including police use of torture, whereas he was ready to criticize the Soviet repression in Hungary. His sense of alienation produced what may be his finest novel, La Chute, published in 1956 (translated as The Fall), an ironic attack on modern ironic man. The following year Camus was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature, the ninth and youngest French writer so honored. He had earlier received various awards, including the Resistance Medal in 1946 and the Prix des Critiques for La Peste in 1947, but he had persistently rejected the Legion of Honor. He used the Nobel Prize money to purchase a vacation house in Lourmarin in the south of France.

Despite the honor of the Nobel Prize, the last thirty-six months or so of Camus’s life were not tranquil. As one biographer has noted, “the year 1957 was terrible for Camus, obsessed by the Algerian problem, isolated within all his families, barricaded within himself or in quarantine….” Camus spoke of having “mal aux poumons” (ill from Algeria as he was ill in the lungs). The prize itself contributed to his difficulties, since inevitably it created a tremendous stir around him, made him more of a public figure than before, thus reducing further his time for reflection and creative work, and caused unintentional alienation between him and old friends, raising up a “herse d’or” (golden harrow or grille). Under difficult personal conditions and facing a half-hostile public, Camus published political essays and L’Exil et le royaume. During much of the decade he was also engaged in attempts to find a theater of his own, where he could be the director. Despite friends’ assistance and intervention with the French government (which subsidized stages then as now) and his own persistence, the enterprise did not succeed. Camus did, however, take over for Marcel Herrand, then critically ill (and, by summertime, dead), as director of the Festival d’Art Dramatique in Angers in the summer of 1953. Two of his adaptations (of plays by Pierre de Larivey and Pedro Calderon) were staged there. As a sequel to his highly successful 1956 stage adaptation of Faulkner’s Requiem for a Nun (1951), Camus plunged into reading Dostoyevsky’s The Possessed (1871) and turned it into dramatic form; it was produced in 1959. He also worked on the posthumously published Le Premier Homme.

The manuscript of the unfinished Le Premier Homme was in Camus’s briefcase, along with French translations of William Shakespeare’s Othello (1605) and Nietzsche’s Joyful Wisdom (1882), when he was killed in an automobile accident on 4 January 1960. Camus feared speed on the road, contrary to some reports. He had been with his family at his vacation home in Lourmarin, where he experienced some moments of morbidity worse than usual and talked about what sort of burial he wanted. When it was time to return to Paris after the Christmas holiday, Francine and the children took the train. Camus, too, had planned to do so, but instead he accepted the invitation of Michel Gallimard and his wife, Janine, who had spent New Year’s with the Camus family, to drive back. On the second day of the drive, past the city of Sens (about seventy-three miles southeast of Paris on today’s roads), the car, with Gallimard driving, swerved off the road and hit one plane tree, then another. Camus died instantly; Gallimard survived a few days; Janine and the Gallimards’ daughter Anne, in the tiny back seat, were not gravely injured, although Janine had some broken bones. It is
unscientific but interesting to note that when in 1943 Grenier had asked Camus for the exact date of his birth, for a horoscope that Max Jacob wished to cast, there was a delay of more than a year before the results were related to him, for the horoscope predicted that he would die a tragic death. During a stay in 1946 at the house of an acquaintance in Lourmarin, Camus had slept in a bedroom that had been cursed by passing Gypsies. He was superstitious and had already felt somewhat cursed when he departed for South America in 1949. If Camus had survived the automobile accident, he would surely have remembered the forebodings he had. He would also presumably have recalled that in 1951 he wrote that he sometimes wished to die a violent death.

NOTES


7. A noteworthy instance when Camus, despite all his former disclaimers, was publicly associated with existentialism occurred during the ceremony in which the Nobel Prizes of 1957 were awarded; the secretary of the Swedish Academy, Anders Osterling, introduced Camus as an existentialist. See Herbert R. Lottman, Albert Camus: A Biography (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday 1979), p. 647.


28. Jacqueton, Bernard, and Gsell, Algérie et Tunisie, p. 1. By the time Camus was eighteen, the population may have been as high as 170,000 European-Algerians and 55,000 indigenous residents. See Todd, *Albert Camus: Une vie*, p. 57.


39. In 1938 Camus wrote in a letter to Jean Grenier that a medical certificate necessary for him to undertake the *agrégation* had been denied to him by a government commission. The *agrégation*, the highest teaching certificate, was necessary for anyone wishing to teach at the advanced levels. Moreover, though Camus did not pursue the matter, he probably would not have been certified to teach permanently at any level. See Camus and Jean Grenier, *Correspondance: 1932-1960* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), p. 33.


45. See Todd, *Albert Camus: Une vie*, pp. 584-590, 593, for details and statements by Camus in letters concerning Francine’s health, his own vexation and guilt, and his plans.

46. Ibid., p. 671.


**Camus, Albert: Camus at Work**

- **EARLY COMMITMENT**
- **LITERARY APPRENTICESHIP AND HABITS OF WORK**
- **SOURCES OF INSPIRATION**
- **ADDITIONAL FEATURES OF CAMUS’S CREATIVE PROCESS AND IMAGINATION**
- **NOTES**
EARLY COMMITMENT

Consideration of Camus at work in the early stages of his development, in which he made the transition from reader, philosophy student, notebook-jotter, and would-be novelist to author of original and publishable texts, can be guided by the following questions, asked by Jean Sarocchi: “How does a young man taken with literature become a writer? Or: how does the infection of egotism become purified through fiction? Or: how are texts filled with narcissism tempered … to become plays and novels?”

In a profound sense, no answer to these questions as asked of any artist can be given with certainty, creative art not being a chemical product resulting from a combination of elements (no matter how brilliant and promising the human elements may be). The self and the life of the mind—a transforming power always active—being far from simple, the passage from the potential of art to its realization must needs be similarly complex. Camus’s notebooks (which he called cahiers and the publisher named Carnets), along with passages from his correspondence and other texts, do, however, furnish a partial reply to Sarocchi’s questions.

The Socratic principle “Know thyself” has no better application than to the life of an artist. The popular assumption, fostered by simplistic psychological beliefs centered around the theory of the unconscious and proclaimed by the Surrealists, that artistic achievement happens somehow despite the artist, who acts merely as a medium, has proved inadequate. By heightened awareness of himself and his potentiality and by taking deliberate measures to realize it, the young writer moves to advance that potentiality and become himself. In Camus’s case, this awareness was present in late adolescence: “J’ai eu envie d’être écrivain vers dix-sept ans, et, en même temps, j’ai su, obscurement, que je le serais” (Around age seventeen I wanted to be a writer, and at the same time I realized, obscurely, that I would be).

This account does not exclude false steps, of the sort taken by some of the greatest literary figures, nor the mysterious workings of the creative mind, which even highly conscious artists do not always understand completely and which biography can describe only roughly. Self-doubt is not excluded either. Camus recalled that “Après L’Envers et l’endroit, j’ai doute. J’ai voulu renoncer. Et puis une force de vie, eclatante, a voulu s’exprimer en moi: j’ai écrit Noces” (After L’Envers et l’endroit, I doubted. I wanted to give up. And then some vital force, bursting through, tried to express itself in me: I wrote Noces). Nor does the choice to write eliminate uncertainties like those faced by other young people. In the summer of 1939, before the outbreak of World War II, Camus wrote to his future wife, Francine Faure: “Je ne sais pas très bien ce que je ferai. Je ne sais pas si je prendrai mon congé” (I don’t quite know what I’ll do. I don’t know whether I’ll take my leave). He added that “si je le faisais, je voudrais passer un mois à travailler pour moi, régulièrement, dans un endroit que j’aimerais. Mais je ne me sens pas capable d’y réfléchir aujourd’hui” (if I did so, I should like to spend a month working for myself, regularly, in a place I would like. But I don’t feel able to think about it today).

Despite the uncertainty, such statements convey the importance that Camus attached to his projects: their very urgency, combined with often difficult conditions, reveal the commitment he had made to literature.

The existential fervor with which Camus lived his work was apparent throughout his career: “Il n’y a aucune distance en ce moment entre ma vie et mon œuvre. Je mène cela de front et les deux avec la même passion” (There is no distance at the present time between my life and my work. I carry on both together and both with the same passion). He understood, moreover, that his true public image would come ultimately from this writing, noting that “L’œuvre est un aveu” (One’s work is a confession). This attitude does not denote a type of aestheticism, the sort often connected with decadent literature of the late nineteenth century, which subordinates, or claims to subordinate, all real living to the work of art. Camus observed in his journals that “Tart n’est pas tout pour moi. Que du moins ce soit un moyen” (Art is not everything for me. May it be at least a means). Nor is all his writing autobiographical; rather, writing was his vital drive, to which he was committed and in which his engagement was constant and total.
Camus was aware that this commitment to writing required discipline, sacrifice, and singlemindedness—a devotion to which obstacles were raised from his youth, including poor health and financial problems. But he understood the value of persistence and faith in himself. In 1933, when he was not quite twenty, Camus wrote to his professor Jean Grenier: “N’est-ce pas que j’ai raison, m’étant choisi une foi, de me refuser a toute concession qui puisse atteindre cette foi—m’étant fixe un but, de m’oublier absolument dans la poursuite de ce but” (Am I not right, having chosen a faith, to refuse any concession that might under-mine that faith, and having set for myself a goal, to forget myself absolutely in the pursuit of this goal).\(^\text{10}\) The word *foi* in this context means belief in himself, as he made clear nearly a quarter-century later in one of his Stockholm speeches: “L’obeissance d’un homme a son propre genie, a dit magnifiquement Emerson, c’est la foi par excellence” (A man’s obedience to his own genius, said Emerson magnificently, is faith *par excellence*).\(^\text{11}\)

Camus was also avid for life itself, naturally enough, perhaps with the added realization that life feeds art and certainly impelled by the knowledge that he had an illness that could prove fatal long before he reached old age. From Prague in 1936 he wrote to Marguerite Dobrenn, one of the three women who rented the “House Above the World” in Algiers with him: “Je me rappelle qu’a dix-huit ans c’était les heures memes du sommeil qu’il me semblait oter a la vie. J’avais une furieuse et avide soif de tout ce qui m’attendaient, des etres que je ne connaissais pas, des paroles que je n’avais encore dites, des oeuvres, des livres, des hommes. Et de tout cela je ne pouvais rien abandonner. Je ne suis pas sur d’avoir change” (I recall that at age eighteen I felt that the hours spent sleeping were being taken away from life. I had a furious and avid thirst for everything that awaited me, for beings I did not know, for words I had not yet said, works, books, people. And I couldn’t give any of that up. I am not sure I’ve changed).\(^\text{12}\) Ill though Camus was through much of his life, feverish, sometimes in bed, and sometimes undergoing treatment, he remained full of curiosity and vitality, as Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir discovered when they met him during World War II; this fervor was a means as well as a sign of his creative mind.

**LITERARY APPRENTICESHIP AND HABITS OF WORK**

Although his material situation as a youth was difficult, except during the years when his uncle Gustave Acault assisted him, Camus was favored by certain other circumstances and took advantage of them; he also took steps that contributed to his literary apprenticeship. One was extensive reading of others’ works. Reading had become a habit for him in grammar school and the lycee, where he was exposed to the canonical writers of French literature and many figures from the ancient Greek and Latin traditions. Throughout his career his personal papers, as well as works intended for the public, give evidence of a great deal of reading. In a set of “Notes de lecture” (Reading Notes) dated April 1933, Camus speaks of works by Aeschylus, Stendhal, Leon Chestov (Lev Shestov), Fyodor Dostoyevsky Friedrich Nietzsche, Marcel Proust, Andre Gide, and Grenier.\(^\text{13}\) In close connection with these notes inspired by reading the works of other writers, Camus registers the evolution of his own thought and character, suggesting to himself that he should master his feelings so that they show in his work, not in his life.

Camus’s journalistic work in Algiers was another important part of his apprenticeship. As the case of Ernest Hemingway illustrates, lengthy experience in writing for magazines and newspapers, particularly daily papers, can serve as an excellent discipline for a developing artist, who is obliged by deadlines, dictated tasks, and the chance stories that come along to acquire skills in organization and expression, including following a narrative line and characterization. Camus discovered that writing philosophy papers for his professors at the university was one thing; producing readable copy every day for the public was another. But philosophy may have served him well, for it taught him to read behind and beneath the facts, to search for meanings and implications. According to his friend and colleague Pascal Pia, Camus was adept at journalism, with a strong grasp of the language and good repertorial skills.\(^\text{14}\)

As with nearly every artist, the question arises in Camus’s case of his artistic dependence upon others. Few artistic geniuses spring forth fully developed, like Athena out of the forehead of Zeus; the
late-nineteenth-century French poet Arthur Rimbaud, who displayed a fully matured talent at an early age, was a rare phenomenon. Camus was fortunate in having superior teachers and in finding in Algiers an estimable circle of young, talented writers and other artists who wished to promote Algerian culture. Among the writers were Grenier, Max-Pol Fouche, and Claude de Freminville; the artists included a man of Camus’s own age, Jean de Maisoneuf, who was a painter and architect, and the somewhat older Louis Benisti. Other outstanding intellectual figures in Algiers were the professors Jean Hytier and Jacques Heurgon, the artist Rene-Jean Clot, and the writer and political figure Gabriel Audisio. The work of several of these figures is a permanent part of French cultural history.

In his early years Camus not only enjoyed the company of professors, students, political activists, poets, and journalists; to some degree they fed his mind, as he doubtless fed theirs. Group projects, such as a review, *Rivages*, collapsed because of the war, not lack of vitality. His experience with the Theatre du Travail and Theatre de l’Equipe certainly developed his sense of what worked on the stage; the very word equipe (team) suggests Camus’s approach to the theatrical experience. Critiques of his work by various friends, including Grenier, whose advice he sought, contributed to his development. Literary discussions, as well as extensive reading, at Edmond Chariot’s book-shop, the meeting place of the young intelligentsia of Algiers, were probably useful to him. As late as 1950 Camus thanked Grenier for his invaluable critical comments on Les Justes, which he had, he assured him, taken into account. Certainly it was a happy coincidence that Chariot decided to launch a modest publishing program at the same time that Camus had his first collection of essays ready for publication. Chariot’s shop and publishing enterprise, which moved to Paris after the war, attracted other writers: Grenier, Audisio, and later Emmanuel Robles and Jules Roy. It is noteworthy that in 1936 Audisio published “Vers une synthese mediterraneenne” (Toward a Mediterranean Synthesis), an article that may have had some influence on Camus’s developing ideas of Mediterranean culture. His close association with other writers in the immediate postwar years probably served to spur Camus on and shape his writing, either by imitation or reaction. Only in the later years was there on his part a marked movement of withdrawal.

The notebooks make it clear that, despite the meteor-like appearance of *L’Etranger*, Camus’s novel was the fruit of long maturation. He spoke of the years and days necessary for his thought to take form, advance, and find words. A sketch, “La Maison mauresque” (The Moorish House), was inspired by a house built in the Jardin d’Essai of Algiers (right at the end of the rue de Lyon, where Camus’s family’s apartment was located) for the 1930 Centennial celebrations. The aim of this early sketch was not the sort of local color that one might have expected: while admiring the beauty of the city, Camus did not see Algiers as material for exotic exploitation as a traveler might. He does, however, evoke features of the city and bay that readers today would find picturesque, and in particular he concentrates on effects of light and shadow, which serve as cor-relatives for his emotion.

Another feature of Camus’s creative work was the early appearance in his notebooks of ideas, characters, plots, vignettes, and tentative forms that he later exploited. He often worked, that is, with discrete elements that sooner or later took their place in a larger structure. Scores of entries are explicitly labeled as material for future work. Dozens of other pages not so labeled nevertheless constitute a fund of ideas and notations on which he later drew. A few samples illustrate the way Camus’s jottings or other references were connected to his subsequent literary production. The first pages of the *Carnets*, dated May 1935, are sketches for *L’Envers et l’endroit*, itself connected intimately to later writings, especially *Le Premier Homme*. One of Camus’s early manuscripts bears as a subtitle “L’Etranger ou Un Homme heureux.” The transformation of this title into the titles of two later works, first *La Mort heureuse* and then *L’Etranger*, shows not only the connection between the novels, which is integral, but also their common source in an earlier conception. Similarly, many passages in works such as *La Mort heureuse* and “Le Minotaure ou la halte d’Oran” (“The Minotaur, or Stopping in Oran,” 1954) were sketched first in the early *Carnets*. Other early pages include the first formulation of *Noces*. The basic situation of *Le Malentendu* was drawn from a newspaper account of a man who returned home after a twenty-year absence and, concealing his identity from his sister and mother, stayed
as a guest at their inn. They murdered the apparent stranger for his money; learning later of his identity, they killed themselves. This story also appears in concise form as summarized in a newspaper clipping read by Meursault in *L’Etranger*. It was reported in the newspapers in January 1935 as having occurred in Yugoslavia; Camus clipped the article and put it away for use some years later. He sketched the ending of *Le Malentendu*, under its early title “Budejovice” (a Czech city, also known as Budweis), in his notebook in 1942. The notebooks of 1942-1943 are filled with material concerning *La Peste*, which was not finished until after the war; some pages are actually drafts for certain scenes. One finds, for instance, a sketch of the old asthmatic man who counts time by transferring chickpeas from one kettle to another at a steady rhythm, and observations on the “psychosis of arrest,” foreshadowing the character Cottard in that novel. Similarly, in late 1942 and thereafter, one finds allusions in the notebooks to a future “esson sur la revolte” (essay on revolt or rebellion), which became *L’Homme revolte* more than eight years later. In 1946, in a lecture before a New York audience, Camus mentioned an incident that took place during the Nazi occupation of Greece; this incident then turned up ten years later in *La Chute*. Characters and plot elements inspired by his trip to Brazil in 1949 appear in his notebooks shortly thereafter, to become subsequently the story “La Pierre qui pousse” (translated as “The Growing Stone” in *L’Exil et le royaume*). Even prefaces were sketched: for the republication of *L’Envers et l’endroit* in 1958, Camus composed a preface that drew on drafts dated as early as 1951.

**WORK**

“I worked in fact almost all day but it is true that solitude is hard. I like life, I like laughter, I like pleasures … and it is terrible, with my nature and the vigor that I have in my blood, to chain and cloister myself. I hope that I shall be more patient by seeing that I am working and by proving to myself that this is the good way, the only way that fits my nasty anarchy. But I kick, I stamp, I rattle my jaws until I grab myself by the skin of my neck and sit down again in front of the paper. Yesterday, having done nothing for about a half-hour, I insulted myself aloud for five minutes.”

*Albert Camus*


There were also countless false starts; or, to put it more positively, Camus had many more ideas for stories, plays, and novels than he could carry out. Some were presumably discarded because they were unsuitable; some he doubtless lost interest in; some were merged with other plots; and many were abandoned simply because he had neither the time nor the energy to bring them to fruition. But his mind never ceased producing ideas, dialogues, and plots, such as a fictional sketch from 1935 concerning a tubercular woman, four pages of a play labeled “tragedy” from 1945, and a novel outlined in 1946. Camus continued to produce such sketches even in his last years, as in this one from 1956: “Roman. Deporte qu’on fait mettre nu. En se deshabillant un bouton de manchette roule dans un coin, il va le ramasser” (Novel. The deported man who is forced to undress. As he undresses, one of his cuff links rolls into a corner; he goes to pick it up).

Camus was a hard worker, although his literary output (as distinguished from his journalism and polemical writings) was not great, which might thus suggest otherwise. He labored at creative writing while holding remunerative jobs, and this despite ill health. Often he suffered from headaches as well as persistent fever. In the summer of 1939 Camus wrote, speaking of his own work and his plan to adapt Andre Malraux’s *La Condition humaine* (1933; translated as *Man’s Fate*, 1934): “Tout ca demanderait plus d’énergie que je n’en ai. Et comment travailler avec cet ignoble danger de guerre?” (All that would require more energy than I have. And how can one work with this horrible danger of war?) Habits he acquired as an apprentice writer remained with Camus. During his stay in Paris in 1940, he told Freminville that it required will for him to hold out physically, but that he had such will. In 1942, as Camus was reading Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-1927; translated as *Remembrance of Things Past*, 1922-1932), he observed in his notebook.
that the great work was “heroique et virile, 1) par la Constance de la volonte creatrice; 2) par l’effort qu’elle
demande a un malade” (heroic and virile, 1) by the constancy of the creative will; 2) by the effort that it
required from a sick man). On 27 February 1951, when Camus was trying to finish L’Homme revolte, he
wrote to the poet Rene Char: “Depuis un mois, je suis enfonce dans un travail ininterrompu. La totale solitude
et la volonte d’en finir font que je reste a ma table dix heures par jour. J’espère en finir avant le 15 mars. Mais
l’accouchement est long, difficile et il me semble que l’enfant est bien laid. Cet effort est extenuant” (For a
month I have been plunged into uninterrupted work. Complete solitude and the desire to get it over with mean
that I stay at my desk ten hours a day. I hope to have it done by the 15th of March. But the birth is long,
difficult and it seems to me that the child is quite ugly. This effort is exhausting).

Throughout his career Camus wished to be severe on himself: lax literary habits and inferior writing
displeased him. By rereading, producing alternate versions, and taking others’ advice into account, he taught
himself to be a severe critic of his work. Camus had to discipline not only the writing itself but also the ego
behind it: “Maudit orgueil” (Cursed pride), he wrote of himself. He shied away from trite expressions—“Ai
peur du cliche” (Afraid of cliches) and pruned some of the lyricism that came to him easily. (Significantly, this poetic vein resurfaced in Le Premier Homme.) When he had finished the first draft of La
Mort heureuse in 1938, he showed it to Heurgon, his former professor, who put into words for him some of its
weaknesses. Camus then attempted a revision, but he did not mention the manuscript to Chariot, his publisher,
and shortly afterward he abandoned it, realizing presumably that it could not be salvaged as he desired. He
corrected and recorrected his manuscript pages, as samples from Le Premier Homme show. He destroyed
drafts; no one knows how many pages. Even outlines of works never realized but jotted in Camus’s
notebooks bear corrections and additions. He also made corrections on proofs, though not so many as his
predecessors Honore de Balzac and Proust, who were notorious for rewriting so much at proof stage,
sometimes in second and third proofs, that they were the despair of their publishers. (Proust, with a private
fortune, could afford to pay for these changes; Balzac, almost always impecunious, at least once handled the
matter by buying, on credit of course, the printing business—for which he could not pay later.) Camus’s
resources were limited and his self-discipline such that he could restrain himself. His notebooks bear traces of
corrections that he initially intended to make to the proofs and finally did not.

Self-criticism notwithstanding, Camus was often bothered by others’ negative comments. His biographer
Olivier Todd observes: “Never confident, even of his talent, Camus remained hypersensitive. Neither Jean
Grenier nor Rene Char reassured him. “He often wrote replies to those who had published severe critiques, the
most famous of which is that by Francis Jeanson in 1952, to which Camus responded with a lengthy
self-defense. In contrast, Sartre, notes Todd, had no problem with misgivings expressed by friends or a public
attack: he simply dismissed his attackers. As Todd notes, “Sartre annihilates his adversaries with a sentence.
Camus interiorizes and closes up.” Camus was aware of the disadvantage of such susceptibility to criticism
and resisted it. After receiving an irritated letter from Gabriel Marcel criticizing Le Mythe de Sisyphe, Camus
told Grenier that it had made him reflect, but that a few years earlier it would have taken him aback.

The case of Caligula is instructive for those wishing to study Camus’s revisions, for the play went through
multiple versions, more than any other of the author’s works, the final version being that of 1958. The
maturation of the play seems to have been a very slow process. In 1939 the young Camus wrote that he had just
received the typescript made from his handwritten pages: “Et a la relecture, j’ai vu que je devais
retravailler ca. Tout me parait difficile” (And upon rereading it, I saw that I had to rework it. Everything
seems difficult to me). A. James Arnold, who has studied in detail the 1941 version of Caligula, shows how
various changes in Camus’s outlook from the late 1930s, as well as contemporary circumstances, shaped this
interim text. For instance, the defeat of France and occupation by Nazi authorities led Camus to see in a
different, less favorable light the ideas of Nietzsche, whose nihilism and notion of the superman were
appropriated by Nazi ideologists in support of their theories of racial superiority.
Like many other modern authors, Camus practiced what in France is called “literary strategy”—general policies, sometimes individual measures, taken to advance one’s career. His calculations, interventions, circumventions, and other procedures appear, however, to be far fewer than those of certain other writers whose biographies reflect repeated, if not continuous, efforts to influence publishers, critics, booksellers, and others to promote their works and sometimes denigrate those of rivals. Evidence in such matters is unreliable: authors do not normally accuse themselves of manipulations, and accusations of others are suspect. Nor are all such efforts unethical. The case of Proust is extreme: in what he considered to be the imperative interest of his art, now recognized by most as well worth it, he wrote hundreds of letters, attempted to persuade reviewers to write favorable notices, wrote some of the reviews of his books himself, marshaled friends and acquaintances to intervene for him, played publishers off against each other in subtle ways, and must have often made himself a terrible nuisance to others. Camus interfered much less, perhaps in part because it was not necessary once L’Etranger proved to be such a success, but also by nature. He was not subservient but was courteous and considerate, with a genuine vein of modesty. Only his attempts to find a theater of his own in Paris, perhaps a government-subsidized one, led him to take a great many steps involving others; he did not in these cases use underhanded means, according to available evidence. In the early 1940s Camus did, certainly, make repeated attempts to get L’Etranger and Le Mythe de Sisyphe into press, with the help of Grenier, Pia, and Malraux; but this help was volunteered as much as it was solicited. Moreover, help was absolutely required, since Camus himself was in Algeria and could not deliver the manuscripts in person. (Mail could not go from the Free Zone to the Occupied Zone, and the manuscripts thus had to be taken by courier.) Even at the stage of supervising the publication of these two books, he could do little, being geographically distant and ill in bed.

Even as a young artist Camus often sought solitude in which to reflect and write. Isolation favored self-knowledge and productivity. Especially in the postwar years he needed, like the title character in “Jonas” from L’Exil et le royaume, to disengage himself from his personal and literary involvements. Around 1950 Camus noted that his journey to the Mediterranean coast had done him good: “Et j’espère que cela déclenchera enfin mon travail…. Je suis seul avec ma pensée … quoique je me souvienne d’avoir parlé avec Grenier, Sartre, Chiaro…. Mais on ne peut pas parler tout le temps. Et puis moi, et c’est le fond du problème, je ne crois pas aux pensées de discussion, aux chocs des idées…. Pour moi la pensée est une aventure intérieure qui murit” (I hope that will get my work going finally…. I’m alone with my thought … although I remember having spoken with Grenier, Sartre, Chiaro [Nicola Chiaromonte]…. But one can’t talk all the time. And then—and this is the heart of the matter—I don’t believe in thoughts from discussion, in the shock of ideas…. For me, thought is an internal adventure that matures …). 34

Moreover, despite belief in himself, Camus had difficulty some-times in understanding what his real vocation was and what he should do. This difficulty, which increased in the postwar years, arose in part from the extreme politicization of his time, when there was pressure on artists to speak out. Some critics even denounced art itself as obscene in an age of torture and mass killings used as a political means. Already in the early postwar months Camus felt the obligation to bear witness: “Quelque chose en moi me dit, me persuade que je ne puis me détacher de l’époque sans lachete, sans accepter d’être un esclave, sans renier ma mere et ma verité” (Something in me says, convinces me, that I cannot become detached from my time without cowardice, without consenting to be a slave, without denying my mother and my truth). He was drawn into political polemics in his journalism and into controversy with L’Homme révolté. Yet, in reference doubtless to Sartre’s book-length essay Qu’est-ce que la littérature? (1947; translated as What Is Literature?, 1949), with its demand that all literary writing except poetry be engagee or committed, directed toward social and political ends in the general service of freedom, Camus wrote in his notebook, “Contre la littérature engagee. L’homme n’est pas que le social” (Against committed literature. Man is not only social). 35

In addition, the sort of doubts that assail many artists were not unknown to Camus. Toward the end of 1952 he spoke of “mon hesitation devant ce que j’ai a dire ou a faire maintenant” (my hesitation before what I should say or do now):
Il y a des jours ou je voudrais ne pas avoir a dire ou a faire justement. C’est peutetre une sorte de peur devant ma vocation. Peur que je n’ai jamais eue et qui me vient peut-etre par fatigue, peut-etre aussi parce que je vois mieux que l’exigence qui m’a fait avancer jusque-la n’a pas de limites, sinon l’epuisement et la chute. Et pourtant sans cette exigence je ne serais rien et mon oeuvre non plus…. (There are days when, precisely, I should like not to have to say or do anything. Perhaps it’s a kind of fear in the face of my vocation. A fear that I have never had and which comes from fatigue perhaps—maybe also because I see better that the obligation that has made me progress thus far has no limits except exhaustion and collapse. And yet without this imperative I would be nothing and my work like-wise….)

Clearly, such doubts reflected achievement: by measuring what he accomplished, and the corresponding public expectations, Camus gauged future difficulty. There was deeper doubt, also—the existential doubt of a man, not yet old but no longer young, in a dark and uncertain world. In 1956 he wrote to Char: “Plus je produis et moins je suis sur. Sur le chemin ou marche un artiste, la nuit tombe de plus en plus epaisse. Finalement, il meurt aveugle. Ma seule foi est que la lumiere l’habite, au-dedans, et qu’il ne peut la voir et qu’elle rayonne quand meme. Mais comment en etre sur?” (The more I produce, the less certain I am. On the path where an artist walks, night falls darker and darker. Finally, he dies blind. My single faith is that light inhabits him, inside, and that he cannot see it and that it radiates nevertheless. But how can one be sure?)

CAMUS AND WOMEN

“Right after the war, Camus became such a close friend that sometimes we lived under the same roof…. I knew he was very fond of women; he didn’t deny it. Women found him handsome, and intelligent, especially; he had the art of persuading them, and few turned him down. In truth, none ever resisted him…. Extremely tactful, Camus wouldn’t have wanted for the world to hurt a friend. Although he didn’t hold back [in that case], he went about it circumspectly and used all sorts of roundabout ways so that no one would know. As for the feelings of those who allowed themselves to be seduced, he counted on forgetfulness, once everything was over….”

Jules Roy


SOURCES OF INSPIRATION

Camus cultivated what he recognized as the sources of his inspiration. One was his reading: works by Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky, and Grenier continued to inspire him throughout his career. If sexual love was another source, as it may have been, its effects are subterranean, not obvious. Camus’s work is lacking in obvious erotic material, and only in rare moments are the tensions of his prose, the images, and the topics eroticized, and then obliquely. An observation such as “Il y a des femmes a Genes dont j’ai aime le sourire tout un matin” (There are women in Genoa whose smile I loved throughout a whole morning) points to a diffuse, generalized inspiration only. This is not to discount the importance of women in Camus’s life: it was enormous, and the effects of his various relationships cannot, of course, be measured. But eroticism did not appear to be a means to the work. He did not use alcohol, either, in order to work, or in order to stop working; nor did he take drugs. (Use of illegal drugs and legal stimulants in excessive doses was not unknown among major French authors: the poets Charles Baudelaire in the nineteenth century and Henri Michaux in the twentieth century cultivated what Baudelaire called the “artificial paradise” of hashish and mescaline (Baudelaire probably also used opium); Paul Verlaine, another nineteenth-century poet, drank absinthe in excessive and ultimately fatal quantities; Sartre took an enormous quantity of pharmaceutical stimulants in the 1950s.)
Camus did, however, deliberately seek out the inspiration of natural and man-made sites that appealed to him and incited his lyrical genius through their aesthetic or historical value. His excursions and journeys in North Africa fed his writing. To Grenier he wrote in 1935 that he was about to leave by cargo ship for Tunis, whence he would travel to the south of Tunisia and then visit islands off the coast: “C’est vous dire si je suis heureux” (This tells you how happy I am). Both sea and desert inspired Camus. Two striking examples of inspiration he sought in landscape are Tipasa and Djemila, sites of ancient ruins not far from Algiers that form the subject of two essays in *Noces*. Camus contrasts the ruined work of human design at these sites with the timeless facts of nature. The first, which he initially visited after the breakup of his marriage to Simone Hie, provided the inspiration for the beautiful “Noces a Tipasa” (“Wedding in Tipasa”), where the union referred to in the title is that between man and nature. “Retour a Tipasa” (“Return to Tipasa”), from *L’Ete* (1954; translated as “Summer” in *Lyrical and Critical, 1967*), reveals Camus's disabused vision of the postwar period, with Tipasa surrounded by barbed wire and contaminated by evidence of human depravity. The second site, which proved to be a disappointment to Camus, nonetheless inspired “Le Vent a Djemila” (“Wind at Djemila”), also from *Noces*. In the 1950s his brooding on such sites reappeared in the stories “La Femme adultere” (“The Adulterous Woman”) and “L’Hote” (“The Guest”), both from *L’Exil et le royaume*. Camus also artistically exploited landscapes and man-made sites that he saw in the course of other travels: Palma in Majorca, for instance, and the Italian city of Vicence. Much later, the landscapes that he saw during his travels in Brazil, especially the great forests and a river crossed at night, provided much of the inspiration for “La Pierre qui pousse.” Camus was fond of the landscapes around his house in Lourmarin; the resemblance of this region to certain parts of North Africa surely contributed to his choice to purchase property there. Similarly, his long-deferred travels in Greece were intended to take him back not only to the sources of his intellectual tradition but also to the Mediterranean landscapes that he loved, where his literary vein would find refreshment.

**ADDITIONAL FEATURES OF CAMUS’S CREATIVE PROCESS AND IMAGINATION**

One feature of Camus at work not only in the early years but throughout his career was his cultivation of multiple genres, the way a musician might play more than one instrument or a graphic artist work in several media. He attempted to work in all the main literary genres—fiction (story and novel), drama, essay, and poetry. His early notebooks, like his late ones, feature poems, including one titled “Mediterranee,” inspired obviously by “Le Cimetiere marin” (1920; translated as “The Graveyard by the Sea,” 1932) of Paul Valery, who had lectured in Algiers. At the end of his life Camus composed a beautiful prose poem reflecting Char’s influence. This is not to say that Camus cultivated all genres with the same degree of felicity throughout his career; he did not publish verse (it was his poetic prose, as in *Noces*, that revealed his lyrical spirit), and some critics assert that none of his original dramas is a masterpiece. But trying different forms and tones was doubtless a useful part of his apprenticeship. Indeed, it can be said that Camus contributed to the development of two genres by bridging certain distinctions, making the essay, as in *L’Envers et l’endroit*, more personal and more like fiction, while his dramas are philosophical.

Still another characteristic of Camus’s creative process is the nearly simultaneous conception and elaboration of multiple works. The notebooks and other evidence show that he took notes for and sometimes drafted more than one work at a time, as with the “absurd” group’*L’Etranger, Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, and *Caligula*. In 1940 he told his friend Fréminville:

> Après les “gammes” de *Noces* j’ai juge que je pouvais entamer ce que je projette de faire: un art absurde … plusieurs etapes, chaque etape figuree dans des techniques differentes et leurs suites illustrant les consequences d’une prise de corps absurde avec la vie….J’ai entame ma premiere etape. *Caligula* (piece) est fini … *L’Etranger* (roman) … est ecrit aux trois quarts. Mon essai sur l’absurde est ecrit a moitie. (After the “scales” of *Noces* I judged that I could start what I pro- pose to do: an absurd art … several stages, each stage represented in different techniques, and their results, illustrating the consequences of an absurd struggle with life…. )
Caligula [a play] is finished … L’Etranger [a novel] … is three-quarters written. My essay on the absurd is half written.)

Thus, even at the level of conception, Camus’s works shed light on and reinforce each other; this reinforcement is borne out by publication dates and, often, public reaction.

Another feature of Camus’s creative mind was the persistence of certain themes and feelings, which shows a fundamental unity in his thought. It can be illustrated by the themes of poverty and the mother. In an important notebook entry dated May 1935, couched in the third person but clearly a personal statement, Camus asserts that “le sentiment bizarre que le fils porte a sa mere constitue toute sa sensibilité” (the strange sentiment that the son feels toward his mother constitutes all his sensibility) and that this sensibility is transformed into “nostalgie d’une pauvreté perdue” (nostalgia for a lost poverty). Camus sketched an outline of a work’essay or fiction’in which he could convey this subject, but it concludes with questions about form: “Quelle solution,” he asks; “La mere? Dernier chapitre: la valeur symbolique realisee par nostalgie du fils???” (What solution. The mother? Last chapter: the symbolic value brought out by the son’s nostalgia???). More than twenty years later, the theme of poverty, or denuement (barrenness or destitution), appeared in certain stories, sometimes as an oppression that weighs down the spirit, else-where as an opening to spirit. Similarly, in the same notebook entry appear notations of what may be Camus’s most characteristic vision of the human condition, a rather disabused, pained feeling composed of a sense of beauty, the realization of life’s brevity, a tremendous appetite for life, despair, and, sometimes, taedium vitae, or ennui: “C’est que la beaute est insupportable. Elle nous desesperre, eternite d’une minute que nous voudrions pourtant etirer tout le long du temps” (It’s that beauty is unbearable. It makes us desperate—a moment’s eternity that we should like nevertheless to stretch throughout time).

PROSE POEM

“Black horse, white horse, a single human hand masters the two furors. With an open tomb, the race is joyous. Truth lies, frankness dissimulates. Hide in the light.

“The world fills you and you are empty: fullness.

“Little sound of foam on the morning shore: t fills the world as much i as the fracas of fame. Both come from silence….

“In the brief daylight that is given to you, warm and illumine, without straying from your path.

“Millions of other suns will come for your rest.

“Under the funeral stone of joy, the first sleep.

“Sown by the wind, harvested by the wind, and yet a creator, such is man, throughout the centuries, and proud to live a single moment”.

Albert Camus


These themes and others are connected to what is surely the dominant subject of Camus’s writing, happiness. Even his protest articles and editorials were inspired not by political doctrine but by the belief that the conditions of life for French and other European workers and Muslims in North Africa must be such that the pursuit of happiness would be possible. The theme of happiness underlies much of Camus’s early writing and
is announced explicitly in *Caligula*, when the emperor observes that men die and are not happy. It reappears in *L’Étranger* and *La Peste* and in such stories as “Les Muets,” in which contentment seems out of reach for Yvars, and “La Femme adultere,” where, in contrast to the heroine’s dull, unhappy life, another culture and setting offer illumination. Happiness is not treated simplistically, and it always appears against a background of unhappiness, misery, despair, injustice, or death. “Il n’y a pas d’amour de vivre sans desespoir de vivre” (There is no love of life without despair of life), wrote Camus in *L’Envers et l’endroit*.44

Another characteristic of Camus’s creative mind, important because it is at the heart of much of his writing, is his symbolic imagination. Under his pen, images and metaphors, many of them visually strong and poetically beautiful, take on sufficient importance to become symbols, operating through the text. Every reader of *L’Étranger* senses the symbolic value of the sun, which weighs on Meursault with the power of a malevolent fate, although it is also part of the nature that he normally enjoys. In *La Peste* the plague obviously represents evil, standing symbolically for the Nazi occupation and allegorically for moral and metaphysical evil. The rest of Camus’s fiction is likewise marked by symbolic use of plot and descriptive elements: the claustrophobia induced by a bus and a hotel room in contrast to the freedom of the vast desert in “La Femme adultere”; the two slabs of rock in “La Pierre qui pousse”; and the concentric canals and oppressive skies of Amsterdam in *La Chute*. Similarly, Camus’s drama is heavy with symbols: the moon of *Caligula* standing for the unattainable; the dark skies of Central Europe in *Le Malentendu* symbolizing inescapable fate and the old servant’s silence suggesting that of the heavens; and plague, as allegorized in *L’Etat de siege*, representing political oppression. This tendency to think and write in symbols is visible from Camus’s early years, as illustrated, for instance, in “Noces a Tipasa.”

Camus’s symbolic imagination often operated by antitheses and contrasts. All literary artists, as well as painters, musicians, and expository writers, use contrasts; they are, in fact, built into the human imagination by the natural pairs of opposites—day and night, men and women, life and death, and summer and winter—and they are similarly built into language. With his sensitivity heightened, perhaps, by his illness, which brought the threat of premature death into his very respiration, Camus exploited with brilliance the linguistic, rhetorical, and philosophical possibilities of antithesis. The setting of *La Chute* in the low, misty Netherlands is an antithesis to his preferred Algerian setting; the burden of guilt in the novel is the antithesis of freedom and happiness.

Among the principal poles of Camus’s *imaginaire* (imaginative world) are the sun and, more generally, the sky; the sea (*mer* in French, with its happy homophonic coincidence with *mere*, mother); and the desert, inhabited by stones, resembling the sea in its vast and solitary prospects, under an empty sky. Camus was aware of the parallels between the desert’s appeal for him and its cultural and symbolic value in Christian tradition as the wilderness to which Christ repaired and, later, saints and hermits fled in order to fast, pray, see visions, and communicate with the divine. The horrible distortion of this image in the short story “Le Renegat” (translated as “The Renegade” in *Exile and the Kingdom*), in which the barren Southern wilds are the scene of apostasy, torture, and agony, does not invalidate the impulse of Camus and of certain characters to find their truth in the stones of the desert. In “L’Hôte” Daru belongs to the stones and the endless vistas, which express his loneliness and existential solitude.

At its most general, Camus’s symbolic imagination becomes mythic. In addition to the Greek myths that he used explicitly, chiefly those of Sisyphus and Prometheus, and the legend of Don Juan (in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*), there is a least one natural myth in his work, that of the sun. Its symbolism reaches almost sacred proportions, going beyond the emphasis on lucidity in classic Greek thought to the solar myths of Mithraic and other Mediterranean religions. The references are not direct: like Camus himself, his characters are generally modern men, speaking in modern voices. But the awful power of the sun—the way it seems to preside over human destinies, as well as its connection to both happiness (as in the swimming scenes of *L’Étranger*)
and misfortune (in La Peste)—raises it to a mythic level: “O lumiere! C’est le cri de ceux qui dans les
tragedies grecques sont jetes devant la mort ou un destin terrible” (O light! That is the cry of those who, in
Greek tragedy, are thrown toward death or a terrible fate). Camus wrote in 1950: “Jusqu’ici je ne suis pas un
romancier au sens ou on l’entend. Mais plutot un artiste qui cree des mythes a la mesure de sa passion et de
son angoisse” (Until now I have not been a novelist in the meaning in which that is understood. But rather an
artist who creates myths according to his passion and his anguish). Even his rebel, in L’Homme revolte, and
those practicing the semiprimitive religion of “La Pierre qui pousse” near the powerful river partake of a
mythic quality.

Persisting through the art of Camus on the most general plane are two strains of thought, feeling, and
expression that are both French and universal, and which he united with great felicity. One is Romanticism,
which is historically situated in Europe from the late eighteenth century through, approximately, the middle of
the nineteenth century. In France, where Romanticism blossomed late, its arrival (as opposed to pre-Romantic
developments) is often identified as the year 1820, when Alphonse de Lamartine published his Meditations
poetiques (translated as The Poetical Meditations of M. Alphonse de La Martine, 1839). Romanticism
overflows historical bounds, how-ever: its most general features are found much earlier (even in the ancient
Greek plays of Euripides) and reach to the present time, dominating modern literature. In its historical form,
Romanticism consists of an outburst of individualism and emotion, expressed personally in poetry—William
Wordsworth’s “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”—and, in fiction and drama, by energetic, often
rebellious heroes who set themselves against society. It includes variously the appreciation of and
identification with nature, idealization of childhood,
sometimes religious feeling and nostalgia for the past—especially the Middle Ages—and impatience with
restrictions, literary or social.

Camus’s Romanticism is evinced primarily in his use of nature as a correlative of human feeling (what the
English aesthetician John Ruskin labeled and criticized as “the pathetic fallacy”) and his nostalgia for a
place and time, more mythic than real, perhaps, that was his childhood and, on a broader scale, a lost
Mediterranean culture. The meditations at the Roman ruins of Tipasa and Clamence’s dream of Greece, in La
Chute, illustrate Camus’s feeling for nature and nostalgia; Le Premier Homme is imbued with nostalgia for the
green paradise of childhood. The swimming scene of La Peste and, in “La Femme adultere,” the heroine’s
epiphany under the stars in the desert illustrate the value given to communion with nature in Camus’s writing.
His efforts as a young writer to prune his work by removing excessive signs of sensibility and emotion show
that he recognized the dangers of Romanticism: “Ma sensibilite doit parler, non crier” (My sensitivity must
speak, not cry out). Concerning “La Maison mauresque,” Camus observed, “Je me suis efforce de n’y rien
laisser paraître de mes souffrances presentes. Mais j’ai laisse éclater un peu de cette souffrance dans les
dernieres lignes…. Je ne me cache pourtant pas que la partie ou j’ai essaye de cacher mon besoin de pleurer
est la meilleure” (I tried to let none of my present suffering show. But I let a little break out in the last lines.
… I do not hide from myself, however, that the part where I tried to disguise my need to weep is the best).
This statement shows a remarkable understanding for a twenty-year-old that, while emotion is potent, it can
easily take over a text and become excessive, whereas the artist must control and direct it. In this sense it is
legitimate to say that art for Camus derived from life, providing that one not suppose thereby that raw
experience, unshaped and unselected, could, in his view, make good literature.

The second strain in Camus’s writing is the opposite of Romanticism: classicism. Like Romanticism, it can be
historically situated (the literature of classical Greece and Rome, as well as that of the seventeenth century in
France and the eighteenth century in England), but it too is a recurring mode of thought and writing, not only
an historical phenomenon. Based on artistic and moral discipline, it favors the general over the particular, a
chastened style over spontaneity, art over nature, order over disorder, morality over indulgence, and a long
view as opposed to a parochial one. T. S. Eliot gave classicism a modern formulation when he wrote that “the
progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.” Camus’s attraction to
Hellenic thought and art was perhaps a sign, perhaps a cause of his classical leaning; his preference for the severe, even barren landscapes of North Africa, aesthetically rich but not lush, can be associated with it likewise. A piece such as “Noces a Tipasa” is classical as well as Romantic, since the aspirations toward self-expansion are immediately controlled by contrast with the site and the landscape, in which ruined evidence of human grandeur and nature’s timeless, beautiful indifference puts into perspective all individual yearnings.

While Camus learned from several sources, doubtless, including the critiques of Grenier, how to discipline his emotion and his style, the chief influence in this area was probably that of Gide, a master artisan whose early self-indulgent works were quickly superseded by writings showing aesthetic control and distance. (Camus cites Gide repeatedly in his “Notes de lecture.”) The irony that Camus himself identified, perhaps erroneously, as his dominant tone is the correction of such Romantic self-indulgence. This correction did not lead to impoverishment of feeling or material. Gide’s maxims are apt: “The classical work will be strong and beautiful only by dint of its tamed romanticism”; “The work of classical art recounts the triumph of order and measure over a previous romanticism. The work is the more beautiful to the degree that what is submissive was, at first, more rebellious.”

If Camus’s works do last throughout the centuries, their endurance will reflect the classical discipline of his writing, even in lyrical passages, and its appeal to what is universal and shared by all, instead of what is idiosyncratic. “Ce qui m’intéresse, c’est d’étre un homme” (What interests me is to be a man), says Rieux in La Peste, in which the sobriety of Rieux’s style and the honesty of his account fit his aspirations to live the human condition properly.

NOTES

4. Ibid.
6. Ibid., p. 241. The word work as used in the translation of this quotation means creation, not labor.
8. In French literature this aestheticism is illustrated, for example, by the artistic principles and writings of the late-nineteenth-century poet Stephane Mallarme; by the works of Philippe-Auguste, Comte de Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, especially his poetic drama Axel (1890); and by Joris-Karl Huysmans’s well-known decadent novel A rebours (1884; translated as Against the Grain, 1922). In England the identification of art with life itself is illustrated in the career and writings of Oscar Wilde, notably The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891), in which the title character makes of his life a work of art. In his play Caligula Camus showed his title character remaking reality according to an amoral idea of what it should be.


20. Ibid., pp. 17, 18.


28. See Todd, *Albert Camus: Une vie*, p. 826, n. 25, for Camus’s statement about having destroyed a draft of *La Mort heureuse*.


30. Todd, *Albert Camus: Une vie*, p. 494. It should be noted that in this volume Todd is quite severe on Sartre; see pp. 494-496. Todd notes that “Sartre knows that he is, to simplify, a genius…. God does not exist but Sartre is God.” This severe judgment does not invalidate the contrast drawn between Camus and Sartre. Todd had been in Sartre’s inner circle as a sort of surrogate son before a falling-out occurred between them. See his *Un Fils rebelle* (Paris: Grasset, 1981). See also Deirdre Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir: A Biography* (New York: Summit, 1990), p. 678, n. 4.

31. Camus and Grenier, *Correspondance*, p. 68.


34. Ibid., p. 506.


38. Ibid., p. 45.


43. Camus, *Carnets, mai 1935 - février 1942*, pp. 15-16, 18 The italics are Camus’s.

44. Camus, *Essais*, p. 44.


**Camus, Albert: Camus’s Era**

- **THE ALGERIAN BACKGROUND**
THE ALGERIAN BACKGROUND

Camus was born into the world of the French Empire. This was one of the principal historical facts affecting and impinging upon his life. Less extensive than the British Empire, and less familiar now to students in North America, it was nevertheless considerable. The French crown had lost New France (Canada) to Great Britain before the French Revolution and was defeated in the same period in a struggle with the British to retain those portions of India, including Pondicherry, over which France had held sway. Still, in 1913 the French nation had colonies and protectorates, some of them large, in Asia (one colony and four protectorates, which together made up French Indochina), South America (French Guiana), North Africa (the colony of Algeria and the protectorates of Morocco and Tunisia), and Sub-Saharan Africa (mainly French West Africa), as well as islands of varying importance in the Pacific, Atlantic, Caribbean, and Indian Oceans. France also exercised considerable cultural influence in Syria. Algiers, the first African foothold of France, fell under French domination in 1830 after a successful military campaign, waged mostly on a diplomatic pretext, against the Turks, themselves outsiders, who had established their rule along that portion of the Mediterranean coast.

In the following decades French dominance over the native Arab-Berber population was consolidated and extended through further military action; by the middle of the nineteenth century the territory that became modern Algeria had been generally pacified and was governed by a military administration. Pockets of resistance held out, however, or appeared again, especially in 1870 and 1871. French settlers trickled in, few at first, then more. Among these pioneers were Camus’s great-grandfather Claude Camus, originally from Bordeaux, and his wife. Most of the settlers took up farming in the fertile coastal area. By 1848 they numbered nearly a hundred thousand. When the Second Republic (1848-1851) was ended by the coup d’etat that made Louis-Bonaparte emperor under the title Napoleon III, many political refugees of republican or anarchist sentiments left France for Algeria—part of an extensive emigration from Europe at midcentury. Settlers continued to arrive during the 1850s. To these French, who came generally but not exclusively from the south of France, were added others of Mediterranean or European origin. A wave of immigration to the colony took place in 1871 after France lost Alsace and part of Lorraine to Germany as a result of the Franco-Prussian War. All the French settlers held citizenship in their nation; other immigrants of European origin could become naturalized French citizens.

The Arab and Berber residents included some merchants, usually poor; a few wealthy and powerful chieftains and influential Islamic leaders; agricultural laborers who worked on colonists’ farms; and villagers, farmers, and tribesmen who lived off their own land, which was often the least productive, especially in the mountains and elsewhere in the interior. There were also many Jewish residents, whose ancestors had in many cases been there for centuries and who had received citizenship by the Décret Crémieux (Crémieux Decree) in the nineteenth century. The Arabs and Berbers, in contrast, had extremely limited civil rights; this remained true for millions until Algerian independence in 1962. A few influential Muslims cooperated with the French, and some eventually were taken into the administration, mostly in advisory bodies, but their position between the two communautés (communities, as the French and native elements were called) was often difficult. Napoleon III, who visited Algeria, expressed his wish for an African empire built on fraternity and what would now be called cultural and ethnic diversity, but his dream was ended by his abdication during the Franco-Prussian War.
By the time of Camus’s birth in 1913, Algeria, which in 1848 had been officially pronounced a part of France, occupied a different status from that of other parts of the French empire and was governed differently. It was divided into départements (administrative divisions) somewhat like those in mainland France, which had French administrators and sent deputies, or representatives, to the legislature in Paris. There had been considerable industrial development, agriculture had become a huge export business, and cities had grown. In addition to its well-developed port, Algiers had not only lycees and a university, with some eminent professors, but also a theater, public concerts, a national library, public gardens, a cathedral, tramway lines, and many hotels. A class of wealthy Europeans called gros colons—large landholders and industrialists—had emerged, but they were few in number compared to the class of modest farmers and city dwellers, to which Camus’s family belonged. The administration had built roads, railroads, hospitals, and schools; some of these facilities were available to members of the indigenous community, others not.

The ratio of those born or naturalized as citizens—principally French, Spanish, Italians, and Jews—to the Arab-Berber population was perhaps one to six. In cities the ratio was quite different, however; only one-third of the population of Algiers in 1910 was Arab-Berber. By 1950 there were approximately one million Algerian residents who were either of European extraction or Sephardic Jews; the nine million Muslim residents were almost all without citizenship. This substantial European population, which helps to explain the stubborn hold France tried to keep on Algeria and the wrenching loss that autonomy represented in 1962, must be contrasted with the much smaller numbers of French settlers in Indochina and the Sub-Saharan colonies; moreover, by the mid twentieth century many Algerians of European blood came from families who had been there for generations. An elaborate celebration in 1930 marking the centennial of the conquest and highlighting colonial achievements gave public form to the assumption that Algeria was and would remain an integral part of France. In fact, however, the ceremonial, even theatrical aspect of the event, featuring a military review, a commemorative cantata, costumes, and discourses, all intended to convey the almost sacred character of the bond between France and her territory, in reality pointed to the French presence as veneer and illusion and underscored the precariousness of French authority in Algeria. The centennial can now be seen as retrogressive rather than progressive.

Allowing for several differences, it can still be said that Algeria was, in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the frontier of France; American students can perhaps understand the colony in that light. The frontier mentality associated with the West in North America (however that West was defined, according to the period) was not entirely foreign to Algeria, nor was the position of the Arabs and Berbers who were displaced wholly unlike that of the American Indians, though important differences obtain, especially the fact that many North African natives worked as laborers for the French. Many of those in France who needed to get away, wanted to get away, or were misfits traveled to Algeria; it was open and free for the taking. This frontier status was a complex one. Algeria needed France, but France needed Algeria as well, because of the export of agricultural products and (by the middle of the twentieth century) petroleum from the colony that were an extremely important element of the French economy. In addition, Algeria played the role of gatekeeper on the border between European culture and economy and that of Africa and, as it was ultimately called, the Third World. Frontiers and borderlands are useful: those in major metropolitan areas may scorn them as primitive, but they need them as a buffer zone, in economic, cultural, and military terms.

Algerian nationalist movements—as opposed to rebellions and uprisings—date from the 1920s. The indifference shown by France after World War I to the many indigenous soldiers who had fought, and often died, in the trenches of France far from their southern home was one factor in the development of such movements. Etoile nord-africaine (North African Star), the first radical movement for independence, was organized in 1926 under the aegis of the French Communist Party; members tended to be from the working classes. Leadership of the movement was soon assumed by Messali Hadj, who rejected the moderate course of assimilation and wanted the autonomy of a homogeneous Arab-Berber nation, from which all European elements would be excluded. Adherents of the movement were often hounded by French and Algerian authorities, and its relationship with the Communists was rocky. Camus showed sympathy for Messali and his
followers and in later years attempted to intervene on behalf of those who ran afoul of government regulations. In 1937 a bill, for which Camus campaigned, to enfranchise some twenty-one thousand Muslims (a figure later expanded to twohundred thousand), including war veterans and grammar-school graduates, was allowed to die in Parliament. A later nationalist movement, drawn from the middle classes, was the National Liberation Front (FLN), one of whose principal figures was Ferhat Abbas, a pharmacist. He was the author of a 1945 manifesto setting forth the demands of the Algerian Muslims and later became titular president of the FLN’s political arm.

ALGERIA

“An effort of the imagination will have to be made to understand … the particular climate which reigned in Algeria, so different from that of mainland France. Algeria was in the hands of a proconsul, under pressure from a hard core of unreconstructed colonial settlers. Public life was not to be compared to that of Paris, with the free play of democratic forces…. Algeria was governed like a frontier post, with frontier law. If one could be a Communist openly in Paris, it was hard to be a Communist in Algeria. By encouraging Algerian nationalism … by contributing to the development of progressive organizations among Moslems not only in North Africa but (among migrant workers) in mainland France, the Communists were sure to be feared and despised.”

Herbert R. Lottman


Even after World War II, provisions made in legislation of 1944 for including certain categories of Muslims in the political process were generally not carried out; only eighty thousand out of eight million were allowed to vote in postwar elections. Moreover, since the extreme nationalists in the Arab-Berber community boycotted these elections, the results could not be considered representative. This unspoken policy of protecting the colonial status quo contributed to consolidation of the nationalists’ aspirations and their increasing radicalization. Camus observed: “L’application du statut fut sabotée et les élections de 1948 systématiquement truquées. De ces elections falsifiées est sortie, non pas l’Algérie du statut, mais 1’Algérie du meurtre et de la répression” (Application of the law was sabotaged and the 1948 elections systematically rigged. From these fixed elections came not Algeria according to the law but an Algeria of murder and repression). He identified a spiral of effects:

L’oppression, même bienveillante, le mensonge d’une occupation qui parlait toujours d’assimilation sans jamais rien faire pour elle, ont suscité d’abord des mouvements nationalistes, pauvres en doctrine mais riches en audace. Ces mouvements ont été réprimés. Chaque répression, mesurée ou démente, chaque torture policière comme chaque jugement légal, ont accentué le désespoir et la violence chez les militants. (Oppression, even well-meaning, and the deception of an occupation that talked always about assimilation without doing anything to establish it gave rise to nationalist movements, poor in doctrine but rich in audacity. These movements were repressed. Each repression, measured or unreasonable, each police torture, like each legal judgment, accentuated the despair and violence of the militants.)

The second principal feature of the historical context into which Camus was born was that it was a world of war: World War I, the Rif wars between the French and mountain tribesmen in the neighboring kingdom of Morocco, the Italo-Abyssinian war, the Spanish Civil War, World War II, the French-Indochinese war (an undeclared colonial conflict lasting from approximately 1947 until 1954), and the Algerian war (similarly undeclared and lasting from 1954 until 1962). Most of these conflicts involving France or her neighbors affected Camus directly or indirectly. His father’s early death and the hardship this brought to the family were
consequences of World War I; his political views were shaped to some degree by the civil war in Spain and its political implications; World War II had important personal and literary consequences for him; and the Algerian conflict darkened his last years and almost surely contributed to his lack of productivity in this period.

This was Camus’s world; he did not make it, but, being bom into it, he faced it as part of his situation and was thus obliged to take a point of view on it. To even his harshest critics, his positions on the conflict in Spain and his conduct in World War II are unimpeachable; indeed, as one literary history puts it, “The mystique of Resistance hero surrounding Camus was one Sartre could never match.” In contrast, for his positions on the status of Algeria, Camus continues to be judged severely. The political and cultural assumptions that shaped French Algerian life at the time of his birth remained his throughout his life, with slight modifications. Although, like Napoleon III, Camus had dreams of an Algeria built on much greater equity, and although he campaigned through journalism and activism to extend Muslim rights and improve living conditions, he always imagined the territory as an integral part of France, not as autonomous.

THE 1930s

Among the most important features of the 1930s, the decade when Camus came to adulthood, were the policies of the Soviet Union and the expansion of Marxism, the economic crisis in the West, the spread of fascism, the Spanish Civil War, the Munich Pact of 1938, and finally the outbreak of World War II in September 1939. Some of these developments did not touch Algeria and its residents directly, but all of them eventually had indirect effects. The young Soviet Union grew stronger by the year, achieving its industrial goals through rigorous social planning. Admirers disregarded the price paid in human misery for collectivization; the internal contradictions of Soviet society and the terror that reigned in the 1930s and beyond were not then fully known in the West. Camus’s brief membership in the Algerian Communist Party (separate from the French party as of 1936) showed that he considered communism a reasonable political direction for one whose sympathies lay generally with the lowest strata of wage earners (proletarians, in Marxist terminology) and notably with the Muslims in their struggle for recognition and rights. The official party line, dictated from Moscow by Joseph Stalin, on Algeria and other colonies of European powers varied: at one moment Moscow preached anticolonialism and rebellion against the French oppressor; at another moment, convinced that it was in the Soviet Union’s interest to have a strong France, Stalin ordered the anticolonial and antimilitary line to be abandoned and antifascism to be the order of the day. Muslim communists and other North African radicals were not particularly moved by the antifascist cause. Camus’s position did not change: he believed that the Algerian Communist Party should concern itself primarily with the plight of Algerian workers and their immediate problems. When this was seen as a heresy, Camus and others were expelled by party vote.

The economic crisis, which began in 1929 and lasted well into the next decade, had repercussions in Algeria; the impoverishment of the Kabyles led Camus to write a series of articles on their plight in 1939. The crisis also contributed to the expansion of fascism in Italy, then its establishment in Germany (with the appointment of Adolf Hitler as chancellor in 1933), Spain, and Portugal. There were protofascist movements and other extreme-right parties even in France; in 1934 violent clashes between right-wingers, including royalists, and police and other demonstrators displayed the political power of these groups. The controversial Popular Front governments (composed of Socialist, Communist, and other parties engaging in rare cooperation) elected in France and Spain in 1936 were one response to the crisis. The assumption of power by leftists in the young Spanish republic helped trigger an invasion by army units based in Spanish Morocco and headed by General Francisco Franco. This military coup precipitated the civil war in Spain, on which Camus published some journalistic reports. Franco’s defeat of the Republican forces culminated in a dictatorship that lasted for decades. Camus, ethnically half-Spanish, abhorred the Franco regime. (A former Spanish prime minister, Santiago Casarès Quiroga, was one of countless Spaniards who went into exile in France; his family accompanied him, and thus his daughter, Maria Casarès, her name gallicized, studied acting in France and
As for the Munich Pact, by which France and Great Britain agreed to Hitler’s demands to occupy the Sudetenland (a German-speaking part of Czechoslovakia), Camus judged it an error. In 1939 he could not refrain from asking why the Western powers were willing to go to war over Poland when they had not done so for Spain or Czechoslovakia.  

**FRENCH POLITICS IN THE 1930S**

“Between 1934 and 1936, all the circumstances favourable to a Fascist revolution co-existed in France. They are the supreme crisis-years of the Third Republic—even more critical, probably, than the days of the Dreyfus affair…."

“Since the end of 1930 France had had ten different ministries, and the musical-chairs atmosphere of parliamentary politics had become absurd. The economic slump had hit France later than other countries, and unemployment-figures were increasingly alarming. Government had seemed paralysed, and did little to counter the slump. Hitler had come into power in Germany. There were reasons enough for popular unrest and disorder….”

*David Thomson*


**WORLD WAR II AND THE OCCUPATION**

When Germany invaded Poland on 1 September 1939, a conflict of enormous proportions was set off that lasted nearly six years and had dreadful consequences. Upon the expiration of ultimatums given to Hitler, Great Britain and France declared war in a matter of hours on Germany and Italy, the “Axis Powers.” The Soviet Union, having signed the German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact (also known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact) in August 1939, did not enter the hostilities until 1941, when Germany’s surprise invasion of Russia nullified the pact. The French believed their nation was properly prepared to defend itself. A chain of fortifications, called the Maginot line, on the German-French border to the northeast, had led to confidence; moreover, the French military command boasted of its readiness. For eight months there were almost no engagements between French and German troops.

In Algiers, where Camus was writing for the newspaper *Alger Républicain*, the war affected him first by the strict military censorship that had been instituted even before hostilities began. The paper continued to appear until late October 1939. *Le Soir Républicain*, a two-page newsheet founded a few weeks before by Pascal Pia, with Camus as editor, was a short-term response to censorship. Even there Camus had difficulties since he baited the censors deliberately. In January 1940 the paper was forced to close. Like countless others who had lost their legitimate source of income, Camus was forced into seeking expedients, and until late 1943 he had no permanent, stable position.

In May 1940 the German army struck with lightning force (the blitzkrieg), not crossing the Maginot line but instead going around to the west, thus violating the neutrality of Belgium as well as that of the Netherlands. The failure of the French forces, the Belgian army, and the British Expeditionary Force to repel the invasion and the consequent disarray of both France’s government and army led to armistice and surrender on 22 June. The defeat was the result of several factors, among them shortsighted military policy, which had remained stagnant, turned backward toward the glories of Verdun and the victory of World War I. “When the Second World War began,” observes Stanley Hoffmann, “the French army was hampered by the cult of the defensive and by instructions that were stuck in time around 1918.” To this congealing of strategy, and partly because of it, were added the disadvantages of inadequate rearmament, notably in tanks and aircraft; excessive
confidence placed in the Maginot line; too much trust in Hitler’s word; and inept strategy and failure of leadership on the field.

The Third Republic was dissolved and replaced by a collaborationist government, officially called the French State and popularly known as the Vichy government, with the aged General Philippe Pétain at its head. From the beginning it was semipaternalistic and semioppressive. Though ostensibly put in place to assure the survival of France after the armistice, its manipulation by the German authorities became more evident as the months passed. Its legitimacy was never recognized by vast numbers of the French, although many did not regret the disappearance of the Third Republic and its ineffectual cabinets. By the terms of surrender, German forces were to occupy the northern half of France and the entire Atlantic coast and other enclaves; the south, with the addition of Algeria, was called the “Free Zone.” Between the “Free Zone” and Algeria travel and communications were possible until the zone was taken over entirely by the Germans in November 1942, after British and American forces landed in North Africa. Thus, Camus and his wife, Francine, were able to travel to France from Algeria—and she was able to return—in the summer of 1942. After the abolition of the concept and fact of the free zone, communications and travel were cut off completely between the mainland and North Africa. Camus wrote in his diary upon learning that the Germans had taken over the rest of France, “Comme des rats!” (Like rats)—referring to his sense of entrapment.5

With defeat in June 1940 and the establishment of the Vichy government, France was humiliated. National politics, already deeply polarized, as the previous decades had shown, became even more acrimonious. Active, enthusiastic collaboration with the Germans, often through journalism, on the part of several elements in French society—including famous right-wing intellectuals—created enormous resentment among those French citizens who, through patriotism, hatred of the occupant, or political convictions, looked upon the Vichy government and the German presence as illegitimate and viewed collaborating as aiding and abetting the enemy.

French opposition eventually led to various sorts of resistance activity, including armed struggle. Lyons, on the Rhone River, was one of its principal centers. The Resistance network to which Pia belonged, Combat, had its headquarters there; Pia was deputy to the chief of the Rhone-Alpes region. Before he left Le Panelier in 1943, Camus sometimes visited Lyons from his mountain residence and became acquainted with certain activities and some of the members of Combat. After Germany invaded the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, the Communists entered the Resistance movement in France, established cooperation with the non-Communist networks already in place, and soon dominated the movement; Catholic organizations were next in importance. Nonaligned Resistance organizations existed also. In May 1943 the first meeting of the Conseil National de la Resistance (National Council of Resistance), which brought together various movements, took place in Paris.

While by far the greatest number of patriotic French did not take up arms secretly against the occupants—and many were in no position to do so, while others would have considered it politically unwise—violent resistance began sporadically as early as 1941 in the form of shootings of Germans and sabotage. Although this action involved taking enemy lives and disabling infrastructure, until well into 1944 its principal aim was not to cripple German war efforts but rather to provoke reprisals—mostly the shooting of hostages and deportations—the intended effect of which would be to anger the French, seen as too willing to collaborate, and mobilize them against the occupying forces. From his base in London, General Charles de Gaulle condemned the early terrorist actions of the Resistance as contrary to French interests. In fact, the number of Resistance agents who engaged in sabotage or other activities, such as espionage, was extremely small until the last year of the war, when Allied invasions produced conditions in which saboteurs could make wide-ranging contributions to the harassment of the Germans. Some of this activity was carried out by armed bands in the countryside, called Maquis (from a Corsican word meaning thicket), who were eventually grouped into the FFI (Free French of the Interior), worked with the Allies, and in some cases had actual engagements with the enemy. They were ultimately absorbed into the Free French (based in London under de

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Gaulle). These guerrillas were supplied with provisions by peasant sympathizers and with arms by parachute drops carried out by the air forces of the United States and Great Britain. These drops had to be coordinated through radio contact with England. Since all such contact—broadcasting and receiving alike, including simply listening to the BBC—was forbidden and the penalties were severe (imprisonment, deportation, or death), it was dangerous work, often carried out by innocent-looking peasants on outlying farms.

Another type of opposition was literary, journalistic, and intellectual. While the last often consisted of ineffective, indeed passive, organizations of opponents of the regime who met to plan vaguely some future line of action and whose main achievement was raising awareness (such was Jean-Paul Sartre’s Socialisme et Liberté), many writers engaged in substantial literary resistance of substance, carried out through clandestine publishers (Éditions de Minuit and Editions Seghers) and magazines (the Poesie anthologies, the first of which was published in 1940, and Les Lettres Françaises, founded in 1942).

More than a half-dozen poets, some among the most renowned of their era, produced patriotic poems in verse or poetic prose that were intended to—and did—bring moral support to the French. These poems were printed individually or in small volumes in North Africa, England, and Switzerland; or clandestine presses in France printed them in tiny type on small pieces of paper. These poems circulated from hand to hand, surreptitiously, or in some cases were simply memorized. Short lyrics by the Communist writers and former Surrealists Louis Aragon and Paul Eluard were beloved of many French. Some of Eluard’s poems were printed in England, dropped by Royal Air Force planes into France, memorized, and recited, while Aragon’s war poetry was published clandestinely in Switzerland and smuggled into France. Robert Desnos (who died just after having been liberated from a German prison camp in 1945) composed lyrics throughout the war as a member of an underground network. Similarly, the Catholic poet Pierre Emmanuel was active in the Resistance and also published volumes of lyrics under the Occupation, convinced that poetry must play a role in rallying France. Without paper or writing instruments, Jean Cassou, imprisoned by the Germans, wrote in his head 33 sonnets composes au secret (33 Sonnets Composed in Secret, 1944); they were shared with others and subsequently smuggled out. René Char, whom Camus called the greatest living poet in France and who was a leader of the Resistance in his region, wrote short prose poems that beautifully suggest the spirit of the Resistance. A young poet friend of Camus’s, Rene Leynaud, considered to be quite gifted, was executed by the Germans in Lyons. Aragon and his wife, Elsa Triolet, founded with Jean Paulhan the Comité National des Ecrivains, a Resistance organization.

Prose writers also carried out intellectual resistance. The eminent Catholic novelist Francois Mauriac denounced Nazi ideology in the pseudonymously published Le Cahier noir (The Black Notebook, 1943). Jean Bruller, writing under the pseudonym Vercors (the name of a Maquis group), published the much-admired Le Silence de la mer (1942; translated as The Silence of the Sea, 1944), the point of which is that between Nazis, even those of impeccable conduct, and the French there could be no communication. Such authors agreed that, as Emmanuel put it, Vichy and the occupying German forces could survive only by perverting language and that to injure language was to injure mankind. As one critic has noted, “Literary language was not only to represent France—that is, its past—with its lyricism and grandeur; it was to serve as agent, helping … to produce events that would lead to the liberation of France and then to the nation of the future.”

That, despite difficult conditions and domination by a foreign power, French culture could remain vigorous says a great deal about the French—and also about the German occupiers. (Even today, France devotes a higher percentage of its national budget to cultural undertakings, including architectural restoration, than any other nation.) German authorities—including the ambassador to the Vichy government, Otto Abetz, and Gerhard Heller, the chief adviser on French publication—were quite tolerant in allowing theaters to remain open and many literary presses to continue publishing, provided that certain conditions were met. Thus, plays by Sartre, Henry de Montherlant, Jean Anouilh, and Paul Claudel, for instance, were produced under the Occupation, and publishers such as Gallimard remained open, putting out books by Simone de Beauvoir, Sartre, Camus, Aragon, and several other major figures, including Raymond Queneau and Antoine de
Saint-Exupéry—though Saint-Exupéry’s *Pilote de guerre* (1942; translated as *Flight to Arras*, 1942) was subsequently banned. Heller read the manuscript of *L’Etranger* for Gallimard and pronounced it a great work. Gallimard’s freedom to publish was achieved perhaps by an internal compromise involving the *Nouvelle Revue Française* (which the firm owned and published) and its new editor, the pro-Fascist but cultivated novelist Pierre Drieu La Rochelle.

Unless there was evidence of pro-German sentiment on the part of editors, publishers, or directors, the willingness of French authors, actors, journalists, and other cultural figures to take advantage of these opportunities—especially after the Germans overran the Free Zone and also censored its publications—was not considered collaboration, no more than teaching in a public (that is, Vichy government) school or working in a library was. Indeed, such activity could be viewed as patriotic, since maintaining cultural life was one way of asserting that France had not been entirely crushed. Sartre, for instance, lectured at one of the theaters and wrote scripts for motion pictures produced by Pathe; Beauvoir worked for the national radio. Lest too much credit be given to the Germans’ cultural tolerance, it must be pointed out that certain high-ranking Occupation authorities were, like many of their fellow Germans, committed Francophiles who relished being assigned to Paris because of the city’s rich cultural life. The ordinary soldiers of the Occupation army also evinced appreciation (as photographs of them enjoying the city demonstrate) for Paris’s beauty and sources of entertainment; at the least, Paris was a better assignment than the Eastern Front. Moreover, the Germans believed that it was in their interest for French citizens to have the impression that life was continuing as usual. The occupying forces wished to avoid the appearance of having disrupted or destroyed the daily routines of the French people and especially the cultural life of Paris. The authorities even on occasion averted their eyes from what must have been obvious: the existence of a widespread network of underground publications, including the newspaper *Combat*.

Camus’s assiduous work on *Combat* belongs to the cultural Resistance. In addition to his journalism, which was a significant contribution, he also on occasion acted as a lookout for fellow Resistance network members. Camus did not engage in any spy work, however, nor did he carry out other dangerous tasks. Friends tried to dissuade him from any activity beyond writing for *Combat*, fearing that if he were arrested, he would not survive the rigors of internment.

**THE POSTLIBERATION AND POSTWAR PERIOD**

As the war drew to a close in 1944-1945, France was a half-ruined nation. The Occupation had taken a tremendous economic toll. Under the terms of the armistice, many of the nation’s resources—raw materials, manufactured goods, agricultural products, young male workers—had been transported to Germany. Other French industry not considered useful to Germany’s war effort had been reduced or eliminated for lack of materials, workers, and consumers. By acts of sabotage and, from June 1944 on, intense fighting, much of the infrastructure—railroads, bridges, roads, industrial installations, and housing—had been damaged or destroyed. There had been little or no building since 1939. Food was rationed from the beginning of the Occupation, and the food supply shrank as the war continued, especially in Paris. Electricity, gas, and other heating sources were severely restricted. Shortages continued well after the war, and the nation was plagued by labor unrest and strikes. It took fifteen years or more for significant progress to become visible in most sectors of the economy.

**PARIS, JUNE 1944**

“We were planning a new fiesta…. We had invited our friends for the night of the 5th to 6th June…. Camus had brought Maria Casarés, who was rehearsing *Le Malentendu* at the Mathurins [theater]; she was wearing a dress designed by Rochas with violet and mauve stripes, she had pulled back her black hair; bursts of slightly strident laughter would expose her young, white teeth, she was very beautiful…. In the dull light of early morning, the place de Rennes was deserted; on the station walls, posters announced that all trains were
suspended. What was going on? I walked down to the rue de la Seine with Sartre…. I slept four or five hours; when I awoke, the sound of a radio was coming through my window, saying incredible things: the Anglo-American troops had landed in Normandy.”

_Simone de Beauvoir_


Despite political turmoil, labor unrest, and shortages—foodstuffs, raw materials, energy sources, clothing, shoes, and paper—the immediate postliberation and postwar period in France was a heady time. From the liberation of Normandy, beginning in June 1944, through the liberation of Paris and the gradual freeing of the rest of the country during the remainder of that year and early 1945, there was an understandable euphoria. “The Liberation of Paris was heavily symbolic throughout the world at the time; the City of Light had been recaptured from the barbarians despoiling it.”

Although literary and intellectual life during the Occupation had been far from moribund, upon the liberation of Paris, when curfews were lifted and expression was again entirely free, there was a tremendous cultural outburst, limited only by the shortage of paper and other material difficulties. Given the hardships and restrictions on personal freedom under the Occupation, the postliberation call to freedom was interpreted also as a statement of emancipation, even joie de vivre. Intellectual life was open and intense. Camus was one of its new lights. Sartre, Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty, and others planned their new political magazine, _Les Temps Modernes_; two of Camus’s plays were performed in 1944 and 1945; Beauvoir published an essay and a novel, and her first play was performed, all in 1945; that same year Sartre published two novels and his play _Huis clos_ (translated as _No Exit_, 1946); many other volumes appeared, some newly written, some that had been kept in desk drawers or carefully hidden chests; and American movies were shown once again. Paris regained some of the vitality that had marked the city both before World War I and in the 1920s, becoming a seething cultural cauldron, sometimes acrimonious, sometimes joyous. With some of the same players who had been on the cultural stage in the 1930s and some new ones, the intense literary life of the city was renewed. Camus sometimes seemed present everywhere, involved with everyone. As one reviewer of a Beauvoir memoir noted, referring to the postwar period and later, “French literati lead a life more inbred, more given to cliques and programs, thrusts and counterthrusts than elsewhere. At its worst, this setup gives the impression that all the writers in France are merely taking in each other’s washing; at its best, however, it engenders an excitement, vitality, and critical self-consciousness that cannot be matched by any other nation.”

At the same time, the liberation brought retribution in the form of _épuration_ (purges) for many collaborators, real or suspected. The Conseil National de la Resistance organized many of these purges; others were spontaneous. Petain was condemned to death, but the sentence was commuted to life imprisonment because of his advanced age; Pierre Laval, a Vichy politician, was executed. Drieu La Rochelle committed suicide rather than face accusations of philo-Nazism. Louis-Ferdinand Celine, not philo-Nazi but anti-Semitic and curmudgeonly, went into exile in Germany and later was imprisoned in Denmark; many more were punished by execution, exile, or some other penalty. In the winter of 1945 the collaborationist writer Robert Brasillach was tried for treason and convicted, on the grounds that the greater one’s talents (and his were quite great), the greater the responsibility: he had used his literary genius to serve the Nazis and demoralize France. Despite having called for justice—that is, punishment—for collaborators who had patently assisted the Nazi occupiers in establishing tyranny in France, despoiling the nation, and causing the death of many Frenchmen, Camus, along with several other figures but not Sartre and Beauvoir, signed a petition asking for clemency; de Gaulle rejected it, and Brasillach was executed.

De Gaulle, the rebellious military genius who had fled to England from France upon the fall of Paris and continued the struggle from there, had become the leader of the French opposition to Vichy after winning a power struggle with General Henri Giraud. In June 1944 de Gaulle’s Committee of National Liberation was
proclaimed the government of France. In August he returned to Paris, and his government was recognized by the Allies. In November 1945 he was elected provisional president. His challenge was to maintain some degree of cooperation among the various political factions and Resistance groups and oversee the first stages in rebuilding France. Not unnaturally, Resistance movements that had tolerated each other prior to the liberation shortly became rivals, determined to extend their power and pursue their own policies during the rebuilding. The Communist aim was, of course, to install a government that they could dominate. Internecine and interparty disagreements were a principal feature of the time. De Gaulle, a Catholic, was generally conservative and strongly anti-Communist but hostile to the British and resentful and suspicious of the United States. He was also arrogant and domineering. In January 1946 he finally quit his position as provisional president when it became clear that France would not adopt the sort of constitution he hoped for, incorporating a strong executive. In 1947 he became head of a new movement, the Rassemblement du Peuple Francais (French People’s Assembly), which had some electoral successes. Gaullists ultimately played major roles in the French political scene during the remainder of the twentieth century.

THE FRENCH INTELLECTUAL

“The French concept of the intellectual… remains bound up with the notion of a social, political and moral crisis. Better still: it implies the notion of a permanent state of crisis. Given this state of crisis, the intellectual considers it his obligation to intervene. This sense of moral duty may reach a particularly high pitch during certain periods (1930-1950, for instance)—but it constitutes a permanent trait…. The intellectual … considers himself a voice. And not merely a voice crying out in protest… but a voice that proclaims itself a conscience.”

Victor Brombert


The new Fourth Republic (1946-1958) was characterized by a weak executive, power being vested primarily in the legislative body. It was a time of great political instability: clashes continued among Communists, Socialists, nonaligned leftists such as Camus (groups and voters who generally supported broad-scale nationalization of industry and services and generous social programs), Catholic centrists, Catholic laborites, extreme right-wingers, and so on. (The Communists generally received between 20 and 25 percent of the vote.) Issues of collaboration or resistance remained at the forefront, meanwhile, and have never gone away entirely. Resentment of the Soviet Union among centrists and rightists was intensified by its increasing hegemony, often maintained through brute force, throughout Eastern Europe and by other abuses of Stalinism, some of which had been revealed only gradually but were known in general by 1950. Yet, many in France, while feeling threatened by Soviet expansionism, were suspicious also of the United States, seen as imperialistic and aggressively capitalist. The polarization that became known as the Cold War solidified parties, and France seemed squeezed between the two great blocs, both appearing paranoid and bellicose. Enunciation in 1947 of the Truman Doctrine, directed at containing Communism and extending assistance to Allies in Asia and elsewhere; the Communist takeover in Czechoslovakia in February 1948; and the Berlin blockade of 1948-1949 and the ensuing Allied airlift—these circumstances and others seemed to put Europe and, indeed, the world on the brink of a third great conflict.

Politics ruled most intellectual life: the uncommitted writer was considered by many to be irresponsible, and left-wing politics prevailed in much of France, the right wing having been crushed or discredited to a considerable degree by the defeat of the Nazis and the fall of the Vichy government. There was also, however, a large group of Catholic intellectuals and an active Catholic press, centrist or friendly to non-Communist workers’ movements; Esprit, a monthly magazine, edited by Emmanuel Mounier, was one voice of Catholic liberalism. The Gaullists also constituted a cultural force: Andre Malraux, Mauriac, and his son Claude Mauriac were among its voices. Still, most writers with whom Camus came in contact in the newspaper
circles of *Combat* and in the Paris neighborhood of Saint-Germain-des-Pres were all committed more or less to socialism; their differences were a matter of degree. As one political historian notes, simplifying somewhat (but not without a point), the literary and philosophical controversies among Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Camus, and others that marked the 1940s and 1950s “were conducted in terms of rival interpretations of Marxism…. Needless to say, the Marxism at stake in the disputations between Sartre and his colleagues was not that of the Communist party. It was not, that is to say, the political doctrine of a totalitarian organization heading a mass movement and obliged to maneuver on the national and international scene. Rather it was an alembicated [sic] extract from the writings of Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Rosa Luxemburg, Lukacs. …” This was not an academic issue, at least as long as “there was a chance of a new Popular Front constituting itself around the CP [Communist Party]. …” In reality, “the hypothetical chance of a postwar Communist seizure of power by quasi-democratic means had already vanished by 1948…. The Communists were being driven into a prolonged isolation as a consequence of the *coup de Prague* of February 1948; and by the time they emerged from the shadows into the light of the post-Stalin era, the whole character of West European politics had been radically altered by the industrial boom of the 1950s and the integration of the labor movement into the new social order.”

**EXISTENTIALISM AND EXISTENTIAL WRITING**

In the heady postwar atmosphere Sartre popularized his French version of existentialism, bringing it to the attention of a broad public in a 1945 lecture, subsequently published as *L’Existentialisme est un humanisme* (1946; translated as *Existentialism*, 1947), and in his plays. Existentialism was originally an individualistic strain of thought that, in order to preserve its asystematic quality, should properly be called *existential* rather than existentialist. It had been illustrated in philosophy and fiction by such writers as Blaise Pascal, Søren Kierkegaard, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and Friedrich Nietzsche; and, later, Andre Gide, Roger Martin du Gard, Saint-Exupery, and Malraux in France; Martin Heidegger in Germany; and Nikolay Berdyaev in Russia. Existential thinking, rooted in the subjective, variously stressed the solitude of human beings, the obligation to choose without certainty about the grounds of choice, the sense of guilt, the awfulness of a distant God, the silence of the universe, the burden or possibilities of freedom, the relationship between human beings and the material world, the irrationality of the human situation, and the terror of suffering and death. This strain of thought became, under Sartre’s pen, both more accessible and more dogmatic, as the suffix -ism suggests, ceasing to emphasize the subjective, asystematic character and spiritual dimensions of much existential thinking in favor of its moral and political implications. Sartre did not eliminate the element of anguish associated with choice, but he subordinated it to the imperative to choose well according to his chief principle and criterion, freedom. The term *existentialism* was not even chosen by him, although he accepted it after Gabriel Marcel applied it about 1944 to Sartrean ideas. Sartre’s companion, Beauvoir, who accepted his analyses and principles, contributed to their dissemination through her novels and essays. Marcel himself can be considered an existentialist in the Christian vein.

The dark or pessimistic side of existentialism and its notions of dread and anguish seemed entirely justified by the occurrence of a worldwide conflict in which millions had died in battle, camps, and bombed cities; the Cold War and atomic weapons merely added to the sense of dread. Those who had feared a knock at the door at nighttime understood the arbitrary quality of fate; those who had seen photographs of emaciated camp prisoners in striped pajamas or of heaped-up skeletons experienced profound doubts about previous humanistic credos. A rosy philosophy in such circumstances seemed out of place: better to acknowledge the abandonment or *delaissement* of human beings, the solitude of individual choice, and the world’s absurdity, yet to hold out hope in the form of total freedom, individual responsibility, and action.

Because Camus became a friend of Sartre and Beauvoir, although never a follower, he was associated in the public eye with their philosophy. Moreover, *L’Etranger, Le Malentendu*, and some aspects of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, which had all attracted great attention, seemed to support this association. The novel illustrates the solitude of man, a stranger to the universe (this is, at least, one way of reading it); the play shows fate as dark,
irrational, and uncaring and human beings as doomed to solitude and failure even as they seek communication, order, and meaning; and the essay speaks of the incommensurability of human beings and the universe, calling it the *absurd* a notion that could easily be grasped in contemporary terms. Sartre himself spoke of absurdity, without meaning quite the same thing. The confusion between his principles and those of Camus is thus understandable, and *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* is usually considered one of the supreme statements of the existential, or existentialist, predicament, while to Frenchmen in 1945 Meursault in *L’Étranger* appeared as a cultural hero.

Camus never accepted the label existentialist, however, and took pains to dissociate himself from the term and movement. His rejection of existentialism (as he understood it) dates to 1942, when, in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, he identified the term with such philosophers as Kierkegaard, Lev Shestov, Edmund Husserl, and others who made the existential leap by espousing irrationality in the form of religious belief or some other concept by which they suppressed or eluded the radical separation between human beings and the universe. Camus remained faithful to this understanding of existential philosophy and thus continued to deny that he was an existentialist. His denials may have been given greater urgency, especially after his dispute with Sartre in 1952, by the public tendency to view him as a Sartrean disciple.

French existentialism became a generalized cultural phenomenon, associated with Parisian life in the postwar period and identified especially with the Saint-Germain-des-Prés neighborhood on the Left Bank in Paris. Prominent figures in the group’Sartre, Beauvoir, Camus, Jean Genet, Boris Vian, and others’frequented cafes, bars, and small boîtes or nightclubs where the music was generally jazz. The singer Juliette Greco performed in these little clubs, including Le Tabou. Modes of dress displayed in Saint-Germain-des-Prés included loose raincoats and long black dresses, repeating the line of long, flowing hair. Despite prolonged economic difficulties after the war, one sensed, in this “existentialist” phenomenon, the expression of new freedom and individuality, not unlike traits displayed by the 1920s “Lost Generation.” The rather inbred literary scene in the neighborhood was never entirely appealing to Camus; he spent much less time in the cafes than Sartre and Beauvoir. By the late 1950s, when he was looking for an apartment and listed for a realtor the neighborhoods he would prefer, Saint-Germain-des-Prés was his third choice.

**THE 1950s AND THE ALGERIAN WAR**

From the beginning the 1950s were marked by continuation of the Cold War. The East-West confrontation in the Korean War (1950-1953) hardened positions and made the middle ground almost impossible to maintain. Stalin’s death in 1953 did not alter the situation materially. In France an active Communist press, including the daily *L’Humanité*, attacked without respite the various governments of the Fourth Republic and Western policies. Among intellectual spokesmen for the French Communist Party and the Soviet Union was the indefatigable Aragon. Sartre was not enrolled in the party and often criticized its positions vigorously, but he generally sided with it anyhow and violently disliked the United States. The Camus-Sartre quarrel of 1952 must be understood against this background of political differences, which Camus’s reply to Francis Jeanson’s negative review of his work did not bring about but merely set out for all to see. Camus was not the only eminent figure formerly in Sartre’s circle, to one degree or another, who broke with him. Sartre’s friend Merleau-Ponty long a champion of Soviet policy, finally denounced it and gave his vocal support to the West; Raymond Aron, another philosopher and former friend, had already left the Sartrean pale. These Cold War polarizations affected literary life throughout the decade.

Even more divisive—because it ultimately involved millions of French citizens, some of whom died—was the Algerian colonial conflict. Although the war was never declared according to provisions of the Hague Conventions, and thus no official beginning can be recognized, historians have generally agreed to date it from 1 November 1954, when nationalist Algerian insurgents launched attacks against several police outposts and other government offices. The uprisings, led by the FLN, spread through the countryside and into the cities, where both police and the army battled against the rebels. This rebellion was not without postwar
precedent: on 8 May 1945—the day celebrating the Allied victory over Nazi Germany—there were murderous riots by Muslims in the towns of Setif and Guelma that resulted in the death of more than one hundred European settlers. The riots were put down by the military with great brutality; it is estimated that there were between six and eight thousand deaths, and many Muslims were tried and condemned to prison or execution.\textsuperscript{11}

Official French policy was that Algeria would remain French, and residents of French ancestry were assured repeatedly that the government would eliminate the guerrillas and terrorists and protect their lives and properties. Terrorism grew, justified in the eyes of many by the principle later enunciated by the Tunisian novelist Albert Memmi: “The violence of the oppressed is a mere reflection of the violence of the oppressor.” Repressive measures became correspondingly more and more severe; in Memmi’s words, “Oppression is an infernal machine.”\textsuperscript{12} Camus’s 1956 visit to Algiers to speak on behalf of a civil truce was a total failure. By 1957 French forces and rebels were engaged in a full-scale urban conflict called the Battle of Algiers. The army was able to destroy the terrorists’ network in the city, but its brutal methods lost much public support for the idea of \textit{Algerie francaise} (French Algeria). Although the government denied it, there was so much evidence of the use of torture by the French to extract information from captured rebels that it could not be ignored. Major periodicals—the newspaper \textit{Le Monde} and the magazine \textit{L’Express}—editorialized against government policy, and eminent voices were heard, among them Sartre’s, in protest against both the fundamental policy and conduct of the war.

The Algerian crisis brought down the Fourth Republic in May 1958, as a military coup seemed imminent. De Gaulle, viewed as the only leader of sufficient stature to deal with the situation, was called to power and given a six-month term during which he could rule by decree. A new constitution was drawn up, with a more powerful executive branch, and in January 1959 de Gaulle was inaugurated as the first president of the Fifth Republic.

Meanwhile, the protest movement grew, especially after large numbers of young conscripts were killed in military actions. Some intellectuals engaged in active sabotage; one of the most active was Jeanson, organizer of the \textit{porteurs de valise} (suitcase carriers), who smuggled funds and arms to Algerian terrorists.\textsuperscript{13} In 1960 an army general resigned in protest against the way the war was being conducted, and in the same year a large number of eminent figures signed the Manifest of the 121, which urged conscripts to refuse to serve in Algeria. Camus’s friend Jules Roy, a former colonel, traveled to Algeria with a pass signed by de Gaulle and, upon returning, published a controversial report castigating the army.

By that time, of course, Camus was dead. Before November 1954 he had written on the Algerian situation, and in the summer of 1955 he published an article on terrorism and repression. His position was not merely a critical one without any constructive content; he contributed articles to \textit{L’Express} and other publications proposing both immediate measures and long-term solutions for a reorganization of Algeria on a new footing and improved status for Muslim residents. Camus’s vision of a society built on justice gave him great understanding and sympathy for members of the Algerian community on both sides as tensions grew; it also dictated his stand against independence and especially against the terrorist methods eventually used to achieve it. His views made him persona non grata among the many French intellectuals who pronounced colonialism an evil in itself. The middle ground was hard to hold; Camus’s vision was dismissed as Utopian, his sense of justice as warped, and \textit{Camus le juste} was called a phony.

Camus made several public statements in the context of the Algerian war that shed light on how he saw himself; these statements reveal his deep attachment to Algeria and his feeling of being a foreigner in mainland France. What is probably the most famous, or infamous, of his declarations is one he made to a militant Muslim during his stay in Stockholm. While the statement does not directly concern Camus or his works, it is in fact a personal, even passionate expression of himself as well as a political statement because it emphasizes his Algerian roots and deep commitment to his mother and to his brother, Lucien, and Lucien’s
family. On 12 December 1957 Camus met students and others for a question-and-answer session at Stockholm University. Tension was high, as students faced a highly honored representative of the French nation while the Algerian rebellion and repression continued. Questioners raised various political issues, including freedom of speech and censorship in France and the situation of Hungary (Camus had protested the previous year against the Soviet repression of the Hungarian uprising). Then a question from the Muslim militant concerning Camus’s reluctance to intervene in the Algerian conflict led to confused exchanges. After being subjected to a barrage of accusations and insults, Camus, visibly upset, finally retorted that he had always condemned terrorism, doing so publicly until it had become clear that for him to do so merely poured more oil on the flames. He meant the terrorist repression of Algerian insurgents by French forces, but he also had in mind the violence exercised by rebels against the French and against members of their own communities when the latter would not cooperate with the insurgents. (Muslim Algerians were often obliged, under pain of death, to furnish money and sons to armed guerrilla bands.) Camus finally stated that while he loved justice, he would defend his mother before justice: “I must also denounce a terrorism that is exercised blindly, in the streets of Algiers, for example, which could one day strike my mother or my family. I believe in justice, but I shall defend my mother above justice.”

This statement caused the greatest uproar. Overlooked later were the applause, according to a report in Le Monde, from some of the audience and Camus’s assurance to one of his Swedish hosts that he could understand the militant questioner’s position. Camus’s words, however, were seized upon by his political adversaries as evidence of his hypocrisy and incorrigible colonial attitudes. Not without sympathy, but critically, Conor Cruise O’Brien has described Camus’s dilemma:

In historical terms, the ideal of revolutionary justice which was appropriate to a Frenchman under the Occupation (La Peste) was no longer appropriate to a Frenchman involved in France’s position in the postwar world, and especially not to a Frenchman of Algeria (La Chute).… Camus was a creation of French history, French culture, and French education, and all the more intensely French because of the insecurity of the frontier. He liked to express himself in universal terms; that too was a French tradition. He could not divest himself of his Frenchness; he could not betray his mother; if France in Algeria was unjust, then it was justice that had to go. …

The ultimate solution to the apparent political and military impasse that characterized the last years of the Algerian conflict was engineered by de Gaulle, who in 1958 had assured the colonists that he “understood” them but in fact had little personal affection for Algeria and simultaneously used the phrase “wholly French” in reference to the Arab-Berber population, indicating support for their demands. A peace agreement called the Evian Accords, signed in March 1962, led to Algerian independence on 1 July of that year. Settlers of European ancestry, given the choice, as it was put, between the suitcase or the coffin, left in great numbers for Marseilles and other ports. Years before, Camus had urged his brother, Lucien (with his family), his mother, and his uncle Etienne to settle in the south of France, but the experiment had not been successful. In 1962 Lucien and his family were among those who went into exile in mainland France, thus living out one of Camus’s principal themes.

NOTES


11. Ibid., p. 378.


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- CRITICAL TRENDS AFTER 1960 AND SUBSEQUENT REPUTATION
- ART IMITATING LIFE
- NOTES

WORKS BY ALBERT CAMUS

BOOKS

Titles, arranged chronologically, are listed normally by their first separate publication only. Many so-called éditions in France are merely reprintings, not revised, enlarged, or otherwise new versions. Certain significant republications are included. The earliest English translation, whether British or American, is listed following each French title; if British and U.S. editions appeared the same year, the U.S. edition is given. In a few cases, more than one translation is listed, for practical reasons. Collections in English, which include various texts not other-wise translated, appear below, under Collections. Supplementary information on British translations and on prefaces by Camus is available in the Dictionary of Literary Bibliography, 72: French Novelists, 1930-1960(1988).
Révolte dans les Asturies, by Camus and others. Algiers: Chariot, 1936. Révolte dans les Asturies is a play in four acts labeled as an “Essai de creation collective” (Attempt at Collective Creation) and dedicated to the friends of the Theatre du Travail. Camus’s three co-authors—Yves Bourgeois, Alphred Poignant, and Jeanne Sicard—acknowledged that he was the primary author. They envisaged a living art, with a certain amount of spontaneity, as in the Italian commedia dell’arte: “Le théâtre ne s’écrit pas, ou c’est alors un pis-aller” (Drama is not to be written, or else it’s because one can’t do better). According to Camus, the drama touched on “une certaine forme de grandeur qui est particulière aux hommes: l’absurdité” (a certain form of greatness that is peculiar to human beings: absurdity). The Théâtre du Travail was not allowed to perform the play for political reasons (the right-wing mayor of Algiers feared diplomatic difficulties with Spain); the text was published in a limited edition. The action is based on a miners’ uprising in Asturias (a region of northwest Spain) in 1934. In the play, Legionnaires sent by the government from Morocco put down the uprising. This detail is historically accurate.

L’Envers et l’endroit. Algiers: Chariot, 1937. Translated as “Betwixt and Between” in Lyrical and Critical; translated as “The Wrong Side and the Right Side” in Lyrical and Critical Essays. In these short essays and sketches Camus explores such subjects as irony, love of life, “death in the soul” (inspired by a visit to Prague, where he had been unhappy), a garden, and a child and his mother (Camus and his own mother) in the setting of Algiers. The preface to the 1958 reprinting (see Lyrical and Critical, Lyrical and Critical Essays, and Essais, also under Collections) is an exceptionally important statement by Camus on himself and his writing, in which he asserts that everything he has written since bears traces of these early essays.

Noces. Algiers: Chariot, 1939. Translated as “Nuptials” in Lyrical and Critical and Lyrical and Critical Essays. Noces comprises four short essays: “Noces a Tipasa” (“Nuptials at Tipasa”), “Le Vent a Djemila” (“The Wind at Djemila”), “LEtè á Alger” (“Summer in Algiers”), and “Le Desert” (“The Desert”). “Le Desert” deals principally with Italy, the “desert” being a moral ideal, including solitude. Some close textual connections exist between these essays and the Carnets (see under Note-books). These essays are among the most beautiful of Camus’s writings—both lyrical and philosophical.

L’Etranger. Paris: Gallimard, 1942. Translated by Stuart Gilbert as The Outsider. London: Hamilton: 1946. Republished as The Stranger. New York: Knopf, 1946. Translated by Joseph Laredo as The Stranger, foreword by Richard Howard. New York: Knopf, 1987. Translated by Matthew Ward as The Stranger. New York: Knopf, 1988. (Winner of the PEN prize for translation.) L’Etranger is a short novel told in the first person and has been the subject of many critical studies. It has been called, variously, a classical work in the mode of Voltaire’s philosophical tales, an apologue, a recit symbolique (symbolic narrative), and “a bleak narrative with a Hemingway-esque aura.” The first fiction published by Camus, it is almost surely his most famous book worldwide. In the first part of the novel, Meursault, a rather passive, detached clerk who lives in Algiers, learns that his mother has died in a home for the elderly outside of the city, and he travels there to attend her funeral. The day after returning home, he goes swimming, picks up a girl, takes her to a comic movie, and invites her home. Meursault becomes involved with a neighborhood man of dubious character (apparently a pimp) named Raymond who has had a dispute with his companion, an Arab woman, because, he believes, she has been unfaithful. Meursault agrees to write a letter for Raymond addressed to the woman, intended to lure her back so that he can give her a thrashing. Some time later, Meursault joins Raymond and his friends one day at a beach party held at a cabin on the shore. During an encounter on the beach with a group of men who seem to be relatives of the woman and are apparently looking for a fight, Raymond pummels one of the Arabs, who then slashes his arm and face with a knife. After being bandaged, Raymond returns to the spot with Meursault, finds his attacker, and proposes to shoot him. Meursault tells Raymond that he must not shoot the man unless the knife is drawn again and takes Raymond’s gun to forestall him. Later, Meursault wanders out alone and
ends up killing the Arab with the revolver when the man flashes a knife before him threateningly in the sun.

In the second part of the novel, Meursault is in prison and then faces trial. He first faces an examining magistrate, who is displeased because he does not show the right attitude toward his crime. Meursault displays no emotion when a crucifix is brandished before him and even denies belief in God. He is subsequently tried on a capital charge of murder—an historically implausible charge, in fact, as readers have noted, since an accusation of second-degree homicide or manslaughter would have been more likely. Camus makes the charge believable by having the prosecutor interpret the crime as a cold-blooded, calculated plot of revenge, even though it was really the result of a series of chance events and thoughtless conduct. Meursault is portrayed before the court as a sociopath who showed indifference to his mother’s death by smoking and drinking coffee beside the coffin and later picking up the girl. The prosecutor claims that Meursault accompanied Raymond to the beach with the intention of provoking a fight and then committed an act of premeditated murder. His execution, the prosecutor argues, will rid the world of a dangerous man, both intelligent and morally monstrous. Meursault is convicted and condemned to death.

While awaiting the outcome of his appeal and anticipating his execution, Meursault receives a visit from the prison chaplain, who speaks to him of sin and the afterlife, tries to console him by the argument that everyone dies sooner or later, and urges him to turn his thoughts to God and the awful moment at which he will have to confront the great trial of death. Meursault, usually passive, loses his temper, shouting that the priest’s consolations are worthless and that what is really important is life. After this moment of illumination he discovers a kind of peace and feels at one with the world. At the end of the novel Meursault anticipates his execution with a sense of exhilaration, wishing for crowds to greet him with shouts of hatred; their hostility will affirm his being. Readers have noted that the cries of hatred from the populace suggest the scenes of Christ’s judgment and death.

Le Mythe de Sisyphe. Paris: Gallimard, 1942. Translated by Justin O’Brien as The Myth of Sisyphus. London: Hamilton, 1955. This short treatise is close in spirit to the work of many existential writers since it focuses on the human predicament as felt by a thinking subject who has no grounds for choice or divine reassurance and faces death as the inevitable end. A revised edition, published by Gallimard in 1954, includes an essay on Franz Kafka, “L’Espoir et l’absurde dans Kafka” (Hope and the Absurd in Kafka), which Camus wrote in the late 1930s. He had appended the Kafka study to the original version of Le Mythe de Sisyphe, but owing either to direct intervention by the German censors or a precautionary warning, it was removed before publication of the first edition.4

Le Mythe de Sisyphe begins with what Camus calls the only true philosophical question—suicide—and then develops the notion of the absurd. The absurd is neither in the world as such nor in man but in the copresence of the two. Men’s aspirations to immortality and the absolute are opposed by the world’s indifference and the fact of death. Since the absurd is the very condition of human existence, it must be maintained, not denied; one must not give in to hope, belief in the invisible, or any other irrational position, including the “existentialist leap” seen in the writings of such authors as Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Jaspers, by which they “leap over” the difficulty of existential isolation and meaninglessness. To maintain the absurd, one must remain conscious and in perpetual revolt: “Vivre, c’est faire vivre l’absurde” (To live is to keep the absurd alive). Types of the absurd man, the one who carries this consciousness and revolt as far as possible, are Don Juan (the lover by quantity), the actor (who multiplies experience on the stage), the conqueror, and the artist or creator. The essay ends with Camus’s version of the ancient Greek myth of Sisyphus pushing his rock: “La lutte elle-même vers les sommets suffit à remplir un cœur d’homme. 11 faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux” (The struggle toward the summits is itself enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus to be happy).5

Le Malentendu suivi de Caligula. Paris: Gallimard, 1944. Translated by Gilbert as Caligula and Cross Purpose. New York: New Directions, 1947. Translations republished in Caligula and Three Other Plays (see under Collections). Caligula, of which the first version was written in 1938, was reworked more than any of
Camus’s other writings and was published in more than one version, the definitive one being that of 1958. Together with *L’Etranger* and *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, which were conceived at roughly the same time, the play makes up, according to Camus, the cluster of his absurd writings—works that he saw as constituting the first stage of his thought. It also presents several points of contact with *L’Homme révolté*. The outline of the plot and many details came from the Roman historian Suetonius, who reported how the emperor Caligula was transformed by the death of his beloved sister Drusilla. The play, in four acts, should be viewed as a tragedy, but with touches of rather grim humor. Some of its themes, including happiness, guilt, judgment, logic, acting, and human ties to the natural world, recur repeatedly in other works by Camus.

Upon the death of one he loved, Caligula discovers that life is imperfect. Although not a new discovery, as his courtiers point out, to him it is a dramatic revelation: “Ce monde, tel qu’il est fait, n’est pas supportable…. Les hommes meurent et ils ne sont pas heureux” (This world, such as it is, is not bearable…. People die, and are not happy). Caligula wants to remedy this imperfection and achieve happiness by reaching the absolute and the impossible (a desire he shares with modern revolutionaries). He asks for the moon, an obvious symbol of the unattainable. He calls on the absolute political power that is his as Caesar to turn his state upside down, confiscating the fortunes of the patricians, putting people to death arbitrarily, frightening and humiliating old men, demanding servile homage and adulation for his wildest caprice, and relishing the pleasure of destruction. Caligula views all acts as morally equivalent, since neither heaven nor earth furnishes grounds for distinctions; he can pursue quantity and variety but not quality. He tries to possess the very soul of his subjects, succeeding in the case of the poet Scipion, who is drawn toward him because Caligula understands him too well. Though at times Caligula seems intoxicated with a strange happiness, he continually requires more stimulation, since even the sacrificial deaths of others leave him dissatisfied. The patricians plot to kill him and eventually do so, but not before Caligula has carried out an extensive terrorist campaign. His final act before he is assassinated is to strangle his mistress, Cassonia. Viewed in terms of Camus’s ideas in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, Caligula has not conquered the absurd but rather has given in to it.

*Le Malentendu*, a three-act drama in a contemporary setting, is based on the same story that Meursault, in *L’Etranger*, reads about on a torn piece of newspaper he finds under his mattress in prison. A prosperous man named Jan, who for years has lived in North Africa, near the sea, returns with his wife after long years to his place of origin, an unidentified European country marked by gloom and dark skies. Obliging his wife, Maria, to remain elsewhere, he goes to spend the night at an inn run by his mother and his sister, Martha, hoping to be recognized without having to identify himself. It is an existential test: Jan wants to share his wealth with them and bring them happiness, but first they must recognize him. Over the years they have murdered lone travelers for their money, in the hope of being able one day to escape from the meaninglessness of their lives into the land of sun and blue sky. Martha and the mother do not recognize Jan, and he, too, is murdered. They then discover his identity.

Maria arrives in the morning to find her husband dead. The mother drowns herself, and Martha also joins her in death. It is not a question of remorse: they are amoral. Rather, the mother says she is too weary to continue, and Martha kills herself as an act of protest against the absurd, which turns acts against their agent and deprives life of meaning and happiness. “Les décors s’écroulent” (The scenery collapses), as Camus wrote in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*: existence is exposed for what it is. In her last sentences, Martha tells Maria, “Je ne puis mourir en vous laissant l’idée que vous avez raison … que ceci est un accident. Car c’est maintenant que nous sommes dans l’ordre…. Priez votre Dieu qu’il vous fasse semblable a la pierre” (I cannot die leaving you with the idea that you are right … that this is an accident. For this is the normal order of things…. Pray to your God that he will make you like stone). The fate of Maria, who calls on heaven to assist her in her grief, is uncertain. The answer of an old, deaf servant, “No!,” is the final word of the play.

The title of the play, which translates literally as *misunderstanding*, refers not only to the crucial lack of recognition and the behavior on all sides that brings about devastating consequences; it also refers to the fundamental disparity between human aspirations toward fulfillment and happiness, on the one hand, and the
indifference of the world on the other—that is, the absurd. Associated themes are exile, existential solitude, and the need for communication (even though communication is difficult).

*Lettres à un ami allemand.* Paris: Gallimard, 1945. Translated as “Letters to a German Friend” in Resistance, *Rebellion, and Death* (see under Collections). This is a series of four statements, two published previously in underground magazines, in the form of letters directed to “a German who was my friend.” Camus’s thesis is that the French will prevail because justice and truth are on their side in the struggle with Nazism, an ideology based on brute force, scorn for human life, and despair. He specified in a preface to a later Italian edition that he did not wish to blame all Germans as such, but rather the Nazis alone.

*La Peste.* Paris: Gallimard, 1947. Translated by Gilbert as *The Plague.* New York: Knopf, 1948. *La Peste* is Camus’s second published novel, which he viewed, along with *L’Homme révolté,* as expressing the second stage in his thought, sometimes called the humanist stage.

The action, in five parts like a classical tragedy, takes place in Oran, Algeria. The story is told in the third person by an anonymous narrator who, at the end, is identified as Dr. Bernard Rieux, one of the principal characters. The city is stricken with an outbreak of bubonic plague, which appears first in rats, then moves to human beings, killing just a few at first and, later, large numbers. (Camus modeled the epidemic partly on an outbreak of typhus that had occurred in an Algerian town in the spring of 1941, shortly before he began making notes for the novel. But bubonic plague was not implausible; the disease had appeared in England and Scotland, for instance, between the two world wars.) The city fathers, initially just startled, pass through a stage of denial before they take action. Lives are changed; lives are ended. At the height of the epidemic, the city is in quarantine, there are shortages, and huge numbers of bodies must be burnt because they cannot be buried. Gradually, the number of cases diminishes.

Rieux’s narrative, which traces the plague from its early stages to its height and finally to its disappearance, also reports the activities of various citizens as they attempt to combat or escape the plague, profit from it, or simply remain uninvolved—thus illustrating different ways of dealing with evil. Rieux’s position is to combat it with all of one’s strength, at the risk of losing one’s own life. Without passing judgment on things metaphysical, he simply believes that one should strive to preserve life as much as possible, even though death will always prevail ultimately. (As the novel begins, Rieux’s wife is leaving to go to a sanatorium; they are separated throughout the story, and at the end he learns of her death.) Rambert, a visiting journalist, wants to leave the city to rejoin the woman he loves; the plague does not concern him, he argues. Paneloux, a Jesuit priest, preaches a sermon on guilt: the citizens of Oran have sinned, and this is their deserved punishment; hence, they must also resign themselves to God’s will but embrace it. Cottard, an unsavory character who is under suspicion and may be arrested, takes advantage of the crisis to remain at large and even indulges in profiteering through black-market dealings.

**EVIL**

“To refuse evil as an auxiliary, as part of man, is to choose the hard way and ultimately to pretend that evil is entirely set over against man and outside him. To maintain human freedom against hostile fate is to oversimplify, but this is a nobler error than sleepily to believe in the condemnation of man by man, in whatever form, as a ‘necessary evil.’ The only necessary evil is the extra-human ‘walls of absurdity,’ and ultimately death, which is the reduction to thinghood against which life struggles.”

*C. Colin Smith*

Tarrou, a loner who befriends Rieux, has been concerned with how to achieve pure conduct in a world of violence, where every act has repercussions on others, and schemes to achieve social justice end in tyranny and terror. He joins in the struggle against the plague by organizing effective paramedical teams. Tarrou’s friendship means a great deal to Rieux; fraternity is a foundation on which to struggle. They are both present when a little boy, Judge Othon’s son, dies. The child’s suffering seems particularly scandalous, a brute denial of Paneloux’s theology, which is founded on belief in a just God whose providential intervention in the world transforms evil into good. Paneloux himself is shaken by the death and moves toward a position of irrational submission to a divine power whose will he cannot fathom but must accept as the only possible explanation for the torture of children. The role of Paneloux, who speaks for divine justice, is a complement to that of the judge, a stiff, unbending person, though not unfeeling, who represents human justice. Toward the end of the novel Tarrou falls ill; Rieux and his mother, who has kept house for him since his wife left, nurse Tarrou devotedly, but he too dies. Rieux has reasons for pessimism, having lost both his wife and a friend and having seen the death of thousands. He affirms, however, that there is more to admire in people than to despise.

The novel may be read on three levels. Literally, it recounts the chance outbreak of a fatal disease that is a fact of nature, the ways of confronting it, and the conclusions that can be drawn from it about natural evil and human response. Metaphorically, the plague stands for the occupation of France and other European countries during World War II by Nazi troops and the brutality they exercised on the population. The responses of various characters illustrate the attitudes one can take toward tyranny. Allegorically, the plague represents moral and metaphysical evil viewed broadly. That is, it represents the human condition, in which with the world and all its chances impinging upon them people are born, suffer, make others suffer, and die, but in which the struggle with others against unhappiness, pain, and death provides a meaningful and authentic way of being. The allegory has appeared valid to at least one philosopher: “Bubonic plague is chosen and well handled by Camus as a symbol of contingency and evil.”

_L’Etat de siége._ Paris: Gallimard, 1948. Translated by Gilbert as State of siége in _Caligula and Three Other Plays_. L’Etat de siége is a three-part allegorical drama with a prologue. According to Camus’s own statement, in a preface written for _Caligula and Three Other Plays_, the work is a morality play (as in medieval drama) or _auto sacramental_ (Spanish allegorical drama) on the subject of freedom. Although he denied that it was a dramatization of _La Peste_, the two works are connected both allegorically and through their symbolism, and Camus once told a friend that he was redoing _La Peste_ “dans le genre lyrique” (in a lyrical mode). The play is not intended to be realistic in the ordinary sense. The tone is not uniform but mixed, as in certain plays of William Shakespeare, combining farce, bombast, lyricism, and political rhetoric, totalitarian in this instance. Camus also uses a chorus, as in ancient Greek drama. Yet, the meaning of the play must not have been obscure to the first audiences in 1948, although it was a stage failure. Its symbolic and allegorical qualities and the distancing (rather than involvement) that it effects between performance and audience give it some resemblance to the dramas of Bertolt Brecht.

In Cadiz, Spain, a comet is seen passing through the sky, portending disaster, which arrives in the form of plague. This is not a plausible epidemic, however, as in _La Peste_, but a symbolic one, represented by Plague—a character—and his secretary, who arrive, strike people down at random, and install the New Order. The references are clear: Nazi Germany and its occupation of France; the Soviet Union and its rule over its satellites; Fascist Spain; and, as Camus said, any country without freedom. But, as in _La Peste_, the scourge also stands more generally for the human condition, in which all are condemned, despite Camus’s belief in a natural innocence (represented here, as in several other of his texts, by the close connections between human beings and the sea).

Plague operates by recruiting collaborators (the word recalls French collaboration from 1940 to 1945) to carry out his orders “of their free will” and by terrorizing the citizens. These political figures are, literally and symbolically, the henchmen of death. They rule by brute force. The municipal authorities, ever slavish, are the earliest and most enthusiastic collaborators. They are seconded by a drunk named Nada (Nothing), who
represents nihilism. Devices and arrangements such as identity cards, health cards, black-colored star badges (recalling the Nazis’ use of yellow stars to label Jews), bread lines, deportations, and concentrations (an obvious reference to concentration camps) all evoke the Nazi occupation and other terrorist regimes. To get an identity card, one must have a health card, and vice versa—a classic example of the dilemma illustrated later by Joseph Heller in his novel Catch-22 (1961). Churchmen tell the citizens to pray and repent (as Paneloux preaches in La Peste). Private lives are worth nothing, and arbitrary “justice” carries off citizens on either the flimsiest of pretexts or no pretext. In its mechanical quality and its arbitrary judgments, the regime of the Plague resembles the institutions in Kafka’s fiction.

The theme of revolt dominates the play, a foreshadowing of L’Homme rôvolè. The young hero, Diego, is in love with Victoria (a name suggesting victory), the daughter of the collaborationist judge. (The name Diego is related to James and Jacques, the name of the protagonist in Le Premier Homme.) Diego discovers the secret to combating the plague: to go beyond fear and use human freedom in the struggle, rather than abandoning freedom for the sake of comfort. The struggle is legitimized by natural law, which, though unwritten, supersedes any established law that is manifestly unjust. Hope is a positive value in the play because it is not directed toward otherworldly ideals.

Les Justes. Paris: Gallimard, 1950. Translated as The Just Assassins in Caligula and Three Other Plays. Les Justes is a play in five acts, based on historical events in Russia in 1905; it is connected thematically to L’Homme Rêvolte through its considerations of whether violence (exercised, for instance, through political or economic oppression) can justify further violence and under what conditions.

A group of five revolutionary terrorists has gathered in Moscow to plot the assassination of the grand duke as a protest against czarist tyranny. While they agree on their aim, they have different reasons for acting. Stepan is a cold, fanatical absolutist, driven not only by an idea of abstract justice but also by personal resentment at having been imprisoned and humiliated; he admits that he hates his fellow men. Kaliayev, called Yanek, is a poet who wants to end despotism because he is in love with life and beauty. Dora understands Yanek but asks a crucial question concerning efficacy, principle, and means and ends: can one use cruel, unjust means (such as killing) to bring about a world of justice? The cool-headed Annenkov is responsible for seeing that plans are carried out and for keeping differences of opinion among the members from interfering with group action. Voinov, a young man who was earlier imprisoned in Switzerland, is a purist who dreams of throwing a bomb and thereby achieving glory as a terrorist. When he is chosen to act, however, he discovers that he cannot do so. Yanek, who is to throw the bomb, says he is willing to die, either in an illuminating explosion or, more dramatically, on the scaffold. The moving exchanges between Dora and Yanek are among the few love scenes in Camus’s works.

Yanek’s first attempt is not carried out because he sees two children in the carriage with the grand duke, and he cannot bring himself to murder children. Stepan argues that sentimentality over children is foolish; only by spilling whatever blood is necessary, without concern for moral limits or consequences, can the revolution triumph. These arguments and other features in the play call for comparison with certain scenes featuring Tchen in Andre Malraux’s La Condition humaine. On the second attempt, Yanek kills the grand duke. In prison he is offered his life if he will furnish the names of his accomplices. Yanek refuses, not only through loyalty but also through the belief that justice requires him to pay for the life he took. The grand duchess pleads with him to repent and beg for God’s pardon, but again he refuses. (The scene, like the rest of the play, is based on fact.) After Yanek is hanged, Dora asks to throw the next bomb.

L’Homme rôvolè. Paris: Gallimard, 1951. Translated by Anthony Bower as The Rebel. London: Hamilton, 1953. This is a book-length essay that takes as its point of departure the arguments on the absurd in Le Mythe de Sisyphe and reinforces the arguments of Rieux and Tarrou in La Peste. Camus’s thesis is that the absurdist man must, by the logic of his position, rebel or protest. Since the eighteenth century, however, individual rebellion, grounded in metaphysical refusal (and thus congenial to Camus), has had far-reaching and tragic
political and collective consequences. The consequences of rebellion have included revolution, tyranny, widespread enslavement, and murder in the name of freeing mankind: “La terreur, petite ou grande, vient alors couronner la révolution” (Terror, on a small or grand scale, then comes along to crown the revolution).

In the course of his analysis, Camus traces the political and metaphysical protests of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, treating such thinkers and practitioners as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Louis de Saint-Just, G. W. E Hegel, and Friedrich Nietzsche. The supreme agents of terror (beside the radicals of the French Revolution) have been the Nazis and the Soviets, whose tyranny Camus condemns as a monstrous distortion of rebellion in the name of historical efficacy.

**LEtè.** Paris: Gallimard, 1954. Translated as “Summer” in *Lyrical and Critical Essays* and in *Lyrical and Critical*. *L’Etè* is a collection of eight lyrical essays, some first published in magazines. The earliest, “Le Minotaure ou la halte d’Oran” (“The Minotaur, or Stopping in Oran”), dates from 1939, and the latest, “La Mer au plus près” (“The Sea Close By”), from 1953. “Les Amandiers” (“The Almond Trees”) is an early wartime text, published in the newspaper *La Tunisie Francaise*. The essay on Oran, dedicated to Pierre Galindo, presents some interesting points of comparison with *La Peste*. “Promethee aux enfers” (“Prometheus in the Under-world”) is noteworthy for its mythological subject. Prometheus the fire-giver and the rebel against divine authority, whom Camus also treats in *L’Homme Rèvolte*. (Percy Bysshe Shelley, Robert Bridges, and Andre Gide are among the post-1800 authors who wrote modern versions of the Prometheus myth, which has appealed to the modern imagination.) Camus’s version recalls his Sisyphus: “Le heros enchaine maintient dans la foudre et le tonnerre divins sa foi tranquille en l’homme. C’est ainsi qu’il est plus dur que son rocher et plus patient que son vautour. Mieux que la révoltè centre les dieux, c’est cette longue obstination qui a du sens pour nous” (The chained hero maintains, through divine lightning and thunder, his calm faith in men. Thus he is harder than his rock and more patient than his vulture. More than rebellion against the gods, it is that long obstinacy that has meaning for us).

**La Chute.** Paris: Gallimard, 1956. Translated by O’Brien as *The Fall*. London: Hamilton, 1956. The last of Camus’s novels published during his lifetime, *La Chute* is an ironic masterpiece, analyzing the human heart and examining mid-twentieth-century attitudes and mores. The work is presented in the form of a first-person monologue spoken by a former lawyer from Paris who has renounced his profession and friends and gone into exile in Amsterdam. The monologue is directed toward an unnamed and unseen interlocutor who visits the bar where the former Parisian awaits those he calls his “clients.” The theological suggestions of the title are reinforced by the concentric circles of the canals in Amsterdam, suggesting the circles of hell in Dante’s *The Divine Comedy* (completed in 1321); by reminders of great evil in the form of Nazi persecution of the Jewish community; and especially by the name the protagonist has taken. He calls himself Jean-Baptiste Clamence, suggesting John the Baptist, who preached repentance, with his “voice … crying [vox clamantis] in the wilderness.” Although the interlocutor is never heard directly, his comments can sometimes be guessed from Clamence’s words, which also remind readers that there is a listener but subtly involve them in the text: monologue supposes dialogue. The *we* of the narrative (by which Clamence refers to himself and his listener) implicates, of course, the reader, who may be drawn finally into the empty space of the listener.

Having personally practiced a wide variety of hypocrisy and having seen much of it in others, having witnessed the great crimes of the century visited on Europe in the name of political ideals, and knowing, thanks to his profession, the human heart at its worst, Clamence is in an excellent position to denounce the evils of his time and preach on the theme of culpability. He pronounces himself culpable first of all, of course. Marvelous little scenes evoked from the past illustrate the skill with which he disguised his real character, filled with envy and desire for power, by cultivating a false persona. He recalls seductions of friends’ wives, outbursts of temper when he had been shown up by someone else, and the cowardice or indifference he displayed toward others. The cry of a person falling into the river as he passed by remains with him to remind him of what he has left undone. But by denouncing his failings, Clamence raises himself above the others.
because he knows his own guilt; beating his breast, accusing himself, he becomes superior and can judge others. Thus, he explains his new profession, that of juge-penitent (judge-penitent).

In the last section of the novel Clamence, suffering from a fever, speaks to the interlocutor from bed. It is—if not a pretext—at least a convenient way for Clamence to reveal his secret: a stolen painting, Les Juges integres (The Honest Judges), kept in his cupboard. The thematic inter-connections among the subject of the painting (an historic object, actually stolen and never recovered), Clamence’s earlier and present profession, and his judgments on others are enriched by his discovery that his visitor is also an attorney—perhaps a fellow spirit who will practice self-mortification with him. Awaiting his friend’s confession, Clamence is a judge without mercy, a prophet without religion, and a confessor without God.


In “La Femme adultere” (“The Adulterous Woman”), a superbly crafted story, Camus subtly brings out the emotional connections between human beings and the material world. The story deals not with physical adultery but with a spiritual communion established between Janine, the wife of a traveling salesman in North Africa, and a severe but inviting landscape that she discovers on a visit to the south of that region—a landscape with a strange appeal, which is reinforced by the presence of silent, solitary Arabs who seem connected to the world in a mysterious manner. Looking over the desert at night, Janine feels a powerful sense of freedom and union with the world, experiencing an illumination that contrasts with the pettiness and dullness of her life.

“Le Rénègat” (“The Renegade”), subtitled “Un Esprit confus” (“A Confused Mind”), presents a world founded on evil. A missionary, inspired by a desire for power instead of genuine charity, goes to a distant city of salt, apparently in the south of Algeria, in order to subjugate the infidels there. They torture him, cut out his tongue, and offer him to the god of cruelty, whose worshiper he becomes. In his fanaticism he escapes in order to kill another missionary who is about to arrive. The infidels recapture him and torture him on a cruciform device. The missionary dies, his mouth filled with salt when he asks for water, having realized too late that mercy should supplant hatred and cruelty. The story is sometimes read as a parable of the Algerian war or of any totalitarian system.

Most of the quiet action of “Les Muets” (“The Silent Men”) takes place in a cooperage, where Yvars and his fellow workers are just returning to work after a strike that has been unsuccessful, since the owner says he cannot raise their wages. Their resentful silence is directed toward the owner when he enters the workroom to chat with them; he cannot share the fraternity that binds them. Later that day, the owner’s little girl, in the house next door, has an attack that fells her; one worker runs to fetch a doctor, and an ambulance arrives. The other men find themselves unable to express their concern. At home, Yvars tells his wife what has happened and dreams of being young again and leaving to live elsewhere. Alienation and the absence of communication and hope mark the story.

“L’Hôte” (“The Guest”) is set in a mountainous area of Algeria during the Algerian insurrection. The story illustrates the antagonisms between communities that nevertheless share a common land and love for it. Daru, a teacher in an isolated school, is told by a rural gendarme that he must hold overnight an Arab prisoner accused of killing a man and then deliver him to the authorities farther on. Reluctantly, the teacher agrees to keep the prisoner for the night, but he is loath to turn in the man, despite his brutishness. The next day Daru leads the Arab to a point where he may choose between two directions, one leading to nomads who will take him in without asking questions, the other to the headquarters of the French authorities in town. The prisoner is freed and allowed to choose; the teacher sees him walking toward the town. Later, on the blackboard, Daru finds a message telling him that he will pay for giving up the Arab. The story is both a political and an
existential parable. It dramatizes the wartime dilemma of many Algerians—both French colonials and the indigenous peoples—who did not want to get involved and yet were drawn into the conflict. Likewise, the story illustrates the impossibility of choosing satisfactorily—whatever Daru does will bring him trouble—and the solitude of the thinking and suffering subject.

“Jonas ou l’artiste au travail” (“Jonas or The Artist at Work”) is set in Paris. After Jonas, a gifted painter, achieves great success, his life becomes contaminated by public recognition; he is a social commodity and a big name. People impinge so much on his time that work becomes difficult. His personal life is similarly complicated: he and his wife and children live in an uncomfortable apartment with narrow, inconvenient rooms and high ceilings. Gradually Jonas withdraws from society and family life and spends all his time in a loft built partway up a wall of the apartment. He seems to lose connection with the world. At the end, he is found unconscious in the darkness of the loft with a new canvas on which the only markings are letters that spell either solidaire or solitaire. Either of these words underlines the ambiguity of the human condition and the position of the artist, who must feel solidarity with others and yet can create only in solitude. The ambiguity of the human condition suggested by the uncertain word on the canvas appears similarly in “LHôte” and the following story in the collection, “La Pierre qui pousse.”

In “La Pierre qui pousse” (“The Growing Stone”), D’Arrast, a French engineer working out of Rio de Janeiro, journeys to a jungle town, Iguape, to study a low area where his company plans to build dikes to prevent flooding. Beginning with the first scene, in which the car is ferried across a river, the journey and subsequent visit to Iguape are filled with symbolism and Christian and mythic overtones (both Greek and South American). The adventure is a spiritual one, in which D’Arrast overcomes his personal isolation or moral exile and his rational skepticism to enter into a community of villagers and receive a sort of grace. The stone of the title is a miraculous piece of rock, honored by the villagers, that grows back when pilgrims chip off pieces as relics. Another stone plays an even more important role: a large block that a villager has sworn to carry on his head to the church in fulfillment of a vow he made to Jesus when he was saved from drowning. After a night of dancing in a hovel smoky with fumes—a ceremony that D’Arrast, as a stranger, may witness only during the early hours—and then a procession with a religious statue, the man undertakes to carry out his vow. But, wearied from the dancing and smoke, he falters. D’Arrast, portrayed as powerful, picks up the block of stone and carries it for the villager, but instead of going to the church, he detours to the villager’s hovel and deposits the stone in the central hearth. He is then invited to share a meal with the man and his family. Although this incident echoes both Christ bearing the cross and Simon the Cyrenian, who was obliged to help carry it for Christ at one point, pagan belief and community are equally important in the syncretic vision of this story.

Réflexions sur la peine capitale, by Camus and Arthur Koestler, with an introduction by Jean-Bloch Michel. Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1957. Camus’s essay, “Réflexions sur la guillotine,” translated by Howard as Reflections on the Guillotine: An Essay on Capital Punishment. Michigan City, Ind.: Fridtjof-Karla, 1959. “Réflexions sur la guillotine,” originally published with an essay on the same topic by Koestler, presents the argument that capital punishment is as morally revolting as the crime that supposedly warrants it, and that it should be abolished in France and elsewhere. Camus’s position is not based on sociological studies or, he says, on sentimentality. Camus repeats an argument already attributed to Yanek in Les Justes, that actually putting a man to death is entirely different from approving of such an execution in the abstract. Examining the common arguments for the death penalty, including its role as a deterrent and the biblical principle of an eye for an eye, Camus denies their validity. What is called punishment is really vengeance taken by society, and it is base. He also argues that social inequities and problems (such as poor housing and alcoholism) play a role in fostering crime, and that the state machinery itself is often murderous, putting political prisoners to death.

cannot live without his art. He also observes that this art is not a solitary undertaking but, rather, “un moyen d’émouvoir le plus grand nombre d’hommes en leur offrant une image privilégiée des souffrances et des joies communes” (a means of touching the greatest number of people by offering them a privileged image of common sufferings and joys). The original Gallimard edition also includes a speech Camus gave at the University of Uppsala called “L’Artiste et son temps” (translated as “The Artist and His Time” in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*).

La Mort heureuse, introduction and notes by Jean Sarocchi. Cahiers Albert Camus, no. 1. Paris: Gallimard, 1971. Translated by Howard as *A Happy Death*. New York: Knopf, 1972. Camus’s rather ill-shaped first attempt at a novel was reconstructed after his death from manuscripts, typescripts, and notebook entries. Highly autobiographical in places, the work is divided into two parts: “Mort naturelle” (Natural Death) and “La Mort conscience” (Conscious Death). The themes are closely related to those of L’Envers et l’endroit and *Noces*, and some of the contents of the three books overlap. There is also considerable textual, thematic, organizational resemblance between La Mort heureuse and L’Étranger, although critics disagree over whether the latter should be considered a direct development of the former or an offshoot or substitute, begun after Camus dropped the first project and conceived the guiding idea of Meursault’s story. The hero of La Mort heureuse is named Mersault, a name comprised of the syllables mer (sea, and a homophone of mere, mother) and sault (jump; also akin, phonetically, to soleil, sun) and nearly identical to that of Meursault in L’Étranger. The presiding theme is happiness, in relation to what Camus later called the absurd: sickness, death, and the indifference of the world.

The novel begins with Patrice Mersault’s murder of an invalid amputee named Zagreus, who has become Mersault’s friend and discussed with him the requirements for a happy life. The murder scene may have been inspired by the first episode in Malraux’s *La Condition humaine*. Time is essential, Mersault has argued, and money can buy time (since one then does not have to have a job). Believing himself justified, he murders the man for his money. This is presumably “natural,” or thoughtless death. The remaining chapters of part one recount events prior to the murder, including Mersault’s dissatisfaction at having to work in an office and his unsatisfactory affair with Marthe, of whom he became intensely jealous (a reflection of Camus’s marriage to his first wife, Simone Hié).

In the second part of the novel Mersault, now able to enjoy freedom, nonetheless experiences weeks of unhappiness when, ill and alone, he travels to Prague and suffers from his solitude and what he sees as the city’s oppressive quality. Returning to Algeria, he is able to constitute a new happiness. First, he lives with three young women in a house in Algiers called La Maison Devant le Monde (as Camus himself did in real life), while taking out a fourth woman, Lucienne. Mersault then leaves Algiers to settle in the country, having married Lucienne in the meantime, not out of love but out of desire. (The two live apart even though they are married.) The remaining chapters recount moments of happiness in his house near the sea: his friendships with local residents, including a doctor named Bernard; the pleasures of fishing, swimming, and mountain climbing; and the beauty of the sky and hillsides. Mersault receives the visits of the three girls and, twice, of Lucienne. Far more self-aware and expressive than Meursault in L’Étranger, Mersault recognizes the function of contraries in all human apprehension: “Je ne puis gouter le bonheur que dans la confrontation tenace et violente qu’il soutient avec son contraire” (I can enjoy happiness only in the tenacious and violent confrontation that it supports with its contrary). Ill with pleurisy, he is cared for by Bernard. “Conscient et pourtant étranger, devore de passion et desinteresse, Mersault comprenait que sa vie meme et son destin s’achevaient la …” (Aware and yet a stranger, devoured by passion and disinterested, Mersault understood that his very life and his destiny were ending there …). He dies, conscious to the last, having discovered what happiness is.

Caligula, version de 1941, suivi de *La Poétique du premier Caligula*, edited by A. James Arnold. Cahiers Albert Camus, no. 4. Paris: Gallimard, 1984. This volume presents the 1941 version of *Caligula* (based on a manuscript), followed by commentary and analysis by Arnold, who emphasizes the psychological elements of
the play and shows how the work evolved subsequently.

*Le Premier Homme*. Cahiers Albert Camus, no. 7. Paris: Gallimard, 1994. Translated by David Hapgood as *The First Man*. New York: Knopf, 1995. Camus’s unfinished autobiographical novel was published from the manuscript left at his death. It is divided into two main parts: “Recherche du père” (“Search for the Father”) and “Le Fils ou le premier homme” (“The Son, or the First Man”). Some notes (“Annexes”) for the unfinished portion of the novel are included as well. The title may be seen as having mythic suggestions, especially since the action takes place mostly in Algeria, viewed retrospectively as “la terre de l’oubli ou chacun était le premier homme” (the land of forgetfulness, where each was the first man). The title may refer to colonization, where men must try to “vivre sans racines” (live without roots), or to the innocence and Edenic quality—as Camus saw it—of Algeria and the Mediterranean life, under “la lumiere des premiers matins du monde” (the light of the first mornings of the world). There are also, in contrast, connotations in the title of Cain, the first biblical murderer. At the same time, the title evokes Camus’s father, the first and only paternal ancestor whose life he imagines in detail. As the title of part two indicates, *Le Premier Homme* also suggests Camus himself, through the autobiographical hero, who “avail du s’elever seul, sans pere” (had had to grow up alone, without a father) in an “innocence adamique” (Adam-like innocence). Finally, the title may refer to Everyman. As Camus observed in a notebook entry of 1954 labeled Roman (novel) and referring specifically to *Le Premier Homme*, “Tout homme est le premier homme, personne ne l’est” (Everyone is the first man; no one is). The work is dedicated to “you who can never read this book,” that is, Camus’s mother, who is portrayed as an extraordinary, Christ-like figure through her goodness and silent suffering.

The narrative begins with the birth in Algeria of a child, Jacques Cormery (J. C, like Jesus Christ), modeled on Camus. The novel then jumps ahead to a visit the adult Jacques pays to his father’s grave in Saint-Brieuc, France, followed by a conversation with his former schoolmaster (based on Louis Germain), who lives nearby. The narrative then returns to Jacques’s childhood and young manhood, to which most of the remaining chapters are devoted, with flash-forwards to later periods, including a visit Jacques pays to his mother during the early stages of the Algerian troubles. Certain other passages clearly refer to the rebellion, and others are devoted to studying the character of “J.” at age forty. Themes in the narrative or announced in the “Annexes” include some of Camus’s favorites: games and sports, school, exile, solitude, guilt, the ambience of Algiers, the natural world and its pleasures, and “un grand cri de joie et de gratitude envers l’adorable vie” (a great cry of joy and gratitude toward life, lovable life).

**NOTEBOOKS**


*Carnets III, mars 1951 - décembre 1959*. Paris: Gallimard, 1989. This volume comprises Camus’s last three notebooks. The first is based on a typed copy that Camus had corrected, both adding and suppressing certain
passages. The other two are based on manuscripts only. The book includes an index of names to all three volumes of the Carnets.

**COLLECTIONS (IN FRENCH AND IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION)**


*Actuelles II: Chroniques 1948-1953.* Paris: Gallimard, 1953. Reprinted in *Essais*. Translated in part in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* and *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*. This volume collects more journalistic pieces, prefaces, interviews, speeches, and polemical texts on political and cultural questions, principally the French Resistance and justice, and on Camus’s *L’Homme révolté*.

*The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays.* Translated by Justin O’Brien. New York: Knopf, 1955. This collection also includes the essay on Kafka omitted from the first edition of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, as well as “**Summer in Algiers**” from Noces and three essays from L’Ete: “The Minotaur or the Stop in Oran,” “Helen’s Exile,” and “Return to Tipasa.” Another selection, “The Artist and His Time,” is a 1953 interview, and not the speech Camus gave in Stockholm in 1957 that is included under the same title in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*.

*Actuelles III: Chroniques algériennes 1939-1958.* Paris: Gallimard, 1958. Reprinted in *Essais*. Translated in part in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*. The third volume of *Actuelles* includes “**Misere de la Kabylie**,” concerning Algeria in the 1930s, and several other pieces dealing with Algeria through the 1940s and 1950s, including Camus’s famous civil truce speech.


*Resistance, Rebellion, and Death.* Translated by O’Brien. New York: Knopf, 1961. This volume is a selection of journalistic articles from the *Actuelles* series, as well as *Lettres a un ami allemand* and other essays on political, philosophical, and cultural topics.

*Théâtre, récits, nouvelles*, edited by Roger Quilliot. Bibliothèque de la Pleiade. Paris: Gallimard, 1962. This volume features a chronology, notices on each work, and notes. Theatrical adaptations by Camus are included. It is the best collection to date of the fiction and drama, although not textually authoritative and somewhat uneven in its critical apparatus.

*Essais*, edited by Quilliot and L. Faucon. Bibliothèque de la Pleiade. Paris: Gallimard, 1965. *Essais* is an invaluable compendium of the major nonfiction writings by Camus and a wide selection of his journalistic pieces, complemented by letters and other associated texts, his university thesis among them. The volume has a substantial critical apparatus, including annotations and a bibliography of Camus’s writings, but this apparatus is not entirely thorough and authoritative. There are errors in the chronology and bibliography. The organization is somewhat unwieldy, and there is no index.

*Lyrical and Critical*. Edited and translated by Philip Thody. London: Hamilton, 1967. This selection of Camus’s writings includes *L’Envers et l’endroit, Noces, L’Ètè*, and essays on literary topics and figures such as Gide, Roger Martin du Gard, Jean-Paul Sartre, Rene Char, Herman Melville, and William Faulkner. There is also a section called “**Camus on Himself,**” with a preface, two literary letters, and excerpts from an interview.
Lyrical and Critical Essays. Edited by Thody, translated by Ellen Conroy Kennedy. New York: Knopf, 1968. This volume is quite similar to Lyrical and Critical but not identical. The contents are arranged slightly differently, some under different titles, and the translator is different.

Paul Viallaneix. Le Premier Camus, suivi de Ecrits de jeunesse d’Albert Camus. Cahiers Albert Camus, no. 2. Paris: Gallimard, 1973. Translated by Kennedy as Youthful Writings. New York: Knopf, 1976. This volume begins with a lengthy essay on Camus by Viallaneix. The essay is followed by some of Camus’s early texts, some never published before, others of which were published earlier in Essais and the magazine Sud. The annotations are by Viallaneix. The translated edition also includes the Viallaneix essay.


Œuvres completes d’Albert Camus. 5 volumes. Paris: Club de L’Honnète Homme, 1983. The volumes in this collection feature several pages of photographs of Camus, his family, and friends; places where he lived or visited; and scenes from performances of his plays. Each volume includes a short introduction by Roger Grenier.


ADAPTATIONS AND TRANSLATIONS BY CAMUS


SELECTED ADAPTATIONS OF CAMUS’S WORK


L’Etranger. Opera project proposed by Gerhard but never realized, 1954. The typed libretto was corrected by Camus.

**L’Étranger.** Théâtre de la Main d’Or, 1986. Adapted by Alain Illel.

**L’Étranger.** Théâtre en Pieces, 1987. Adapted by Robert Azencott.

**La Chute.** Brussels. Théâtre National de Bruxelles, 1988. Adapted and directed by Paul Anrieu.


**La Chute.** Avignon. Théâtre de la Tarasque, 2000. Adapted by Catherine Camus and Chaumette; directed by Michel de Miramont.

**CONTEMPORARY RECEPTION**

Because Camus’s first two books were published in Algeria by a new firm, and because war broke out shortly after the appearance of the second, *Noces*, he was scarcely known in France until 1942. Among major critical figures, André Gide was one of the few to comment on *Noces*, and even that was six years after it was published. Gide’s friend Maria van Rysselberghe, called “La Petite Dame,” reported in her diary: “In the afternoon, Gide brings me *Noces*, a little volume by Camus that he has just discovered…. He says to me, ‘I like very much the way it’s written; he is someone who really has a feeling for language.’” But when *L’Étranger* was published in 1942, it was viewed immediately as one of the chief literary events of the year, a meteor in the dark days of national humiliation, deprivation, and censorship, and the young author, who was still in Algeria, achieved an envious renown, which grew with the publication later that year of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. Jules Roy wrote, upon reading the novel, “*L’Étranger* is a masterpiece, which is going to bring him glory.” The eminent critic Marcel Arland wrote a favorable review of the novel for the weekly *Comoedia*, which continued publication under the Occupation. Roger Quilliot spoke later of “this strange novel, which achieved considerable success so quickly and which placed Camus in the first rank of the postwar writers.” Yet, under the circumstances of the Occupation, Camus’s work was not as widely reviewed as would otherwise have been the case. Some magazines had shut down; others had become collaborationist, losing some good reviewers in the process. Many writers who would otherwise have furnished reviews were dead, prisoners in Germany, in exile, or in hiding. Moreover, there were then and later, as Quilliot notes, some hostile reactions to the novel, with the implication that Meursault’s moral indifference was demoralizing and unpatriotic.

In fact, even before it was published, Camus’s writing had drawn the attention of some major literary figures and earned their esteem. In addition to Pascal Pia, the poet Francis Ponge, later to be recognized as one of the masters of the prose poem, read *L’Étranger, Le Mythe de Sisyphe,* and *Caligula* in manuscript. Ponge pronounced them extraordinary and wrote to Camus concerning his philosophical essay:
Sisyphus happy, yes, not only because he takes stock of his destiny, but because his efforts lead to very important relative results.

Of course he won’t manage to wedge his rock at the top of its track; he will not attain the absolute (inaccessible by definition), but he will achieve positive results in the various sciences, and in particular in political science (organization of the human world, of human society, mastery of human history, and of the individual-society paradox).

André Malraux also read the manuscripts and forwarded them to Gallimard with a recommendation for publication. Jean Paulhan, a chief figure at the firm, read a few lines of L’Etranger to the committee of readers that made decisions, with the comment, “Recommendation one,” meaning that the novel would be published.

Jean-Paul Sartre, already a literary figure to reckon with, having published his first two works of fiction and some volumes in philosophy, wrote a long article on L’Etranger that was published in Cahiers du Sud. Sartre made several apt and perspicacious observations, reading to some degree according to Le Mythe de Sisyphe, which furnishes ways of interpreting the “absurd novel.” The subject of the novel, he asserted, is “the absurdity of the human condition.” The absurd is “at once a state of fact and the lucid consciousness that certain people have of that state.” Yet, he argued, it should not be thought that the book is a roman à thèse (thesis novel); its burden is expressed in images, not in reasoning. Sartre noted also that Meursault’s attitude toward his life—“the present and a succession of presents”—is the ideal of the absurd man, “who, from fundamental absurdity, draws without fail the conclusions that absurdity imposes.” This man, moreover, like Meursault, does not explain himself; he simply describes before he “affirms himself in revolt.” Meursault is “one of those terrible innocents who create scandal in society because they do not accept the rules of the game. He lives among strangers, but for them also he is a stranger.” His mind is “transparent to things and opaque to meanings.” Sartre may have been the first critic to comment on the absence of causality in the book: paradoxically, causality having been eliminated, “the smallest incident takes on weight; there is not a single one that doesn’t contribute to leading the hero toward crime and capital punishment.”

Sartre concluded by noting that, owing to this absence of causality, the work scarcely deserved the designation roman (novel), since the novel requires, in his view, a sense of time’s irreversibility. Despite two features that are not Voltairean—the narrative technique, modeled on that of American novelists, and elements of German existentialism (or so Sartre contended)—L’Etranger was more like a Voltairean tale (such as Candide, 1759) than a novel. This assessment is still considered remarkably perspicacious, although some commentators have noted its logical flaws (the same sort of inconsistency with which Sartre later charged Camus).

When Camus moved to France late in the summer of 1942, he could not often take advantage of this early fame, since the Occupation as well as his personal circumstances made it difficult for him to visit Paris. Still, when he did travel to the city briefly in January 1943, he was well received by the figures associated with the Gallimard publishing firm and was introduced to other writers. Having a sense of his own worth, Camus did not disdain recognition, though he did not seek celebrity for its own sake and refused to tailor his writing to obtain public approval.

Another opinion of Gide’s showed the forked tongue with which he often spoke. In 1944 he wrote to the author of L’Etranger, whom he had not yet met: “I have an aversion to your novel; but it has given me, for you and your thought, a high esteem—which Sisyphus has only reinforced.—That the world is absurd, you seem to have discovered; whereas one must begin with that, it seems to me; man has everything to do, and to create, there…. Let’s drop that, for the moment;… You are one of the rare beings with whom I feel some desire to chat.”

The reception given to Camus’s plays varied, from generally favorable to thorough panning. Le Malentendu was given a cool reception in 1944, its somber quality helping to strengthen the public supposition that Camus
was a nihilist writer. The following year, however, *Caligula*, for which Camus counted thirty reviews, was received enthusiastically, perhaps in part because of the performance of Gerard Philipe as the emperor. *L’Etat de siège* was a total stage failure, offset somewhat by the partial success of *Les Justes*. The adaptations presented the following decade were well received, especially *Requiem pour une nonne*.

Many opinions expressed by reviewers and other critics were, presumably, honest and not influenced by political bias, particularly in the months immediately following the liberation of Paris. In a way, the Occupation had simplified the intellectual scene, bringing together, through their common dislike of Nazism, writers and others who would later separate into factions. But in the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, politics more than any other consideration governed book reviewing in France. Many tendentious reviews appeared, and despite great journalistic talent in some quarters, the project of literary assessment lost some of its value to the degree that it was politically biased. Monthly publications such as *Les Temps Modernes*, dominated by the Left, and newspapers such as *Liberation*, which began as a Resistance paper, and *Les Lettres Françaises*, a Communist paper run (after 1953) by Louis Aragon, could be counted on to praise highly any author on their side, while *La Revue des Deux Mondes*, a quite conservative bimonthly magazine, would not bother with the same author. (Even extreme left-wing readers were not thrilled, however, by Aragon’s series of tedious thesis novels, *Les Communistes*, 1949-1951.) Some publications were less politically extreme, including *Esprit*, a magazine of Christian social thought, but even in these periodicals the tenor of reviews was often predictable. The case of Malraux, who had protested against Hitler, fought in Spain, and otherwise gained excellent leftist credentials, is instructive. No longer the darling of the Communists since he had become a Gaullist, he and his writing lost, so to speak, all value in the eyes of the Left, as Simone de Beauvoir’s memoirs show.

Camus was long viewed as a member of the nonaligned Left (neither Socialist nor Communist)’an accurate enough assessment in general terms, since he favored measures, such as nationalization of all major industries and services and an extended social security arrangement, that would reduce the difference between haves and have-nots. He was also in favor of expanded voting rights for Muslims. (Women had received the franchise only after World War II.) Camus spoke in 1959 of “cette gauche dont je fais partie, malgré moi et malgré elle” (this Left to which I belong, despite myself and despite it). But in the polarized climate of the postwar period and the Cold War, with little middle ground available, anyone who did not endorse independence for Algeria or who quarreled with the Communists, criticized the Soviet Union, expressed reservations about socialist Utopias, or distanced himself in any other way from the Left was thereby ipso facto assumed to be of the Right. Thus, after publication of *L’Homme révolté* and the polemic with Sartre and Francis Jeanson that both publicized and distorted Camus’s positions, the Left came to view Camus as treacherous, and assessments of his writing altered accordingly. Sartre, Beauvoir, and Jeanson saw choices, certainly, as “all or nothing at all” and publicly accused their erstwhile friends Raymond Aron, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Camus of embracing bourgeois values because they could not endorse wholeheartedly the positions of the Left. The Right then gradually viewed these figures more sympathetically.

**JEANSON’S CRITIQUE OF LA PESTE**

“A metaphysical novel, *La Peste* could have been called ‘The Human Condition’; for the true scene was not that city but the world; and the characters were not those men and women of Oran, but the whole of humanity, nor that disease, but the absolute Evil that weighs on every conscious existence. Naturally, to the degree that the reader was referred from the immediate meaning to this essential meaning, there was an abuse on the author’s part: for the passage from one to the other is in reality impossible. The analogy is illusory between an epidemic related by a pure mind and the human condition as lived by a consciousness in a situation.”

_Impressive_ Jeanson

This trend began with La Peste. Beauvoir’s estimate of the novel was revealing of her view that Camus had eluded the true historical question by fleeing into abstraction: “La Peste appeared around then; you could find in it, at places, the tone of L’Etranger; Camus’s voice touched us. But to compare the Occupation to a natural scourge was another means of fleeing from History and genuine problems. Concerning the fleshless morality that came out of the apologue, everyone was too easily in agreement.”

Similar objections were expressed somewhat later by the critic Roland Barthes, who argued that the novel was founded on an antihistorical outlook and a politics of isolation and that a plague could not serve successfully as a metaphor for military oppression. Camus replied that readers everywhere had nevertheless recognized the Occupation under the guise of disease without being prodded to do so, and that the sort of solitary revolt that marked L’Etranger had been transformed into collective struggle in La Peste.

For different reasons, Gide, who by that time had come to know Camus quite well, expressed disappointment in La Peste. Van Rysselberghe recorded in her journals Gide’s opinion:

This morning, we both receive Camus’s latest book, La Peste. He [Gide] says upon opening it: “I have rarely wished more for a book to be very good.” But he’s not slow in saying he’s disappointed. “I was expecting something much more masterful,” he says; “it started out so well, but there’s too much cogitation and subtle, drawn-out arguments; he didn’t draw from his subject all that it promised. It lacks grandeur; it shuffles along too much—yes, it’s an important book, but I was expecting much more.”

Yet, Arland stated that he liked the novel, and in fact sales of La Peste were quite high.

By the early 1950s Camus was included in the Nouveau Petit Larousse Illustré, a combination dictionary and encyclopedia, entry into which is considered a hallmark of success in France. Phrases from his writings were later cited for purposes of illustration in the Robert dictionary—evidence that lexicographers viewed his usage as correct and authoritative. Scholarly examination of Camus’s production began to blossom during his lifetime, following and often partly dependent upon journalistic assessments published during the same period. A 1957 volume by Philip Thody, published in England, was one of the first solid studies on Camus and his works; John Cruickshank’s comprehensive study was published in 1959. A long chapter on Camus as a “representative figure in contemporary fiction” was included in a critical study by R. W. B. Lewis published the same year. At about the same time the first bibliography of scholarship on Camus was published; it was superseded some years later by other listings and ongoing, updated lists in serials.

After Camus’s untimely death early in 1960, critics hastened to get out articles, essays, and books, and a tremendous Camus industry developed, much of it going needlessly over the same ground. Sartre produced a statement soon after Camus’s death that was published in France-Observateur on 7 January 1960. Sartre stressed the contradictions in Camus’s position and the fact that they had quarreled, but he reminded readers that the two had been friends. Moreover, he wrote, Camus “represented in this century, and against History, the current heir of that long line of moralists whose works constitute perhaps what is most original in French letters. His stubborn humanism, narrow and pure, austere and sensual, waged a dubious combat against the massive and formless events of this time.” A trace of emotion seemed to come through Sartre’s prose. Questioned later about it, he admitted that he had “let himself go” because he saw the opportunity to indulge in some fine writing. Only one year later, and on a subsequent occasion, Sartre made certain that his sentiment should not be taken too seriously by making clear and damning allusions to Camus’s article “Ni victimes ni bourreaux.” Then, in 1972, Sartre told a friend that Camus “was not made for what he did. He was a little thug from Algiers, very funny, who could have written a few books but of the gangster type—instead of that one has the impression that civilization was stuck onto him and that he did what he did, that is, nothing.”

Many newspapers, weekly magazines, monthlies and quarterlies, and other publications devoted the whole or part of an issue to Camus the man and his achievement and place in French literature. These memorial issues
were produced with great haste, some as early as February 1960. The *Nouvelle Revue Française* devoted a thick issue to Camus, with excellent photographs and contributions from eminent figures in France and elsewhere. *Yale French Studies* furnished an assessment for American readers. Even the conservative *La Table Ronde* had a memorial issue.

**CRITICAL TRENDS AFTER 1960 AND SUBSEQUENT REPUTATION**

In the next few years several longer studies on Camus appeared, in French, English, German, Italian, and various other languages. By 1980, twenty years after his death, the section on Camus prepared by Raymond Gay-Crosier for the major annotated bibliography on twentieth-century French literature comprised 1,147 items in all categories except journalism (bibliography, biography, collections, various sorts of scholarly studies, and letters) in the chief European languages. In France, a favorite book—because it was part of an inexpensive and popular series, “Écrivains de toujours” (Perennial Writers), often bought or consulted by students and general readers—was Morvan Lebesque’s *Camus* (1962), which has been frequently reprinted. A man-and-works study, generically speaking, it nevertheless approaches the topic somewhat obliquely, giving glimpses of Camus at different moments of his career. Lebesque attempts to shed light on Camus’s career and assess it by situating it socially and politically. Without being excessively defensive of the author, Lebesque is sympathetic, seeing Camus much as he saw himself: as a writer and artist who was drawn into public life and public disputes in which he was summoned to take a stand.

During the same period, the name of Camus appeared in several new surveys of French literature or modern fiction as a whole, some of which concentrated on writing in France after 1940, a year that was considered a major watershed. Ten pages were devoted to introducing Camus’s work, with excerpts, in a survey published in 1960, *Écrivains d’aujourd’hui, 1940-1960* (Writers of Today, 1940-1960). Maurice Nadeau borrowed the title of Camus’s speech “L’Artiste et son temps” as a heading for the introduction to his study *Le Roman français depuis la guerre* (1963), in which he examines writers whose work appeared chiefly in the postwar period and attempts to situate their writings with respect to earlier literary themes and fashions; an entire chapter of this study is devoted to Camus as a novelist. R.-M. Albèrés included Camus in his *Histoire du roman moderne* (1962), calling the writers work “more philosophic than fictional” but maintaining that its philosophic contradictions were resolved by the tone in which Camus treated them: “In *L’Etranger*, doesn’t one find, reduced to a dry and symbolic drama, the conflict between a diffuse sensibility and an essential demand? Just as in *La Peste*, where pity and action confront each other, as well as tragedy and pathos, complacency and rigor.” Albèrés grouped Camus with writers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Gide, and D. H. Lawrence, whose work “translated a conscious revolt on the part of a hero who is its center and who analyses it as he lives it.”

The attitudes taken toward Camus’s work at mid century and later by Catholic critics are revealed not only by choices in anthologies but by books, articles, excerpts from critical surveys, and other assessments. Their attitudes varied from the cordial and sympathetic to the dismissive. Pierre-Henri Simon, an important Catholic critic and novelist who wrote repeatedly on Camus, displayed an approach at once critical and sympathetic. After Camus’s death, Simon called him “one of the high consciences of the nation.” Like many other commentators, he contrasted Camus with Sartre. While speaking of the atheism of both (in Camus’s case, the term *agnosticism* would be more appropriate), Simon distinguished important differences, noting Camus’s idealism and transcendentalism—that is, reaching for higher values. He identified Camus’s evolution from nihilism and isolation to the warm humanism and commitment of *La Peste*, which, at the time Simon wrote about it (in 1951), he considered the author’s best work. He stressed especially what he considered the entirely justified attack on historicism in *L’Homme révolté*, where Camus attacked the myth of revolution and the Hegelian-Marxist form it had taken in the twentieth century. In fact, Simon paid Camus the compliment of noting that his opposition to the way many modern thinkers had raised history to the plane of an absolute was close to that of the Christian philosopher Paul Ricoeur. Simon considered *La Chute* a sardonic work focused on guilt. He observed that Clamence “wishes to be innocent, but no longer believes he is … ; he has
recognized … in the very substance of his person and in the deep-set inclination of his will an inevitable complicity with guilt.”

Another sympathetic study by a Catholic critic was that of Charles Moeller, who clearly liked La Peste (which he considered Camus’s greatest novel at the time) and found the author’s humanism warm and appealing, though it denied God. In the United States some years later, the Catholic monk Thomas Merton wrote of Camus’s “honesty” as well as his anguish and spoke of his ethics as those of a nontheological but religious thinker. Judgments such as these may have contributed to a tendency for readers to imagine that Camus was on the brink of conversion, or at least to see him as a writer who might have become a Christian—in contrast with Sartre, whose conversion is unimaginable.

In contrast to these critics was Helmut Hatzfeld, whose frame of reference in his guide to twentieth-century French literature was “avowedly Catholic.” Although his judgment of Camus was ultimately less harsh than his judgment of Sartre, it was nevertheless an indictment, in which other readers of the time, and especially now, may scarcely recognize the author they thought they knew. Hatzfeld misread L’Étranger as a story of “the naively alleged absurdity of human existence.” The central problem of the novel, he averred, is that “the judge in Algiers who condemned Meursault changed his mind absurdly.” In La Peste, a “Kantian-Stalinist world,” Hatzfeld identified what he called “the naturalistic, behavioristic, practical, technical” approach to the problem of evil. Contrasting with this generalized approach are the attitudes of three characters: “the moral substance of the apostate Christian,” which is still strong enough in Tarrou “to lead to the decision to abandon the animalistic drift of egoistic ‘happiness’” and an absurd belief in the ideal of la tendresse humaine on the part of Rieux; and the desperation, bitterness, and pseudoresignation shown by the Jesuit Paneloux, a “purposely misrepresented priest,” whose sermon is “a poignant reply to Kafka” and whose portrait shows Camus’s shortcomings “in judging the spiritual side of life.” But, Hatzfeld concluded, as if to draw Camus into the religious fold, “Camus’s half-existentialism, half-humanism stressing man’s capacity for sincerity, liberty and justice again is a Christian echo. There is the liberal tendency to secularize mysticism, making out of a pessimistic despair something like a dark night of the soul.”

Other critics approached Camus from an explicitly Protestant viewpoint. The American commentator Nathan Scott attempted in a short book to give a Christian interpretation of several of Camus’s works. One critic drew a parallel between La Chute and a work by the German Protestant Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Two other critics published volumes on Camus’s thought from a Protestant point of view.

Thematic and structural studies on particular works by Camus—often L’Étranger—constituted a new stage of critical development, beginning generally in the 1960s. Victor Brombert studied “Le Rènègat” in connection with the “temptation of the absolute” in the twentieth century, including the dreadful absolute of evil; the story’s “nightmarish perfection” is part of an “apocalypse of cruelty.” Certain critics called on principles of literary structuralism, a mode of literary criticism derived from the principles of structuralist anthropology, illustrated by Claude Lévi-Strauss. Elsewhere, critics followed roughly the old explication de texte, or textual analysis, developed decades before in France and reinforced for some critics by the American New Criticism. In the United States, the interrelationship of plot (structure) and theme in L’Étranger was explored in a long chapter by Eugene Falk. In the same year, 1967, W M. Frohock published an examination of Camus’s narrative techniques and paratactical style in Noces and L’Étranger, concentrating on the use of metaphor, especially in the final pages of the latter book. Of special note is Frohock’s challenge to the oft-repeated claim that Camus learned his style from the American “behaviorists”—a term whose meaning he deemed unclear—and from Ernest Hemingway. Frohock contended that Camus’s style was much more metaphoric than that of Hemingway and was closer to that of the hard-boiled fiction writer James M. Cain. Frohock also studied the narrative voice in La Peste as an example of the “pseudo-third person.” The structuralist approach to narrative contributed to the development of a body of criticism called narratology, whose principles were shortly applied to Camus’s fiction, as in Brian T. Fitch’s study of L’Étranger. Familiarity with Camus’s main novels is so widespread that critics whose focus is principally
English-language fiction often draw on examples from his works to illustrate a point or draw a comparison. While many readers, especially undergraduates who encounter *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* for the first time, are impressed by Camus as a thinker, his standing among professional philosophers and public intellectuals was from the beginning much lower than his reputation among literary critics. Jeanon contributed greatly to the trend with his article attacking *L'Homme révolté* for its faulty thinking; this article was shortly followed by Sartre’s piece in the same vein and later remarks by both Sartre and Beauvoir to the effect that Camus was no thinker. Perhaps anticipating future criticism as well as defending himself against contemporary attacks, Camus himself said that he was an artist or a moraliste, not a philosopher. Left-wing intellectuals have not ceased attacking *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*; in 1987 Hayden White mocked Camus for “opposing ‘totalitarianism’ and holding up the prospect of an amiable anarchy as a desirable alternative.” Handbooks and readers in modern philosophy often include no excerpts from Camus, although selections from *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* were featured in a major mid-century anthology of existentialist writings, and surveys of existentialism sometimes included his work. Gaëtan Picon devoted fewer than three pages to Camus in his long survey of contemporary thought, whereas Sartre received more than twenty pages. Camus was not included in the category of existential philosophy but rather that of contemporary humanism—an appropriate classification in some ways but indicative of Camus’s secondary position with respect to such thinkers as Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Martin Heidegger. Many historians and critics of existentialism did not even bother to sort out the differences between Camus and Sartre, simply letting the latter represent mid-century French existential thought, along with such figures as Beauvoir, Mer-leau-Ponty, Jean Wahl, and Gabriel Marcel. Even literary critics noted, as one put it, “the philosophical deficiencies of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*.”

It is true that, in addition to the dozens of general studies by scholars and critics of literature and intellectual history, professional philosophers in several countries have devoted books and articles to aspects of Camus’s thought both during his lifetime and afterward. By 1980, articles in at least nine different European languages had been published on aspects of his philosophy. General ethics, the absurd, revolt, suicide, freedom, agnosticism or atheism, and happiness are among the topics most often treated under the rubric of Camus’s philosophy. As early as 1946 the British philosopher A.J. Ayer published an article critical of his philosophic categories. Maurice Blanchot, a French thinker of high reputation, published three articles in 1954 dealing in particular with nihilism in Camus’s work. In 1958 the American philosopher Thomas Hanna treated his work and thought sympathetically. Hazel Barnes, known for her studies of existentialism, wrote on balance and tension in Camus’s thought. In 1968 Stuart H. Hughes devoted a chapter to Camus’s contribution to social thought, focusing on *L'Homme révolté* and critiques by Sartre and Marcel. Comparisons, not always favorable to Camus, have been drawn over and over again between him and other modern thinkers such as Martin Buber, Heidegger, and Nietzsche. The seventeenth-century French scientist and philosopher Blaise Pascal is often mentioned in conjunction with Camus, for their similar existential outlook. In 1997 a collection of essays titled *Camus et la philosophie* was published with many contributions from professional philosophers. Among the voices raised in defense of Camus as a thinker at least as able as Sartre is that of Jean Saroc-chi, in the essay “Camus, non philosophe sans le savoir [the phrase comes from the tide of an eighteen-century play by Michel-Jean Sedaine]. Camus, philosophe sans que Sartre le sache” (Camus, Not a Philosopher Who Doesn’t Know It but a Philosopher Without Sartre’s Knowing It”).

Camus’s subsequent reputation has varied enormously. His continued popularity with students and other readers and the presence of his works on course syllabi point to his enduring appeal. Specialized scholarly research continues at an impressive rate, with new critical studies added every year to the great abundance of volumes and articles already on the shelves. Two specialized serial publications are devoted to his work. Camus-bashing has been common, however, for more than thirty years, pardy on philosophical grounds but chiefly on political ones, including the charge of Eurocentrism. The near-absence of native Algerians in most of his work (as in *L’Etranger* and *La Peste*, both set in Algeria) and his refusal in the 1950s to espouse the cause of the rebels, and thus of independence, are the principal grounds of this criticism. To these charges
other accusations have been added, such as Camus’s use of *nous* (we) for Europeans and *vous* (you) for Algerians of native origin. In 1970 Conor Cruise O’Brien published a study, also translated into French, that blamed Camus for the omission of Arabs from his work. Another commentator wrote: “In order to deserve to keep his title of Camus the Algerian, [he] should have shown total solidarity with the colonized Algerian people, but he was incapable of that because he felt more solidarity with ‘his people,’ namely the French Algerians.” The Arabs are scarcely present in his work,” asserted another critic. “Totally absent from his philosophical books and his dramas, they are only shadows, passing or simply ignored, in the remainder of his work.” Speaking in the 1980s, a friend from Camus’s youth called him “a pure city intellectual. He didn’t know Arabic, he wasn’t familiar with the rural areas, nor the Berber mountain regions, nor the southern part of Algeria. The ‘Arabs’… were for him just ’extras’ [actors], or a social problem, not a community, a history, a universe awaking.”

Similarly, the Berber writer Kateb Yacine has noted, “Some pages by Camus are very lovely, but the [indigenous] Algerians are absent, or covered up, as in *L’Etranger.* …” Quoting these statements, a critic concludes that “if it seems excessive to attribute to Camus the term racist, one can understand this sort of resentment on the part of so many men who recognized themselves in him and yet did not find him when they were searching for this witness, this defender that he could not, or could no longer, be.” Another Algerian commentator acknowledges that “although he had never mingled with the Muslim population, Camus had nevertheless seen its dreadful misery, especially in his journalistic reports on Kabylia,” and that “Camus had fought for the same rights for the Muslim community as for the European community”; yet, “one has the impression that Camus turned a deaf ear to this crucial discovery of the twentieth century, the right of peoples to dispose of themselves, and that he was satisfied with repeating the declaration of 1789: ’Men are born free and equal in rights.’” Still another commentator expressed his judgment even more harshly: “His [Camus’s] clear and unequivocal position in the Stockholm speech and in 1958 … represents merely the conclusion of the position of a right-wing Frenchman who refused to acknowledge what he was, it articulates openly what his oeuvre had tried hard to hide, fake, ignore, or to reveal only in a subtle and edulcorated form.”

Certain of these judgments can be explained somewhat by the fact that most of these commentators did not have access to *Le Premier Homme,* in which Camus depicts native Algerians sympathetically, speaks of their comradeship, and often shows great concern for them (for example, Arab women barricaded in their houses). Yet, critics had at their disposal from 1958 on the *Chroniques algériennes* that make up *Actuelles III.* This volume was, as Peter Dun-woodie writes, “crushingly ignored.” Moreover, most critics do not take into account Camus’s behind-the-scenes efforts in the mid 1950s to find a political solution to the violence brought about by the Algerian uprising.

**ALGIERS**

“In the Kasbah they [Camus and a friend, Blanche Balain] sat at the Café Fromentin watching the passing scene while sipping mint tea. ’Look,’ he said of the Moslem crowd, ’how they are, how they go, so noble, so indifferent.’ He added: ’They are more civilized than we are.’ He confessed that he would like to be in Spain, fighting with the Republicans. ’To possess everything, to accomplish everything, in an instant, and die!’ They speculated about suicide-to them a fascinating conception.

“… They crossed the city, went down to the harbor. The sight of successive tiers of houses descending to the docks, the illuminated boats at twilight, led him to say:’Isn’t this the loveliest city, the loveliest bay in the world?’”

*Herbert R. Lottman*

The charges at issue illustrate at least two critical fallacies. One is judging by later standards a conduct or position adopted in earlier times: certain of Camus’s critics, writing from the perspective of the 1980s or 1990s, do not reflect that the same suppositions did not hold forty or fifty years before. What appeared radical in the 1930s has long been abandoned or surpassed; what looked practicable in 1995, with respect to Algeria, appeared much less so in 1955. The other fallacy is simply to ignore contrary evidence. Camus’s articles on the unfortunate situation of Arab and Berber Algerians, some of them published before the outbreak of World War II, were much more than a gesture: they were a call for widespread changes, a call certainly not typical of the right wing. Moreover, the vulnerability of Camus to criticism typifies the position of many other public figures and commentators who wish to hold a middle ground, denouncing fanaticism and extremism: they are attacked from both sides. In *L’Homme révolté* Camus denounced this tendency of absolute political thought to have recourse to violence and deny all positions other than extreme ones.

**ART IMITATING LIFE**

Camus’s chief literary concern was not to portray himself, still less to pour into his writing the totality of his experience in an idealized and redemptive mode, as Marcel Proust did. Nor is Camus’s writing principally a working-out of complexes or hidden aspects of the psyche, although some critics have read it as such, particularly as a search for the missing father. At the extreme opposite of the Surrealists and other artists who looked upon art as a means of getting in touch with and expressing their unconscious or some other dark side of the self, Camus was concerned with lucidity—that Mediterranean value, illustrated by the Greeks in their meditations on man and nature and by his own essays. “Nul homme ne peut dire ce qu’il est,” he wrote (No man can say what he is). Camus was also concerned with art—something that goes beyond the raw material of life. His enterprise was that of the poet Paul Valéry: not to feel, but to *make felt*, “et bellement sensible” (felt beautifully).

Still, like nearly every literary artist, Camus called on his own experience and that of those around him for much of the material of his fiction and drama, whether settings, characters, actions, attitudes, themes, or images. He stated: “Un personnage n’est jamais le romancier qui l’a crée. Il y a des chances, cependant, pour que le romancier soit tous ses personnages a la fois” (A character is never the novelist who created him. It is quite possible, however, for the novelist to be all his characters at the same time). The relationship between Camus’s life and his creation is like that seen in the work of Gide, who explored alternative possibilities of the self. Thus, although it would be a grave mistake to read Camus as a markedly autobiographical writer, it would be similarly erroneous to overlook in his work the many elements of autobiography and the self. These elements are sometimes transparent but are more often transposed into indirect expressions, as in *Caligula*, in which only a feeling, a sentiment, and theme remain to tie the work personally to the author. *L’Envers et l’endroit* and *La Chute* are also works in which readers have seen elements of autobiography and self-confession.

The meaning of the terms *autobiography* and *autobiographical* warrant a few words. Philippe Lejeune has argued that autobiography must be defined in the narrow sense, as a deliberate writing of the self according to a pact made between author and reader, according to which it is agreed that author, narrator (or I), and main character in a narrative are one and the same historic person. While this definition holds for many examples of the genre, including famous ones such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions* (1781, 1788), it excludes any variants, such as highly personal and autobiographical poetry, third-person narratives of the self (often in the form of transparently autobiographical novels), and personal narratives published under a pseudonym. Even more, this definition of autobiography excludes all texts that are simply based on actual experiences of an author or are highly revealing of his character. The exclusion can be remedied by applying the label *autobiographical* to texts or portions thereof that recount or otherwise reveal significant incidents or aspects of an author’s life, without purporting to portray that entire life or to use nothing but historical data.
Two works, the early novel *La Mort heureuse* and the late, unfinished novel *Le Premier Homme*, both published posthumously, afford considerable parallels with Camus’s own experience. Mersault in the former is clearly autobiographical, despite points of difference between him and the author; Camus, however, plainly made an effort to distinguish between the text of *La Mort heureuse* and the autobiographical facts. *Le Premier Homme* is a direct and generally accurate rendering of his personal experience. Proper names given to family members are sometimes the actual ones; in other cases they are names Camus borrowed from previous generations of his family. The whole novel closely follows what is known of his life from his own writings and others’ testimony, including details found in his other fiction and his early lyrical essays. This last novel must be seen, however, as a work in progress, which, had Camus lived, he might well have greatly altered; he told his wife that he would make it less autobiographical later. Yet, he might instead have left it as transparent as it stands, inspired by a desire for frankness and perhaps a sense of guilt dictated by maturity. As it is, the novel reveals “a secret Camus, who is willing to unveil his most painful memories, who admits his childish errors as well as his success as a young man,” and was thus “a great novelty for the readers of his work.” One of the consequences of the publication of *Le Premier Homme* in 1994 was to invite critics to read backward in light of the new revelations it provided and to identify overlaps between the novel and earlier works, thus certifying the autobiographical nature of elements in these earlier works and creating the image of a writer less distant from his fiction than had been assumed.

Settings furnish some of the most obvious ties between Camus’s own experience and his writing. The short lyrical essays in *L’Envers et l’endroit*, *Noces*, and *L’Èté* are largely connected to North Africa by elements of landscape, seascape, foliage, and history; the cities of Algiers and Oran are likewise evoked. The number of metaphors and motifs drawn from the Algerian landscape and cityscapes in Camus’s work is enormous; the connection is a deep and existential one, part of the thematics of his work. In *L’Etranger* Meursault lives on the rue de Lyon in Algiers, where the Sintes apartment was; he goes swimming on the beaches Camus knew well. *La Peste* is set in Oran, from which Camus, like certain characters divided from what they love, was separated (or in exile) as he worked on the manuscript in central France. Like the characters in *La Peste*, he was, as it were, a prisoner (in his case, of the Occupation). Three of the stories from *L’Exil et le royaume* are set in Algeria and are closely connected to the landscape and cultural features of the territory: “La Femme adultere,” “Les Muets,” and “L’Hôte.” A fourth story from the collection, “Le Rènégat,” similarly takes place in an African land, but it is not particularized and the entire work partakes more of myth than mimetic reality. The setting of “La Pierre qui pousse” in the same collection was inspired by Camus’s travels in Brazil; the story incorporates fragments from his travel diary. Certain other works or portions of them are likewise connected to locales with which he was familiar, such as *Le Malentendu*, which is set in a Central European locale obviously based on Prague, where Camus had been unhappy. The play also reflects the moral and geographic climate of central France in 1942, when he was unable to leave. Explicitly identified, the Prague setting also appears in *La Mort heureuse*, in which it is associated with the hero’s unhappiness, a direct transposition of Camus’s own, resulting from his difficulties with his first wife, Simone. Paris appears in *L’Ètranger* as a city of “dark courtyards” in contrast with Algiers. In *La Chute*, set in Amsterdam, the Greek isles, which Camus had liked greatly, are mentioned as a sort of ideal that the guilty souls of mid-century Europe no longer deserve.

Several characters in Camus’s fiction derive from real models. It has been noted that many times Camus attributed to his characters names that came from his own family: the surnames Cardona and Sintes in *L’Etranger* come from his mother’s family; the given names Jeanne and Fernande, similarly used in her family, appear in various stories. Both *La Mort heureuse* and *Le Premier Homme* include, as one might expect, some actual family names as well as actual incidents; some might have been eliminated had Camus lived to oversee the publication of these texts himself. In *La Peste* Camus used names identical with or similar to those of people around him during the conception of the novel. The early sketches in *L’Envers et l’endroit* present characters based on family members and others Camus had known; their connection with his family is reinforced by *Le Premier Homme*. In *L’Ètranger* Meursault was modeled, according to Camus, on Pierre Galindo, whom he had known in Algeria, but also on himself.
mother in *La Peste* are clearly transpositions of Catherine Hélène Camus. The disengagement between mother
and son, who did not have much to say to each other, as Meursault put it, and the closer, warmer connection
between Rieux and his mother (although she is often silent) both have roots in reality, since Catherine Camus
was at once silent and seemingly indifferent on the one hand, and truly devoted to her son on the other. Three
female characters in Camus’s drama—Martha in *Le Malentendu*, Victoria in *L’État de siege*, and Dora in
*Les justes*—may have been inspired obliquely by the strong personality of Maria Casares, who played the roles
in the first productions.

**ORAN**

“The desire to live in [Oran] has never occurred to me; it was Camus’s territory, that associated with his
‘handsome Spaniard’ side. He had found his second wife there; her family lived in a middle-class
neighborhood. Add to that, for someone from Algiers, the contempt that is shown for this city built on a shore
but where people can’t glimpse the sea. Proud, Spanish, Oran, prey to furious passions. There, people insult
each other and kill each other for almost nothing. At least that is the idea that people in Algiers have of Oran.”

*Jules Roy*


Camus said that he put himself into the story of Meursault through the journalist who attends the trial and
gazes with sympathy at the accused. Clamence in *La Chute* was based to some degree on Camus himself, it
was asserted by Beauvoir and widely believed; friends recognized resemblances. It is better to consider
Clamence as one of the author’s possible selves. Sartre, it has been observed, is as likely a model; some of
his personal characteristics and moral sanctimoniousness appear in Clamence. In December 1954 Camus
wrote in his notebooks: “Existentialisme. Quand ils s’accusent on peut etre sur que c’est toujours pour
accabler les autres. Des juges penitents” (Existentialism. When they accuse themselves one can be sure that
it’s always to condemn others. Judge-penitents). Yvars in “Les Muets” was based on Etienne Sintes, Camus’s
uncle, who was a cooper and, like the character, was lame and given to silence.

One notes also in Camus’s fiction the near-absence of fathers, except in *Le Premier Homme*, in which the
paternal figure appears at the beginning as Camus imagines him as a young man; the autobiographical hero
much later goes to visit his father’s grave in Brittany. But an incident in which Camus’s father attended an
execution appears four times in his writing: in *L’Étranger*, where Meursault recounts such an incident as
happening to his father, according to his mother’s report; in *La Peste*, in which Tarrou’s father is the one who
witnesses the event; in *Réflexions sur la peine capitale*; and finally in *Le Premier Homme*.

There appear to be few direct projections in Camus’s creative work of his marriages and his involvements
with other women. In *La Mort heureuse* certain female characters seem to be transpositions of Simone Hie
and other women with whom he was involved in Algiers as a young man. Certainly, the hero’s jealousy and
quarrels with Martha reflect the problems in Camus’s marriage to Simone. In *La Peste* the difficulties that
Rieux and his wife have had, as well as his resolve near the end to begin again and do better, are likely
transpositions of difficulties that had probably already arisen between Francine and Camus by the time they
were separated by World War II and that were exacerbated after 1945. The dull routine and
semi-estrangement of the couple in “La Femme adultere” might conceivably refer to Camus’s second
marriage. “Jonas ou l’artiste au travail” is read by nearly all critics as a projection of Camus’s marital
problems as well as practical difficulties that the couple experienced in the 1940s and 1950s. Indeed, if Camus
put himself directly into any fiction or drama, it is here. As Patrick McCarthy has noted, “Jonas is an attempt
to interpret their marriage. Camus explains that the role of a famous writer is incompatible with the role of a
devoted husband.”

Various tastes and pastimes of Camus are reflected in his work. Swimming, which he enjoyed from childhood on, is depicted as a great pleasure in *L’Etranger* and provides one of the central scenes in *La Peste*. Soccer and soccer teams are likewise mentioned in both novels. Camus’s familiarity with working-class lives and his appreciation for the simple pleasures of modest people are apparent on many pages. His writer’s block and difficulties in dealing with public expectations are certainly reflected in “Jonas ou l’artiste au travail” and probably in *La Chute*.

NOTES


5. Ibid., pp. 138,198.

6. The 1958 version of *Caligula* is the one published in *Thèâtre, recits, nouvelles* and used in the reprise of the play at the Festival d’Angers in 1957 and on the Paris stage in 1958, the year in which it was published.


13. Ibid., p. 844.


15. In Greek mythology, Zagreus was the son of Zeus and Persephone. He was dismembered and devoured by the Titans, but his heart was saved by Athena and swallowed by Zeus, who then fathered a child with Semele. The child, formed from the heart of Zagreus, was Dionysus. Zagreus is thus a resurrection figure.


20. As of 2000, four volumes of Camus’s collected works, with annotations by specialists, have been planned for the Bibliotheque de la Pleiade series published by Gallimard and are in the earliest stages of preparation. They will supersede all previous editions as the authoritative versions of Camus’s works.


24. Ibid., p. 1908.


56. See Seymour Chatman, *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 149; Chatman cites Clamence in *La Chute* as an example of the unreliable narrator.


64. These articles are collected in Maurice Blanchot, *L’Entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969).


71. A. E. Elbaz, quoted in Dunwoodie, Writing French Algeria, p. 237.


73. Yves Bourgeois, quoted in Lenzini, L’Algerie de Camus, p. 95.

74. Kateb Yacine, quoted in Lenzini, L’Algerie de Camus, p. 95; Lenzini, L’Algerie de Camus, p. 95.

75. Ghani Merad, quoted in Lenzini, L’Algerie de Camus, pp. 117-118.

76. Tayeb Bouguerra, quoted in Dunwoodie, Writing French Algeria, p. 237.

77. Camus, Le Premier Homme, p. 257.

78. Dunwoodie, Writing French Algeria, p. 265.


81. Ibid., p. 448.


86. Ibid., p. 196; see also Todd, Albert Camus: Une vie, pp. 230-232. Note also Camus’s statement in Carnets, janvier 1942 - mars 1951, p. 34: “Trois personnages sont entres dans la composition de L’Etranger: deux hommes (dont moi) et une femme” (Three people were used in the composition of L’Etranger: two men, including me, and a woman).


Of the various sources of statements by Camus on himself, his background, career, and work, including notebooks, prefaces, correspondence, interviews, and other public statements, the seven notebooks, published posthumously in three volumes called Carnets (of which the first two have been translated into English), are the richest, providing many observations on wide-ranging topics and affording great insight into the author and his literary works. (Camus’s working sketchbooks, or “carnets de notes,” for drafts of works in progress and other types of notebooks or loose sheets, mentioned occasionally in the Carnets, have not yet been published; nor, with the exception of a few pages, have facsimile manuscripts, which would likewise be revealing.) These notebooks are entirely different, however, from the records left by some of Camus’s contemporaries—notably the diaries, running to thousands of pages, of writers such as Andre Gide, Roger Martin du Gard, Marcel Jouhandeau, and Julien Green, and the memoirs of Simone de Beauvoir (which include some of her journal)—in all of which daily reports are common and extensive; remarks on acquaintances, rather gossipy in Gide’s case, play a major role; and minutiae often take over. In Camus’s notebooks, most of the entries are not dated at all; only a few bear indications of months, and even fewer record specific dates. He did not write entries on a regular basis; thus, they bear only an oblique relationship to the daily activities that often constitute the heart of a personal journal. Care should be taken, then, not to confuse Camus’s notebooks with the more intimate genre of the journal, although the notebooks eventually acquired some of the features of a journal, partly, he wrote, because he made entries in order to remedy his inadequate memory. Nor do they constitute an autobiography, since they lack the shaping, intention, and narrative structure that true autobiography displays.

The Carnets are, rather, a well-organized, neatly kept writer’s laboratory, workshop, or preparation room. They belong to the genre of personal papers in which the writer “practices and does his scales.” Such writers’ notebooks have been called “a sort of file-drawer kept with a work in mind.” This appreciation is, to be sure, the more accurate for being an ex post facto one: scholars who know Camus’s finished works are able to see their lineaments in the earlier notebook entries by reading backward. One of the most striking facts about the Carnets is that when Camus had a typescript made of the manuscript notebooks dating from 1935 through 1953, he made almost no corrections before they were typed, according to editors who have seen both versions.

Readers can thus enjoy these pages in their original state, and a mature state it is: as a young man, Camus had already censured the ephemeral, dull, and irrelevant from his thinking to concentrate on what was at the heart of his thought and would shortly find expression in his published works. Many pages reproduce passages, usually short, copied from the works of a wide range of other writers: Michel de Montaigne, Daniel Defoe, the Marquis de Sade, Francois-Rene de Chateaubriand, Soren Kierkegaard, Herman Melville, Leo Tolstoy, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jacques Maritain, Gide, and many others. Together, these quotations sketch one type of
what Philippe Lejeune has called an autobiocopie—a self-portrait through the selection and copying of excerpts from other authors, which, accumulated without commentary, suggest “I too am like this.” Like several predecessors in the French tradition—Montaigne, the due de La Rochefoucauld, Stendhal, Gide, and Paul Valery—Camus shows a particular predilection for maxims and generalizations, which he often quotes from the most eminent writers of Greece, France, and elsewhere. In this regard Lejeune notes that “between maxim and autobiography, there are obvious connections. The very excess of generalization seems to condense a painful and personal experience.”

Readers who already know Camus’s texts can recognize quotations that he used subsequently (such as one from Defoe that serves as the epigraph to La Peste) or can see adumbrated in his choice of citations lines of thought he pursued later and developed in his fiction and essays. It is also instructive to note which authors appear in the notebooks without being mentioned elsewhere—pretexts for reflection that had no connection with Camus’s creative work or which, more likely, were connected to it only obscurely.

Camus also published several prefaces to his own work, sometimes for later editions and collections. They are often a reply to journalistic or critical interpretations of the work in question, showing that he had read the comments and, in some cases, was vexed by them. The short preface, composed in 1955, to a textbook edition of L’Etranger is one of the best known. While it concerns the main character in the book, Meursault, it may be taken as revealing also something of the novelist himself.

**ROGER MARTIN DU GARD ON CAMUS**

“Camus—I don’t mean by his work, although still… !—but by his value as a human being, his moral quality, the elevation and logic of thought that does not stop growing, like a fine tree, is the figure in his generation who inspires the greatest hope! The one whom one can both admire and love.”

Roger Martin du Card


**LETTERS**

Unlike those of certain other twentieth-century French writers, such as Gide, Martin du Gard, Marcel Proust, and Jean-Paul Sartre, all tireless correspondents, most of Camus’s letters remain unpublished. Thus, it is difficult to assess how many he may have sent and how many are extant. They may number in the hundreds or thousands. According to Olivier Todd, Camus wrote thousands of notes and letters—one hundred a month in 1950, he said. He was able to carry on this level of correspondence despite being fully employed for most of his adult life and thus lacking in leisure time, unlike Gide, Proust, and Martin du Gard, all of whom had private incomes, and Sartre, who after 1943 lived on author’s royalties. (Camus, in contrast, feared being dependent upon his literary income and thus being obliged to write what he did not want to write.) Camus’s journalistic and theatrical endeavors also took up an enormous amount of time, year after year. Generally he was, by aesthetic choice or nature, less prolix than many of his fellow writers, including Sartre and Beauvoir, and he was a much more private man than Sartre and Gide, who had an urge toward public confession. Gide, in particular, used epistolary exchanges sometimes for that purpose. Correspondence was, however, one means by which Camus could express himself in a freer, more spontaneous, and more intimate manner than he did publicly.

The letters exchanged between Camus and Jean Grenier have been published in extenso. A listing of individual letters to other correspondents that were published before 1980 has been compiled by Raymond Gay-Crosier. This listing includes various letters printed in the critical sections of the two Gallimard collections of Camus’s dramas, fiction, essays, and journalism: Theatre, recits, nouvelles and Essais. Two of
the letters included in the Gallimard volumes, one to Roland Barthes on *La Peste* and another to “P. B.” (Pierre Berger), are translated in *Lyrical and Critical Essays* and *Lyrical and Critical*. Certain other letters are collected in Carnets III and two in *Le Premier Homme*.

Unpublished letters by Camus are in various hands and occasionally turn up in auction catalogues. His correspondence with the poet Rene Char may turn out to be the richest of all. There are also letters Camus exchanged with Gide, Andre Malraux, Michel Gallimard, and other writers and publishing figures in the Gallimard circle. Among more personal correspondence are letters from Camus to various women to whom he was close at different times of his life, from the 1930s through the 1950s. Chief among the owners of Camus’s letters are his children, Jean and Catherine Camus, who have many of their father’s papers in their possession and control them strictly; they also exercise control over all other autographs and other documents not yet made public. Consequently, there are currently no plans to include letters in a new edition of Camus’s works planned by Gallimard. Catherine Camus did, however, allow Todd in his 1996 biography to quote from any unpublished autographs by her father to which he could obtain access. In fact, Todd’s volume includes a large number of quotations from letters by Camus from various periods, making it an invaluable resource.

**INTERVIEWS AND SPEECHES**

From the mid 1940s through the late 1950s Camus gave several interviews and made other public statements on various topics. Some were on radio and television, such as the televised broadcast “Pourquoi je fais du theatre?” (Why Am I in Theater?) of 1959 and an interview, beamed to France, on NBC radio from New York in 1946. Texts of several interviews appear in the Essais; others appear in *Theatre, recits, nouvelles*. A few have been translated and collected in *Lyrical and Critical* and *Lyrical and Critical Essays*. Inevitably, whatever the point of departure and chief subject, Camus portrayed something of himself in these interviews. His tone was often defensive because his pride was easily wounded by distorted or hostile reviews and other comments on his work and his political role. As he noted in his *Carnets* after the publication of *L’Etranger*: “De la critique. Trois ans pour faire un livre, cinq lignes pour le ridiculiser’et les citations fausses” (*On Criticism*. Three years to write a book, five lines to ridicule it’and wrong quotations). This defensiveness was increasingly seen in the mid 1950s with the development of the Algerian conflict, when many journalists and others, including former friends, took potshots at Camus for his refusal to speak out or intervene in the way they wished him to do.

One of the topics on which interviewers were insatiable was that of religion. Out of hope, perhaps, many readers thought that Camus would convert to Christianity. Works such as *La Chute* and his adaptation of William Faulkner’s *Requiem for a Nun* brought grist to their mill. Camus was obliged more than once to make himself clear. Another topic constantly brought up from 1945 on was that of existentialism. In Chile, Camus was obliged to set straight a journalist who hailed him as “el numero 2 del ’Existencialismo’” (number 2 of existentialism); soon the journalist had to publish Camus’s disclaimer, “No soy ni sere existencialista” (I am not nor will I be an existentialist). In the last interview of his life, granted to an American interviewer, Robert Spector, Camus’s statement makes it clear that in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* he wished to criticize the conclusions, not the premises and the general sensibility, of the existentialist philosophers he examined. In his view, their leap of faith eliminated their very grounding’the absurd. (This interview is sometimes read as a final, defining statement, although it certainly was not intended as such.) As for the “godless theology” and “scholasticism” Camus mentioned, he clearly had in mind the existentialism of Sartre and Beauvoir and its justification of totalitarian practices (such as Stalinist purges, camps, and repression, as in the Soviet crackdown in Hungary), paradoxically undertaken in the name of human freedom. Elsewhere, Camus commented from time to time on the general topic of literature and its place in culture. Perhaps his most famous statement on the subject was the one he made in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, in which he apparently wished to clarify as much as possible his view of himself as an author first and foremost, that is, as
an artist—and thereby as a human being with ethical responsibility. Not surprisingly, Camus also commented on his works when pressed to do so.

RECORDING


EXCERPTS FROM TEXTS BY CAMUS ON HIMSELF AND HIS WRITING

**From the Carnets (January 1936):**

Prisoner of the cave, here I am alone in front of the world’s shadow. A January afternoon. But a chill remains in the heart of the air. Everywhere, a film of sunlight that would crack under a fingernail but that covers everything with an eternal smile. Who am I and what can I do—except enter into the play of foliage and light. To this sunbeam where my cigarette burns, this sweetness and this discreet passion which breathes in the air. If I try to reach myself, it’s in the depths of this light. And if I try to understand and savor this delicate flavor which gives up the secret of the world, it is myself that I find in the depths of the universe. Myself, that is to say this extreme emotion that delivers me from the scenery.15

**From the Carnets (second half of 1938):**

The true work of art is the one that says less. There is a certain relationship between the global experience of an artist, his thought + his life (his system, in a way leaving aside the systematic dimension that is implied in the word) and the work that reflects this experience. This relationship is bad when the work of art presents the entire experience surrounded by a fringe of literature. This relationship is good when the work of art is a portion cut from experience, a diamond facet where the inner brilliance is condensed without limiting itself. In the first case, there is overload and literature. In the second, a fertile work because of a whole implied experience whose richness can be guessed at.

The problem is to acquire this savoir-vivre [knowing how to live, experience], (to have lived, rather), which goes beyond savoir-vivre [knowing how to write]. And, in the end, the great artist is before all else someone who lives greatly (it being understood that to live, here, is also to reflect on life—it is even this subtle connection between experience and the consciousness that one has of it).16

**From a review of Sartre’s novel La Nausee (1938; translated as Nausea, 1949):**

A novel is never anything other than a philosophy expressed in images. And in a good novel, all the philosophy has gone into the images. But all it has to do is overflow the characters and the actions, and appear like a label on the work, for the plot to lose its authenticity and the novel its life.

Yet a lasting work cannot do without profound thought. And this secret fusion of experience and thought, of life and reflection on its meaning, is what makes the great novelist, as he appears, for instance in a book such as [Malraux’s] *La Condition humaine*.17

**From Le Mythe de Sisype (1942):**

Consciousness and revolt: these two ways of refusing are the contrary of renunciation. All that is irreducible and passionate in a human heart animates them with its life. Suicide is a misjudgment. The absurd man can only exhaust everything, and exhaust himself. The absurd is the most extreme tension, a tension that he maintains constantly by a solitary effort, for he knows that in this consciousness and this revolt from day to day.
day he bears witness to his only truth, which is defiance.  

From the Carnets, on L’Etranger (1942):  

It’s a very thought-out book and the tone … is deliberate. The tone rises four or five times, it’s true, but it is in order to avoid monotony and to give a sense of composition. With the chaplain, my Stranger doesn’t justify himself. He becomes angry; that’s quite different. So you say that it’s I who’s doing the explaining then? Yes, and I thought about that a great deal. I decided on it because I wanted my character to come to the only great problem by means of the daily and the natural. I had to mark that great moment. Notice on the other hand that there is no break in my character. In this chapter as in all the rest of the book, he limits himself to answering questions. Previously, it was the questions that the world asks every day; this time, it’s the chaplain’s questions. Thus I define my character negatively. 

In all that, naturally, it’s a question of artistic means and not of the end. The meaning of the book is found exactly in the parallelism of the two parts. Conclusion: society needs people who weep at their mother’s funeral; or else, one is never condemned for the crime that one supposes. Besides, I see ten more possible conclusions.¹⁹

From Carnets (early 1943):  

What bothers me in the exercise of thought or discipline necessary to any work, is imagination. I have an uncontrolled imagination, out of proportion, a bit monstrous. Hard to know the enormous role that it has played in my life. And yet I didn’t notice this personal peculiarity until I was thirty years old. 

Sometimes in the train or the bus, the hours drag out and I prevent myself from wandering off and playing with images, with constructions that seem sterile to me. Weary from having to straighten constantly the bent of my thought, of bringing it back toward what I need it to feed on, a moment comes when I let myself go—sink would be better: hours go by at lightning speed and I’ve arrived before I realize it.²⁰

From an interview with Jeanine Delpech in Les Nouvelles Littéraires (15 November 1945):  

’No, I am not an existentialist. Sartre and I are always surprised to see our two names associated. We are even thinking about publishing some day a little announcement in which the undersigned will affirm that they have nothing in common and will not be responsible for the debts that the other might contract, and reciprocally. Because this is a joke. Sartre and I published all our books [up to the present] before knowing each other. When we met, it was to recognize our differences. Sartre is an existentialist, and the sole book I have published dealing with ideas, Le Mythe de Sisyphe, was directed against philosophies called existentialist….

Sartre and I do not believe in God, it’s true. Neither do we believe in absolute rationalism. But then neither do Jules Romain, nor Malraux, Stendhal, Paul de Kock, the marquis de Sade, Andre Gide, Alexandre Dumas, Montaigne…²¹

From the Carnets, on visiting Lourmarin (September 1946):  

Lourmarin. The first evening after so many years. The first star … the enormous silence, the cypress whose top shivers in the depth of my fatigue. A solemn and austere countryside—despite its deeply moving beauty.”²²

From the Carnets, on his ill health:  

End of October 49. Relapse….
After having been sure of getting well for so long, this return should crush me. In fact it does. But following an uninterrupted series of depressions, it inclines me to laugh. Finally, I’ve been liberated. Lunacy also is a liberation.”

**JULES ROY ON CAMUS**

“[In love] his virtue was to boast of nothing. Whereas in his confrontations over political ethics, he could argue fiercely, in matters of love he wouldn’t answer. The only rival who ever took him on was Max-Pol Fouchet, in their early youth, in Algiers, when the ravishing creature [Simone Hie] with whom Max-Pol thought he was very cozy passed over, without his suspecting it, to the side of Camus.”

*Jules Roy*


**From the Carnets (1950):**

My work during these first two cycles [the absurd and revolt]: beings without false-hoods, thus not real. They are not in the world. That is why doubtless, and up to now, I am not a novelist in the usual sense. But rather an artist who creates myths to fit his passion and his anguish. That is why also the people by whom I was carried away in this world are always those who had the power and the exclusivity of myths.

**From the Carnets, on his vocation (early 1952):**

I move with the same step, it seems to me, as an artist and as a man. And this is not preconceived. It’s a sort of trust that I have, humbly, in my vocation…. My next books will not turn away from the problem of the hour. But I should like for them to submit the problem rather than be submitted to it. Put differently, I dream of a freer creation, with the same contents…. I will know then whether I am a true artist.

**From a 1955 letter to Roland Barthes in reply to Barthes’s criticism of *La Peste:***

1. *La Peste*, which I should like to have read on several levels, nevertheless has as obvious contents the struggle of European resistance against Nazism. The proof is that everyone, in all countries of Europe, has recognized this enemy that is not mentioned. Add to that the fact that a long section of *La Peste* was published under the Occupation in an underground anthology and that this circumstance alone would justify the transposition that I made. *La Peste*, in a way, is more than a chronicle of the Resistance; but it is surely not less.

2. Compared to *L’Étranger*, *La Peste* marks, without any possible disagreement, the passage from an attitude of solitary revolt to the recognition of a community whose struggles one must share. If there is evolution from *L’Étranger* to *La Peste*, it took place in the direction of solidarity of participation.

3. The theme of separation, whose importance in the book you note very well, is in this connection very revealing. Rambert, who incarnates this theme, gives up private life to join the collective fight. Parenthetically, one can observe that this character by himself shows how artificial is the opposition between a friend and a militant activist. For a virtue is common to both—that of active fraternity, which no historical action, finally, has ever been able to do without.

4. Furthermore, *La Peste* ends by the announcement and acceptance of struggles to come. It bears witness to “what had been necessary and what doubtless [men] would still have to accomplish against terror and its tireless weapon, despite their personal heartbreaks.”

I could develop my point of view still further. But already, if it seems possible to consider as inadequate the morality that one sees at work in *La Peste* (one must then say in the name of what
more complete set of ethics), and legitimate also to criticize its aesthetics (many of your observations are cleared up by the simple fact that I don’t believe in realism in art), it seems to me quite difficult, in contrast, to say about it, as you do in conclusion, that its author refuses solidarity with our present history.26

From the preface to *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*:

For me *The Myth of Sisyphus* marks the beginning of an idea which I was to pursue in *The Rebel*. It attempts to resolve the problem of suicide, as *The Rebel* attempts to resolve that of murder, in both cases without the aid of eternal values which, temporarily perhaps, are absent or distorted in contemporary Europe. The fundamental subject of *The Myth of Sisyphus* is thus: it is legitimate and necessary to wonder whether life has a meaning; therefore it is legitimate to meet the problem of suicide face to face. The answer, underlying and appearing through the paradoxes which cover it, is this: even if one does not believe in God, suicide is not legitimate. Written fifteen years ago, in 1940, amid the French and European disaster, this book declares that even within the limits of nihilism it is possible to find the means to proceed beyond nihilism. In all the books I have written since then, I have attempted to pursue this direction. Although *The Myth of Sisyphus* poses mortal problems, it sums itself up for me as a lucid invitation to live and to create, in the very midst of the desert.27

From the preface to a 1955 American textbook edition of *L’Etranger*:

One would thus not be greatly mistaken in seeing in *The Stranger* the story of a man who, without any heroic attitude, is willing to die for the truth. I have said on occasion, and paradoxically, that I tried to portray in my character the only Christ whom we deserve. It will be understood, after my explanation, that I said so without any blasphemous intention and only with the slightly ironic affection that an artist has the right to feel toward his created characters.28

From “Terrorisme et répression” (Terrorism and Repression), *L’Express*, 9 July 1955:

I am among those who, precisely, cannot resign themselves to seeing this great country [Algeria] be broken in half forever. Although a shortsighted politics has for a long time prevented it from becoming institutionalized, the Franco-Arab community already exists for me, as for many French Algerians. If I feel closer, for instance, to an Arab peasant, a Kabyl shepherd, than to a shopkeeper from our cities in the North, it is because an identical sky, a proud nature, the community of our destinies have been stronger, for many among us, than the natural barriers or artificial divisions maintained by colonization.29

Remarks on the dust jacket of the first edition of *La Chute*:

The man who speaks in *La Chute* engages in a calculated confession. A refugee in Amsterdam, in a city of canals and cold light, where he plays at being a hermit and a prophet, this former lawyer waits in a shady barroom for willing listeners.

His heart is modern; that is to say, he cannot bear to be judged. He hastens thus to judge himself, but it’s in order to be able better to judge others. He finally holds up to them the mirror in which he looks at himself.

Where does the confession begin, and where the accusation? Does the one who speaks in this book accuse himself or his time? Is it a particular case or contemporary man? One single truth in any case, in this carefully designed interplay of mirrors: pain, and what it promises.30

From an interview in *Le Monde* (31 August 1956):
Q. Does Faulkner’s belief, diffuse as it is, not conflict with your personal agnosticism?

A. I do not believe in God, it is true. But I am not for all that an atheist. I am even inclined to agree with Benjamin Constant in seeing in irreligion some-thing vulgar and … yes, worn-out.

Q. Should one see there the sign of a certain evolution in your thought, and might this interest in Faulkner not foreshadow an eventual embracing of the spirit, if not the dogma, of the Church? Certain readers of The Fall have certainly hoped so.

A. Nothing authorizes them to do so. Didn’t my judge-penitent say that he was a Sicilian and a Javanese? Not a penny’s worth of Christianity. Like him I have a great deal of friendship for the first of these figures. I admire the way he [Christ] lived and died. My lack of imagination forbids me to follow farther. That is, by the way, my sole common point with Jean-Baptiste Clamence, with whom people insist upon identifying me.31

From remarks on the dust jacket of the first edition of L’Exil et le royaume:

Before becoming a long narrative, La Chute was part of L’Exil et le royaume. This collection comprises six stories…. A single theme, however, exile, is treated [here] in six different ways, from interior monologue to realist narrative. The six stories were written one after the other, although they were then taken up again and reworked separately.

As for the kingdom that is at issue here also, in the title, it coincides with a certain life, free and bare, which we have to find again, to be reborn

finally. Exile, in its way, shows us the way to that kingdom, on the sole condition that in it we know how to refuse both servitude and possession.32

From the foreword to Requiem pour une nonne, Camus’s adaptation of Faulkner’s Requiem for a Nun:

After having read this Requiem I was even sure that Faulkner had solved, in his way and without having thought about it, a very difficult problem: that of diction in modern tragedy. How can one make characters in business suits speak a language at once ordinary enough to be spoken in an apartment house and striking enough to remain at the level of a tragic destiny? Well, Faulkner’s style, with its jerky breathing, its interrupted sentences, taken up again and drawn out by repetitions, its interrupting elements, its parentheses and its cascades of subordinate clauses, furnishes us a modern equivalent, not at all artificial, of a tragic speech. It is a breathless style, from the very breathlessness of suffering. A spiral, interminably unwound, of words and phrases leads the speaker to the abysses of suffering buried in the past….33

From the Carnets (October and December [?] 1957):


19 October. Frightened by what is happening to me and which I didn’t ask for. And to make things worse, attacks so low that it makes me ill. [Lucien] Rebatet dares speak of my nostalgia for commanding firing squads, whereas he is one of those for whom I, along with other Resistance writers, asked for pardon when he was condemned to death. He was pardoned, but he doesn’t pardon me. Again, the desire to leave this country. But for where? …

The effort that I have made, tirelessly, to join others in common values, to establish my own equilibrium, is not entirely vain. What I have said or found may be useful, must be useful to others. But not to me, given over
now to a sort of insanity.  

**From a statement to Franc-Tireur on winning the 1957 Nobel Prize in literature:**

I find that I am a little too young. Personally, I would have voted for Malraux. I am simply grateful to the Nobel Committee for having wished to single out a French Algerian writer. I have never written anything which is not connected, closely or more loosely, to the land where I was born. It is to that land and its misfortunes that all my thoughts go.  

**From the Nobel Prize speech:**

Personally, I cannot live without my art. But I have never placed this art above everything else. If it is necessary to me, indeed, it is because it is not separate from anyone and allows me to live, such as I am, on everyone’s level. Art is not in my view a solitary enjoyment. It is a means of moving the greatest number of people by offering them a privileged picture of common sufferings and joys. It thus obliges the artist not to become isolated; it submits him to the most humble and most universal truth. And the one who, often, has chosen his destiny as an artist because he feels himself as different soon learns that he will not feed his art, and his difference, except by admitting his resemblance to all. The artist forges himself in this perpetual back-and-forth between himself and others, halfway between beauty, which he cannot do without, and the community from which he cannot tear himself away. That is why genuine artists scorn nothing; they force themselves to understand rather than to judge. And if they have a position to take up in this world, it can be only that supporting a society in which, according to Nietzsche’s great word, the judge will no longer reign, but rather the creator, whether he is a worker or an intellectual.

The writer’s role, at the same time, cannot always be separated from difficult duties. By definition, he cannot place himself at the service of those who make history: he is at the service of those who submit to it. Or, otherwise, he will be alone and deprived of his art. All the armies of tyranny, with their millions of men, will not remove him from solitude, even and especially if he consents to walk with them. But the silence of an unknown prisoner, abandoned to humiliation on the other side of the world, suffices to draw the writer out of his exile, each time, at least, that he succeeds, by means of the privileges of freedom, in not forgetting that silence and in making it resound through the means of art.

**From the preface (December 1957) to Caligula and Three Other Plays:**

*Caligula* was composed in 1938, after a reading of the Twelve Caesars of Suetonius. I wrote the play for the small theater that I had organized in Algiers and my intention, very simply, was to play myself the role of Caligula. Novice actors often are ingenuous that way. And then I was twenty-five years old, the age where one doubts everything, except oneself. The war forced me into modesty, and *Caligula* was finally produced in 1946 … in Paris.

*Caligula* is thus an actor’s play, a director’s play. But it is inspired, of course, by my concerns at that time. One more word. Some people were incensed by my play, who nevertheless find it natural that Oedipus should kill his father and marry his mother and who allow a *menage a trois*, at least in prosperous neighborhoods. I have little regard, however, for the kind of art that chooses to shock, for lack of being able to convince. And if I found myself, unfortunately, to be scandalous, it would be only because of that exaggerated love of truth that an artist cannot repudiate without giving up his very art.

*Le Malentendu* was written in 1941 [in fact, 1942-1943], in occupied France. I was then living, against my will, in the mountains of central France. This historical and geographic situation would suffice to explain the sort of claustrophobia from which I was suffering then and which is reflected in this play. It’s hard to breathe
in the play, that’s a fact. But none of us could breathe freely then. The fact remains that the darkness of the play bothers me as much as it bothered the audiences. To encourage people to approach the play, I will suggest that readers (1) acknowledge that the morality of the play is not entirely negative; (2) consider Le Malentendu as an attempt to create a modern tragedy.\textsuperscript{37}

**BEAUVIOR ON FIRST MEETING CAMUS**

“At the dress rehearsal for The Flies, Sartre had found Camus pleasant. It was at the Flore [cafe] that I met him, with Sartre, for the first time…. Circumstances led us to break the ice very quickly…. He had just arrived in Paris; he was married, but his wife had remained in North Africa; he was a few years younger than I. His youth, his independence brought him close to us…. Like us, Camus had moved from individualism to commitment; we knew that, without his ever alluding to it, he had important responsibilities within the Combat movement…. He accepted success hungrily, without hiding it; a blase air would have been less natural … but he didn’t seem to take himself seriously. He was simple and cheery. His good humor didn’t disdain facile jokes: the waiter named Pascal, he called Descartes.”

*Simone de Beauvoir*


**On drama in general, from the preface to Caligula and Three Other Plays:**

Although I love the theater passionately, I have the misfortune to like only one kind of play, whether comic or tragic. After a rather lengthy experience as director, actor, and dramatist, it seems to me that there is no real theater without language and style, nor any dramatic work that, like our classical drama and the Greek tragedies, does not bring into play the whole of human destiny, in its simplicity and its grandeur. Without claiming to equal them, one must set them up as models, at least. Psychology, ingenious anecdotes, and tantalizing situations leave me indifferent as an author, even if they may amuse me as a spectator. I recognize that this attitude is open to discussion. But it seems preferable to present myself, on this topic, as I am.\textsuperscript{38}

**From the preface to the 1958 reprinting of L’Envers et l’endroit:**

There is in me, I must repeat, artistic opposition, as other people have moral and religious scruples. Taboos, the idea that “that is not done,” which are rather foreign to me as a son of free nature, are present to me in so far as I am a slave, and an admiring slave, of a severe artistic tradition. Perhaps this suspicion is directed toward my anarchy, and thus remains useful. I am aware of my own disorder, the violence of certain instincts of mine, the graceless abandon into which I can throw myself. To be constructed, the work of art must draw first of all on these obscure powers in the soul. But not without channeling them, surrounding them by levees, so that their level will rise, and rise well. My dikes today are, perhaps, too high. Whence this stiffness sometimes…. Very simply, the day when a balance will be struck between what I am and what I say, that day perhaps—and I hardly dare say so—I will be able to build the work I dream of.\textsuperscript{39}

**From an interview with Robert Spector (20 December 1959):**

I don’t speak for anyone: I have too much to do just to find my own language. I don’t guide anyone: I don’t know, or I don’t know very well, where I’m going. I don’t live on a tripod [like a god]; I walk with the same step as everyone, in the streets of my time.

I ask the same questions as other men of my generation, that’s all, and it is quite natural that they should find them in my books, if they read them. But a mirror informs, it does not teach….
Existentialism for us [in France] ends up in a godless theology and a scholasticism that inevitably justified inquisitorial regimes.

If the premises of existentialism are found, as I believe, in Pascal, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, or Shestov, then I am in agreement with them. If its conclusions are those of our existentialists, I am not in agreement, for they are contradictory in relation to the premises. …

NOTES


2. Ibid., p. 181.


10. Catherine Camus has generally placed tight restrictions on scholars who wish to quote from her father’s correspondence, permitting, for instance, one writer to quote from certain letters only in a private, noncirculating version of a thesis.


16. Ibid., p. 127.


18. Camus, Essais, p. 139.

19. Camus, Carnets, janvier 1942 - mars 1951, pp. 29-30. The ellipsis and italics are Camus’s.

20. Ibid., pp. 77-78.


23. Ibid., p. 283.

24. Ibid., p. 325.

25. Ibid., p. 47.


31. Ibid., p. 1872. The mention of “Sicilian” and “Javanese” refers to La Chute, see p. 1496.

32. Ibid., p. 2030.

33. Ibid., p. 1859.


35. Camus, Essais, p. 1892.

36. Ibid., pp. 1071-1072.

37. Camus, Théâtre, récits, nouvelles, pp. 1727-1729.

38. Ibid., pp. 1731-1732.


40. Ibid., pp. 1925-1927.
Camus, Albert: Camus as Studied

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CAMUS AS STUDIED BEFORE 1980

Camus’s international image and worldwide fame spring chiefly, it would appear, from two sources. One is found in Camus the man, as documented by contemporary witnesses and photographs and made known in the facts of his biography, especially his ironic death in an automobile wreck, by which he seemed to be both prince and victim of the absurd that he made central to his early works. The early, needless death of a figure with such great literary talent and thirst for life seems to illustrate the meaninglessness of human life in a century that began under the shadow of Friedrich Nietzsche’s nihilism and went on to include the extermination, through wars and political persecutions, of millions of human beings. The photogenic, trench coat-clad figure of Camus, with his slightly asymmetrical, ironic smile and resemblance to Humphrey Bogart, remains for many readers indelibly associated with what they know of intellectual life in Paris from the end of World War II until 1960. Those who are familiar with both the man and his work see, or imagine they see, the personality of Meursault from L’Etranger coming through the photographs of Camus, and even more, the figure of Jean-Baptiste Clamence, the ironic narrator of La Chute, both penitent and judge. Many also think of Camus as the mid-twentieth-century existentialist par excellence, despite his disclaimers and the real differences that separated him from such figures as Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir.

The other source of Camus’s continued fame is the appeal of his fiction, both those works published during his lifetime and the two posthumously published novels. In America, La Peste, or, rather, The Plague, in Stuart Gilbert’s translation, first made his name widely known, although L’Etranger had been translated earlier as The Stranger.\(^1\) School editions and other inexpensive printings of works by Camus in French and English have sold well for decades. In England and America many critical guides and handbooks on his fiction, directed toward students and general readers, have been published. (Curiously during Camus’s lifetime permission was not granted for reprinting L’Etranger in inexpensive editions; the author wanted his novel to remain exclusively in Gallimard’s Collection Blanche, the publisher’s designation for its literary publications.) L’Etranger and The Stranger are still frequent choices for French courses and general literature classes, as are La Chute and The Fall.\(^2\) With the exception of Caligula, Camus’s drama is now much less frequently discussed, although shortly after the mid twentieth century Le Malentendu appeared in a popular American classroom anthology.\(^3\)

The study of works by Camus, whether in the original or in translation, became widespread at the university level in Anglophone countries before it was common in France. Until the reform of the French university and lycee (secondary school) system, starting in the late 1960s, it was not standard practice to include in university curricula the works of contemporary authors or philosophers; nor were university theses normally written on living writers. But Camus was represented in manuals intended for lycee students: for instance, seventeen pages are devoted to him in the well-known Lagarde and Michard volume of 1962, which is an anthology of excerpts, supplemented by information on the authors.\(^4\) By 1970 there was a French textbook introducing students to Camus’s philosophy, attacking it as an imitation of that of Rene Descartes and generally denigrating the author and his work.\(^5\)
The inclusion of Camus’s work in English-language volumes from the mid twentieth century on, until college anthologies decreased greatly in popularity, is revealing in more than one way. Although emphases vary, in world-literature anthologies he is usually seen in a modernist light, as in The Modern Tradition: Backgrounds of Modern Art (1965). In an English-language college anthology titled World Masterpieces (1965), the editors include Camus in a chapter titled “Masterpieces of Symbolism and the Modern School,” along with nineteenth-century poets such as Charles Baudelaire and a wide range of twentieth-century authors, including T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Andre Gide, Franz Kafka, Marcel Proust, D. H. Lawrence, and William Faulkner. Whether the term symbolism in the first part of the title is to be taken as applying also to the remainder of the selections is, presumably, for the reader to decide. The decision to represent Camus’s work by “The Renegade” (the translation of “Le Renégat”), called “the most savage and the most impressive” of his short stories, suggests that the editors certainly saw him as a writer of symbols. An American school edition of L’Exil et le royaume published during the same period omitted “Le Renégat,” which was viewed as “more difficult to follow” and presenting “difficulties for classroom handling.”

Prudery showed itself at approximately the same time in the American school edition of L’Étranger, in which the editors omitted “four phrases … which might prove embarrassing in classroom reading.” A French literature anthology of the 1960s, bearing the imprimatur of Richard Cardinal Cushing, Archbishop of Boston, includes no fiction by Camus—all of it having been deemed unsuitable, perhaps, for young Roman Catholic minds—but does include the essay “Le Minotaure ou la halte d’Oran.” In another anthology put together by the same editor, without imprimatur, the story “L’Hôte” is included.

Indeed, the most common choice of a Camus text in the original French during the late 1950s and early 1960s was “L’Hôte,” used widely in readers directed toward intermediate students of French and in introductory literary anthologies. The excellent crafting, presentation of situation and character, and ending of the story—both expected and surprising—illustrated Camus’s narrative skill, and the theme of the Algerian rebellion seemed timely. Examination of dozens of classroom readers and anthologies in French dating from the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s shows that selections from Camus appear in more than twenty-five and that “L’Hôte” is the choice in eight of these, including a major anthology for advanced students of French. Selections in other textbooks include the short stories “Les Muets,” “Jonas,” and “La Pierre qui pousse”; excerpts from La Peste, La Chute, and Le Mythe de Sisyphe; and extracts from other works, the Carnets among them. For surveys of French literature since 1800, one widely used anthology included in its revised edition of 1965 Camus’s lecture “L’Artiste et son temps.” The short story “La Femme adultère” was also a frequent choice used, for instance, in Germaine Brèe’s selection of readings for advanced students. Brèe and a collaborator also included Caligula in an anthology of drama for advanced classes. One concludes that Camus’s fiction, especially the short fiction, was deemed eminently teachable at almost all levels for students of French and world literature.

CAMUS AS STUDIED AFTER 1980

As Camus has become more of an historical figure rather than a contemporary one, and as the scholarship on him has multiplied, the study of his works has inevitably become more closely connected to this growing body of criticism, just as happens with other deceased authors. It is nearly impossible for new readers to progress very far in studying Camus without encountering critical judgments in prefaces, notes, articles, and books, all of which necessarily shape the reader’s approach. Moreover, young readers who are currently discovering him cannot help seeing his works in an entirely different light from earlier readers because of their different historical and cultural context. While Camus can be viewed as a writer for all times, he was first of all a voice of particular moments and places that gave their coloring to his writings (even those most shaped by aesthetic concerns) and shout from the pages of his journalism.

“FAMISHED PASSION”
“When we all went out together, drinking, talking, laughing late into the night, he was funny, cynical, a bit of a rascal, and quite bawdy in his speech. He would confess his emotions, he would yield to his impulses; he could sit down in the snow on a curb at two o’clock in the morning and discourse with pathos on love…. I liked the ‘famished passion’ with which he devoted himself to life and his pleasures, and his very great courtesy…. Nevertheless, at the newspaper [Combat] people accused him of being arrogant and curt. In serious discussions, he would clam up, become stiff; to arguments, he would oppose noble phrases, elevated sentiments, righteous anger turned smugly toward others. With his pen in hand, he became an inflexible moralist in whom I recognized nothing of our joyous companion of the evening.”

Simone de Beauvoir


In the United States the use of literary primers or readers in intermediate French classes has declined, giving way to nonfiction selections. The use of anthologies for more advanced classes, in either French or world literature, and of classroom editions has similarly declined. Thus, it is difficult to assess which of Camus’s texts have been preferred after 1980 for classroom use beyond L’Etranger, which remains quite popular as both a reader for French classes and a text for general literature courses at the undergraduate level. There appears to be a tendency to leave Camus behind in classes directed toward contemporary literature: he is now far from contemporary, and some editors may have deemed that his work has lost its vitality and applicability.

In 1991 the eminent scholar and critic Antoine Compagnon lamented what he called the “diminishing canon” of French literary studies in the United States, noting that many scholars had turned their attention away from literary works in the traditional sense in favor of various theoretical and critical texts, particularly those concerning feminism, which “defines French literature in America today.” Even among those scholars who remain ostensibly faithful to the traditional ideas of literature as opposed to “texts” or other products (such as advertising, comic strips, and so forth), fewer and fewer authors have received their attention; they have concentrated on either the newest literary products of the 1980s and 1990s or on a few earlier favorites, chiefly Marguerite Duras, Monique Wittig, and sometimes Proust.16 The scholars and teachers Compagnon has in mind have dragged their students behind them; he identifies this process as a domino effect, for “the students are wary of taking up abandoned authors.” Compagnon acknowledges that while Camus is “sometimes treated out of nostalgia,” his presence in the canon has decreased drastically. This applies to French studies at the postgraduate level as well as lower levels. For instance, at a major state university that has long offered the M.A. and Ph.D. in French, Camus is not taught at all now on the graduate level, nor is his name found on any reading list. This case, which is not exceptional, should be contrasted with the situation in 1983: according to a report from American graduate schools in that year, La Peste was on the required reading lists of 46.7 percent of M.A. programs in French and on the required reading lists of 53.8 of the French Ph.D. programs.17 In a massive and influential history of French literature edited by a prominent critic and published in 1989, Camus receives quite cursory treatment: three paragraphs on his writings, one on his role in Resistance journalism, and two on his differences with Sartre.18

The writings of Camus may seem out of date especially because of their fidelity to aesthetic values. A good style—whether probing, clipped, lyrical, expansive, or even racy—has long been honored in France as the mark of a fine writer and an enduring work, but the ability to recognize good style and the appreciation of it have been eclipsed by other preoccupations. Similarly, Camus’s concern with the individual, and what appears to some as his wrongheaded cultural politics, including Eurocentrism and an unreconstructed colonialism, have made him unfashionable. Indeed, although Camus was an early, eloquent, and sincere critic of certain administrative and economic policies in Algeria that left hundreds of thousands of native Algerians living in extreme misery, standard books on colonialism and postcolonial criticism and theory do not mention him.
Camus is still cited often in connection with later developments in French literature, as a precursor of the theater of protest; the nouveau roman, or “New Novel”; and absurdist literature. Readers of the nouveaux romans that began appearing in the mid 1950s and dominated the literary horizon in the years immediately following Camus’s death did not fail to notice that the fictional aesthetics adopted by some of the New Novelists, particularly Alain Robbe-Grillet, had a great deal in common with features of Camus’s writing in L’Etranger. Chief among these features were the plain, declarative prose and reliance on observation (as opposed to explanation) in the novel; the plot, made up of indifferent, meaningless, and apparently random actions; and the taciturn, antisocial hero. As one critic notes, “Even a writer as essentially conventional as Camus provided a source of inspiration for the ‘floating’ characters of more radical novelists by allowing Meursault’s fairly intelligible personality, in L’Etranger, to be partly subverted by a liberating superficiality of motive.” Paradoxically, at the same time Robbe-Grillet apparently profited from Camus’s example, he attacked in critical articles three concepts that were central to Camus’s thinking: nature, humanism, and tragedy. Camus’s influence on fictional modes has endured well beyond the 1950s and 1960s. Roy C. Caldwell cites him as one of the figures often mentioned in the French press as influencing the novelist Jean-Philippe Tous-saint, a recent darling of French fiction.

**OTHER AUTHORS FREQUENTLY STUDIED WITH CAMUS**

Notwithstanding Camus’s own disclaimers concerning existentialism, as well as the carefully shaded distinctions made by critics between his work and that of the mid-twentieth-century French existentialists, Camus has long been studied in connection primarily with Sartre and, to a lesser degree, Beauvoir, especially as feminist criticism has brought her work more into the public eye. The connections among those three fashionable writers, which were established in 1943 and the years immediately following and which flourished for a half-dozen years, are part of the common popular image of the period and of existentialism—as a cultural phenomenon in Paris as much as a philosophic position. Another author mentioned frequently in connection with these three is Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a philosopher of the phenomenologist school and for years a friend of Sartre and Beauvoir. Like Camus, Merleau-Ponty ultimately denounced both Soviet practice and theory and adopted positions that Sartre and Beauvoir saw as bourgeois and pro-Western.

Sartre and Camus in particular appear to form an historical pair, their friendship and certain similarities between them overshadowing their differences, which have been called one of the great debates of postwar French culture. The pedagogical and critical pairing persists, somewhat like that of Gide and Proust for earlier decades of the twentieth century, despite the enormous differences between those two modernists. Similarly, for many students of French literature, the names of Honore de Balzac and Gustave Flaubert are linked together in nineteenth-century literary history, as are Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau one hundred years or so before—again, despite great aesthetic and philosophic differences in each case.

Such pairings of authors are understandable if somewhat crude, intellectually speaking, and they are particularly to be expected on the part of those approaching French literature from the outside, whether in the classroom or on their own. In the case of Camus and Sartre, the pairing is justifiable to some degree and is useful as a first approach to reading, but one must eventually confront the necessity of drawing important distinctions. There are many overlapping areas in their careers and personalities, beyond their acquaintance and joint participation in certain enterprises. (Camus contributed articles to Sartre’s journal Les Temps Modernes; Sartre wrote for Combat while Camus was the editor; Camus was the first choice to play Garcin in Sartre’s play Huis clos; and the two often signed the same political petitions.) Each had personal charm, early and ultimately enormous success, and interest in theater; each rejected many of the assumptions of earlier fiction and owed a debt to American novelists; and each was politically active, though ultimately in different directions.
Pairing does not mean identity, however. The well-advised reader will keep in mind the historic dispute between Camus and Sartre concerning *L’Homme révolté*, as well as the breakup of their friendship, in order to offset the misapprehensions of their earliest commentators and the subsequent echoes of these distorted views. Readers should understand that, while Camus’s literary and philosophic works belong in the vein of existential writing, he did not embrace Sartre’s brand of existentialism, nor did he set out to illustrate and publicize it. Sartre, for his part, did not like *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*.25

Nor were Camus’s and Sartre’s backgrounds really the same, as Camus took pains to point out on occasion. Camus was a Mediterranean man, spiritually wedded to the sea and to the cultural traditions that he associated with it—especially Greek culture, including Neoplatonic thought. To the degree that Christianity was familiar to him, it was in the form of Catholicism, especially that of St. Augustine. Sartre, in contrast, was a man of northern France; his mother’s family, from Alsace, was Protestant. Camus came from the most modest of homes, poverty-stricken by most standards, and comfortable only in comparison to the conditions in which the Arab and Berber populations lived in Algeria. Sartre belonged to the bourgeoisie; the households of both his grandparents and his mother and stepfather were comfortable. Sartre was never seriously ill as a young man, and physical disturbances at the height of his career were caused primarily by his abuse of stimulants. He appeared to view death abstractly, whereas for Camus it had been and remained a serious personal threat. Camus married twice and had children; Sartre never married. Camus bought a property in the south of France as a vacation home and a site for working; Sartre lived in hotel rooms for most of his life.

Reading the texts of Camus and Sartre against one another and comparing the authors’ positions is a possible strategy. Thus, Camus’s concision of style and narrative illustrated in *L’Etranger* and *La Chute* can be contrasted with Sartre’s prolixity and much more complex and extensive (though not more artistic) narratives in his series *Les Chemins de la liberté* (The Roads to Freedom, 1945-1949). The value given by Camus to the absurd—as the condition that must be acknowledged and maintained by human beings—is quite different from Sartre’s ultimate shrugging off of “absurdity” as merely a fact and a point of departure from which men must go on to remake society. Camus’s love of nature and the importance given in his work to its major elements as he knew them in Algeria’s sea, sun, sky, sand, and stones can be contrasted with Sartre’s rejection of “nature” as anything but a set of human concepts, and his own personal dislike of vegetation and the countryside. (He did not even like to eat raw vegetables.) The individualism of *L’Etranger*, *Caligula*, and *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* stands in opposition to Sartre’s rejection of individualism as an unjustified bourgeois and idealistic position that must be replaced by a Marxist understanding of groups. The moral hesitations in *Les Justes* can be contrasted with the intransigence of Hugo in Sartre’s play *Les Mains sales* (1948; translated as *Dirty Hands*, 1949). Camus’s strongly worded rejection of Stalinism and its abuses must be contrasted with Sartre’s ultimate preference for the Soviet Union (despite quarrels with the French Communist Party from time to time). A useful comparison can be made if one reads *La Peste* first from the sympathetic perspective of the one who wrote it and then from the point of view of Sartre’s rigid and anti-individualistic socialist moralism. The most trenchant distinction between the two authors is, ultimately, one that arose in specific political circumstances. Sartre’s attacks on Camus for not intervening on the side of the rebels in the Algerian war and thus for playing the conservatives’ game revealed the deep political differences between them and the impossibility, finally, of assimilating the work and positions of one with the other.

While Beauvoir and Camus appear to be mentioned and read side-by-side less frequently, the contrasts between them call for comment. In most of her novels—*L’Invitée* (1943; translated as *She Came to Stay*, 1949), *Le Sang des autres* (1945; translated as *The Blood of Others*, 1948), *Les Mandarins* (1954; translated as *The Mandarins*, 1956), *Les Belles Images* (1966; translated, 1968), and *La Femme rompue* (1967; translated as *The Woman Destroyed*, 1969)—Beauvoir was concerned either partly or mostly with the feminine condition. It was also a major topic in all four volumes of her memoirs and her study *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949; translated as *The Second Sex*, 1953). Camus never put the condition of women at the center of his writing, although it would be false to assert that women were not a concern. To recent feminist critics, as to Beauvoir herself, Camus was an illustration of machismo—an ethos of male domination by which woman
was always the other, object rather than subject, and often marginalized. Moreover, he did not attempt to define a general ethical position, as Beauvoir did in *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté* (1947; translated as *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 1948). Camus’s political positions stood in contrast to hers, as they did to Sartre’s.

Camus’s fiction and lyrical essays can also be usefully studied along with some of the works of Gide. Both writers had lung disease, and both used North Africa (which Gide visited on many occasions) as the setting for major works, including lyrical writings—Camus’s *Noces* and Gide’s *Les Nourritures terrestres*—praising the natural beauty of North Africa and meditating on death at some of the loveliest sites in this region. Both authors examined the relationship between ethics and individual development in connection with the high value they placed on personal experience and the goal of increasing it and its meaning to the highest possible degree. There is also considerable similarity between the form of Camus’s short narrative works and Gide’s *recits* (short narratives), such as *L’Immoraliaste* (1902; translated as *The Immoralist*, 1930) and *La Symphonie pastorale* (1918; translated as *The Pastoral Symphony*, 1931). It is noteworthy that Gide and Camus both had recourse to Greek myth in their writings, as did Sartre and Beauvoir, as well as several other well-known French authors of the twentieth century, particularly in drama. These included Jean Anouilh, Jean Giraudoux, and Jean Cocteau, whose plays are sometimes studied along with those of Camus for their use of Greek myth and for chronological reasons.

Another French author whose work is appropriately examined with that of Camus is Andre Malraux. Great differences separate them, including Malraux’s concern for transcendence, in contrast to Camus’s insistence upon immanence. But both, as agnostic humanists, appear as heirs of Nietzsche’s nihilism and the “death of God” that he announced; both were drawn into supporting communism for a few years before turning against its tyranny; and each devised a humanism of fraternity, illustrated in *La Peste* and in Malraux’s novels *La Condition humaine* and *L’Espoir* (1937; translated as *Man’s Hope*, 1938). Among earlier French authors, Camus can usefully be paired with Voltaire (1694-1778). Both were deeply involved in issues of their time and used the genres of fiction, essay, and drama to convey their views, either directly or subtly. Sartre compared *L’Étranger* to Voltaire’s philosophical tales, such as *Zadig* (1747) and *Candide*, because of the philosophic principles in fictional form. Some of their views are close, moreover—dislike of fanaticism, insistence on moderation, and suspicion of authority—and Camus can rightly be considered a modern philosophe.

**JUDGING BEAUVOIR JUDGING CAMUS**

“With respect to her own mother, whom she describes to us as imperious, conformist, and a victim of the bourgeoisie who defended angrily and awkwardly her values and her morality, Mme de Beauvoir felt hardly anything but the feelings of a rival for her father’s love and rebelliousness. She tried only to escape from her; whereas the devotion of Camus for an old woman [his mother] who wasn’t able to read his letters turned into a cult…. One can wonder nevertheless why, in transcribing them, she [Beauvoir] distorts most of the words of a man who annoyed her because his heart wasn’t [dry] enough. Why does the author of *La Force des choses* judge so harshly a mind which sought truth passionately…? Why does she accuse of deception a writer who wore himself out trying to find a solution… ? … From where does this great exemplum of civic virtue draw the lightning bolts with which she crushes Camus?”

*Jules Roy*


Camus is also studied, especially in advanced courses on French or other Francophone literature, with the authors of the Ecole d’Alger (School of Algiers), also called the Ecole nord-africaine—writers from Algeria (or, in a few cases, Tunisia) who gathered in Paris in 1945 and afterward, as well as some younger authors subsequently grouped with them. These writers were associated with the publisher Edmond Chariot, who
published Camus’s first two essay collections. The Ecole d’Alger included Jules Roy, Emmanuel Robles, Jean Amrouche, Gabriel Audisio, Armand Guibert, Claude de Freminville, René-Jean Clot, and, later, Jean Pèlègré. Even though Camus did not play the role of leader, he was the acknowledged model and inspiration for these writers. Roy spoke later of “the importance, the immensity of the role that Camus would play in literature and even more in the destiny of us who were born in Algeria.” As one important part of Francophone literature, incorporating elements from both before and after 1962, when Algeria won its independence, the Ecole d’Alger has been examined increasingly in recent years. The school has been considered both from a sympathetic point of view, as a peripheral but important part of French literature, and from the hostile viewpoint of postcolonial theory, which considers the cultural products originating in colonies or former colonies but created by those of European descent to be offensive, inauthentic, and exploitative. (All of the authors in the group except for Amrouche were of European descent.)

In classroom discussions, textbooks, and critical surveys of many sorts, Camus is often treated in connection with authors from other countries, particularly those whose work is seen as existential or inspired by protest. With Herman Melville in particular parallels are often drawn, to which Camus himself contributed by writing an essay on Melville and praising him in Le Mythe de Sisyphe and elsewhere, calling him a great philosophical novelist in the company of Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Proust, and Faulkner. Various themes and figures appear in the works of Melville and Camus: the figure of the stranger, the Christ figure, and the themes of alienation and the absurd. Likewise, whether they antedate or postdate Camus, the works of major American novelists of the twentieth century, including Ernest Hemingway, Saul Bellow, and Walker Percy, present several points of contact with those of Camus, and he is often treated with them. He has been read along with a group of British authors who came to prominence in the 1950s called the “angry young men,” which included John Osborne, Kingsley Amis, John Wain, and Alan Sillitoe, because these writers’ discontent with society and its institutions seems foreshadowed by the attitude of Meursault and the critique of the system of justice in L’Etranger. Similarly, Camus has been read along with novelists of the Beat Generation in America such as Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs, because their anarchic, nihilistic spirit and amoral accumulation of experience can usefully be compared and contrasted with views explored in Le Mythe de Sisyphe and with Meursault’s character.

In South America, Camus’s writings, particularly L’Homme révolté, have been reread in the past decades in connection with the works of the Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa (1936–), whose interest in French literature led him to consider, at one time or another, four French authors as his masters—Victor Hugo, Flaubert, Sartre, and Camus—and to write on the last three. For some years, as an unswerving believer in Marxist revolution, Vargas Llosa was under the sway of Sartre’s thought and took his side, after the fact, in his dispute with Camus, accusing the latter of a “purely rhetorical” doctrine. Vargas Llosa was persuaded that violence, which Camus had identified as endemic to socialist dictatorships such as that of the Soviet Union, and to any other programmed society, would disappear when Communist states matured, and that Camus’s analysis of revolution was entirely wrong: “It is enough to read The Rebel to realize that [Camus’s] thought is vague and superficial: banalities and empty formulas abound, problems always lead into the same blind alleys which he paces interminably like a prisoner in his tiny cell,” he wrote in the 1960s. By 1975 Vargas Llosa had repudiated his earlier denunciations, saying, “On my own, after a number of lapses, I came to exactly the same conclusions as Camus.” He then embraced what he called Camus’s “reformismo libertario” (anarchistic reformism). Vargas Llosa’s writings are marked by some of the same warnings concerning history and ideology that appear directly or indirectly in such works as L’Homme révolté, Les Justes, and “Le Rénégat”; by the themes of civilization and barbarity that inform much of Camus’s writing; and sometimes by an irony not unlike Camus’s. Among the authors most frequently, and justifiably, studied with Camus is Dostoyevsky, with whose work Camus became familiar in the 1930s. In 1938 he helped the Théâtre de l’Equipe stage his dramatic adaptation of The Brothers Karamazov in Algiers. In 1959 Camus adapted Dostoyevsky’s The Possessed for the theater and directed the production himself in Paris. Moreover, he discussed Dostoyevsky and quoted from his work.
on more than one occasion, notably in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, in which Ivan Karamazov, the Grand Inquisitor, and Stavrogin are examined and Kirilov, the protagonist in *The Possessed*, is given as an example of the absurd man, illustrating existential freedom.

Like Dostoyevsky, Camus was interested in questions of crime, guilt, and responsibility; unlike him, Camus did not accept the notion of sin. Readers of *La Peste* will recall the scene in which, after the agony and death from the plague of Judge Othon’s little boy, the narrator (Rieux) confronts the Jesuit priest Paneloux, who has preached resignation to divine will, with the challenge: “Ah! celui-là, au moins, était innocent, vous le savez bien! … Je refuserai jusqu’à la mort d’aider cette création où des enfants sont torturés” (Oh, he at least was innocent, you know perfectly well! … I shall refuse until I die to love the creation in which children are tortured). This speech is clearly an echo of the protests made by Ivan Karamazov against a world “founded on absurdities” and the tortures of the innocent. “And if the sufferings of children go to make up the sum of sufferings which is necessary for the purchase of truth, then I say beforehand that the entire truth is not worth such a price.”

Ivan, however persuasive he may appear to present-day readers, is not Dostoyevsky’s ultimate spokesman; in his dark world, acceptance of the Christian notions of sin, shared responsibility, guilt, and redemption is viewed as essential—the only possible salvation.

There are likewise parallels between Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from Underground* (1864) and Camus’s work, touching especially on the themes of nihilism and alienation. Similarly, it is easy to read Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* (1866) in association with *L’Etranger*, since the two novels explore crime from psychological and philosophical angles and have unusual protagonists.

Another author often read with Camus is the Austrian Kafka, whose fictional parables about lost or guilty souls call for comparison with Camus’s novels; indeed, the philosopher Gabriel Marcel called Camus a “Mediterranean Kafka.” It is noteworthy that Kafka suffered from tuberculosis and died from the disease. His work is frequently cited by critics and by existential writers themselves as illustrating a world of hopelessness and despair. Camus often mentioned Kafka and devoted an essay to him that was published in a postwar edition of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. Both authors dealt with symbols and wrote works that have been viewed as allegories; both were concerned either explicitly or metaphorically with totalitarian regimes; and both have been viewed by psychoanalytical critics as suffering in one way or another from their relationship with their fathers. Camus and Kafka differ greatly, however, with respect to the paternal image: whereas Camus never knew his father and felt a lifelong regret at this absence, Kafka suffered from a powerful and lifelong inferiority complex in regard to his father, a distant, arbitrary, and cruel authority figure. This complex is illustrated in nearly all of his writings, with their theme of culpability.

Especially pertinent to a comparison of the two authors is Kafka’s *The Trial* (1914), since it deals with accusation and judgment, like *L’Etranger*. Joseph K., the protagonist and the accused, has no understanding of the crime with which he has been charged, nor can he comprehend, still less survive within, the court system that holds him as in a vise. There are significant differences, however: Meursault, in *L’Etranger*, who is similarly a victim of the court system, has at least committed a crime that he himself and his friends recognize as such, though not in the degree asserted by the prosecution (that is, premeditated murder, a capital crime). Moreover, while recognizing the causal connection between his shooting and the victim’s death, and thus society’s need for retribution, Meursault, who does not acknowledge moral guilt, ends his story with what is often seen as an epiphany—an affirmation of the self. In contrast, Joseph K., even though denying his guilt and struggling to counteract the inscrutable mechanism that condemns him, is unable to go beyond this condemnation and achieve any sort of transfiguration. An interesting, if debatable, contrast between the two has been offered by Murray Krieger:

If Joseph K. barely makes it into the tragic realm, Meursault … never comes close—or perhaps passes far beyond. If K. has tried less manfully than other prisoners in our literature to thrust through the wall, Meursault takes his only prideful consolation in his refusal to try
his hand against it at all. It is not that he accepts it; he is further from acceptance than K. It is just that, like Melville’s Bartleby, who also ends up a literal prisoner looking at a blank wall…. Meursault, yawning at such metaphysical problems as acceptance or defiance, simply would “prefer not to” and stares blankly.

Krieger concludes that while Kafka’s vision risks moving from the tragic to the merely ironic, Camus “speaks from beyond the farthest reach of the tragic vision.”

The contrast between the respective visions of the two authors is borne out in another work by Camus that can be read in connection with Kafka, La Chute, in which Clamence’s fraudulent protests of guilt serve only to point to others’ depravity. Krieger views this novel as a parody of tragedy: “Camus refuses to allow guilt to man since, following upon the tragic vision that relies upon claims to human guilt, our consciousness of it incapacitates us for the action which Camus’s naturalistic liberalism requires.” In another vein, Camus’s story “Le Rénégat” can usefully be studied in connection with Kafka’s story “In the Penal Colony” (1919).

NOTES


30. See Catharine Savage Brosman, Existential Fiction (Detroit: Gale/Manly, 2000), pp. 211-223. Sartre noted the resemblance with Hemingway, probably exaggerating it.


32. Ibid., p. 101.


34. Vargas Llosa has said, “I think that Camus was very lucid with regard to two things: the first was that history is not everything…. *The second is the danger of ideology.*” Quoted in Braulio Munoz, *A Storyteller: Mario Vargas Llosa Between Civilization and Barbarism* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), pp. 122-123.


41. Ibid., p. 146.

**Camus, Albert: Study Questions**

1. How does Camus write his illness into his imaginative work? In what texts does he do this?
2. Identify occurrences of the theme of guilt in Camus’s fiction and drama in addition to *La Chute*. How is the theme treated in each?
3. What features of North African topography and climate are featured in *L’Etranger, La Peste, “La Femme adultere,” and “L’Hote”*? How are they connected, explicitly or implicitly, to the themes of each work?
4. Sigmund Freud spoke of “civilization and its discontents.” What elements in Camus’s fiction, drama, and essays might constitute his version of “civilization and its discontents”?
5. Trace references to and appearances of a maternal figure in Camus’s writing, including the posthumously published works, and identify in each case Camus’s attitude toward these maternal figures.
6. What features of Camus’s career and work may have entered into the decision by the Swedish Academy to award him the Nobel Prize in literature in 1957? In what ways was the award appropriate or inappropriate, depending on one’s view?
7. In which works does existential anguish come through clearly in Camus’s writing? What forms does it take and how is it treated?
8. What are some of the connections in plot, theme, characterization, and setting between La Mort heureuse and L’Etranger?
9. What fictional works and plays by Camus have as a theme either indifference to communication among human beings or the failure of communication when attempted? How is the theme handled in each work, and what conclusions can the reader draw from Camus’s treatment of this theme?
10. In what works does Camus reveal something of his attitude toward mainland France and the rest of Europe? Describe the components of this attitude.
11. How does Camus work into his writings the associated themes of judgment and justice? What distinctions does he make between judgment and justice?
12. Why is Camus’s name so often associated with Jean-Paul Sartre’s? To what degree is this association justified?
13. What does Martha mean in the play Le Malentendu when she says to Maria, “This is the normal order of things”?
14. How is the theme of solitude explored in the stories that make up L’Exil et le royaume?
15. To what American authors of the early or mid twentieth century might Camus be usefully compared, and in what ways?
16. What features of Amsterdam or its history could have entered into Camus’s choice to set La Chute in that city?
17. Camus told the critic Jean-Claude Brisville that in Le Premier Homme he planned to show the great influence of women in his life and accordingly would give them important roles, unlike in his previous fiction, in which they were “mythical.” How do women appear in Camus’s three novels published during his lifetime (L’Etranger, La Peste, and La Chute) and in the short stories, and in what way might they be justifiably termed mythical?
18. In what passages of L’Etranger does an emotional language replace the flat style of reporting in the rest of the novel? Why did Camus choose this emotional language or allow it to appear in these passages?
19. What are some of the ironies in Camus’s life and career? What elements in his work can be viewed as a commentary, intended or otherwise, on such ironies?
20. In addition to the types of absurd man named and analyzed in Le Mythe de Sisyphe, which characters in Camus’s drama or fiction could be called types of the absurd hero or heroine? In what ways?
21. To what degree and in what ways did Camus leave himself open to the charge of indifference to the plight of the Arab and Berber populations in Algeria?
22. What explains the immediate and lasting success of L’Etranger? Is the high reputation of the novel warranted?
23. Did Camus excel as a dramatist? What characteristics of his plays contribute to their dramatic impact? What are their weaknesses?
24. What are the references and implications of the two nouns in the title L’Exil et le royaume?
25. Francois Mauriac, a Catholic novelist, said of Marcel Proust’s work, “God is terribly absent.” Would this phrase fit Camus’s writings? Is there any element in them that might suggest a religious dimension? If not, suggest why critics nonetheless persist in asserting that Camus could conceivably have developed a religious sense (some say he might even have converted), whereas it appears universally agreed that Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir would not have done so under any conceivable circumstance.
26. When Camus’s work is viewed broadly, what features does it seem to have in common with the general features of twentieth-century literature in any specific sense and what elements seem traditional or retrogressive?

27. Identify traits and details concerning Jean-Baptiste Clamence in La Chute that may justify the common claim that he is a portrait of Camus himself.

28. Cite a few factual incidents known by Camus that seem to have acted on his creative imagination and show how they were shaped in his writing.

29. Omitting his journalistic pieces, in which of Camus’s works do the various wars of the twentieth century appear? How are they treated?

30. What principles do Camus’s writings, including personal statements, suggest as a means of assessing oneself? To what degree are these principles morally and psychologically adequate?

Camus, Albert: Selected Bibliography

• BIBLIOGRAPHIES AND CATALOGUES
• BIOGRAPHIES AND BIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND MATERIAL
• CRITICAL AND GENERAL STUDIES, INCLUDING COLLECTIONS OF ESSAYS AND CHAPTERS IN BOOKS, ON CAMUS AND SOME CONTEMPORARIES
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• MOTION PICTURE
• ARCHIVES
• WEB SITES
• NOTE

The following is a list primarily of English-language works, but some works in French are also included for their historic importance, special value, or interest.

BIBLIOGRAPHIES AND CATALOGUES


BIOGRAPHIES AND BIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND MATERIAL


Lenzini, Jose. L’Algérie de Camus. Aix-en-Provence: Edisud, 1987. Includes photographs, drawings, and paintings of Algiers and other sites as Camus knew them, with commentaries by various figures and
quotations from Camus. Conveys the feel of the city and identifies particular locations mentioned in Camus’s works.


Todd, Olivier. *Albert Camus: Une vie*. Paris: Gallimard, 1996. Translated by Benjamin Ivry as *Albert Camus: A Life*. New York: Random House, 1997. Includes many pertinent, apt remarks and much information not available to Lottman when he was writing his biography. Todd includes quotations from unpublished letters but is less thorough than Lottman in some respects, for example, in discussing Camus’s childhood.

**CRITICAL AND GENERAL STUDIES, INCLUDING COLLECTIONS OF ESSAYS AND CHAPTERS IN BOOKS, ON CAMUS AND SOME CONTEMPORARIES**


Hanna, Thomas. The Thought and Art of Albert Camus. Chicago: Regnery, 1958. Though published decades ago, this sympathetic study by a professional philosopher remains valuable.


Kellman, ed. Approaches to Teaching Camus’s “The Plague.” New York: Modern Language Association, 1995. Despite the suggestion that this is a handbook for teachers only, some chapters are suitable for students as well. Good bibliography.


King, ed. Camus’s “L’Etranger”: Fifty Years On. London: Macmillan, 1992. Includes an introduction and essays, all in English, on a wide variety of topics, including the reception of L’Etranger abroad, Camus’s depiction of Arabs, ethnic and colonial questions, women in L’Etranger, and comparative studies.


Roston, Jacqueline Gabrielle. Camus’s *Récit “La Chute”: A Rewriting Through Dante’s “Commedia.”* New York: Peter Lang, 1985. Assuming the presence of one masterpiece in another, Roston examines connections between Dante’s great poem and Camus’s novel, using also, as context, the poetics of Paul Valery. Photoreproduction of a typescript.


Zyla, Wolodymyr T., and Wendell M. Aycock, eds. *Albert Camus’ Literary Milieu: Arid Lands*. Lubbock: Inter-departmental Committee on Comparative Literature, Texas Tech University, 1976. Essays by Brian Fitch, Anna Balakian, Thomas Bishop, and others on connections between Camus and Samuel Beckett, Voltaire, Valery, the Flemish painters Hubert and Jan van Eyck, and additional topics.

**SERIES AND JOURNALS**

*Albert Camus*. Paris: Minard, 1968-. Revue des Lettres Modernes series. An irregularly appearing serial devoted to French-language scholarship on Camus, with a table of contents at the end of each volume. The “Carnet bibliographique” rubric, which has appeared irregularly, includes up-to-date bibliographic information. Eighteen volumes have been published through 2000.


*Cahiers Albert Camus*. Paris: Gallimard, 1971-. A series of miscellaneous volumes, including primary texts.

**BACKGROUND READINGS IN GENERAL LITERATURE, EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY, TWENTIETH-CENTURY FRENCH CULTURE, AND FRENCH AND ALGERIAN SOCIAL AND POLITICAL HISTORY**


Brosman. Existential Fiction. Detroit: Gale/Manly, 2000. A general introduction to the background of existentialism and to the existential dimension of literature as a whole, as well as a survey of French existential writing, with sections on Beauvoir, Sartre, Camus, and several others.

Brosman, ed. Dictionary of Twentieth Century Culture: French Culture, 1900-1975. Detroit: Gale/Manly 1994. Includes short articles on Camus’s literary contemporaries, as well as the Left Bank, World War II, the Occupation, the Algerian war, French theaters and directors, French newspapers, and major political figures.


Well-researched.

Judt, Tony. *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992. An outstanding study of politics and thought in the period, viewed from many angles and conveying brilliantly the intellectual atmosphere while examining the positions of Camus, Sartre, Catholic intellectuals, and many other figures on such questions as postwar purges in France, Soviet expansionism, trials, and labor camps.


Keegan, John. *The Second World War*. New York: Viking, 1989. A lucid history by one of the world’s foremost authorities. Parts 1 and 4 deal with the war in the West (France, the Low Countries, England, and Italy). Illustrated; index.


McBride, William L, ed. *Sartre’s French Contemporaries and Enduring Influences*. New York ’ London: Garland, 1997. Comprises twenty-one highly philosophical essays by respected scholars on various topics connected to French existential writing and on such figures as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Gilles Deleuze, Sartre, Beauvoir, and Camus, who is treated as a thinker (by Thomas Hanna) and as an adversary of Sartre and Francis Jeanson.


**MOTION PICTURE**


**ARCHIVES**

Most of Camus’s papers remain in the possession of his children, Catherine and Jean Camus, and are not available for inspection except with their permission. Camus’s portion of his unpublished correspondence with Jules Roy is in the Bibliotheque Saint-Charles in Marseilles; Roy’s portion, formerly in the IMEC archives in Paris, has been transferred to the Fonds Camus of the Bibliotheque Mejan Aix-en-Provence. Two other sets of correspondence (partly in originals, partly in photocopies) are in the Special Collections division of the library at the University of Florida, Gainesville. See articles by Raymond Gay-Crosier summarizing their contents: “Une Correspondance inedite de l’époque du Theatre de l’Equipe,” Albert Camus, 14 (1991): 165-172 (letters to Francoise Maeurer); and “Encore une correspondance inedite: Albert Camus-Yvonne Ducailar, 1939-1946,” Albert Camus, 15 (1993): 183-196. A typescript of Camus’s unpublished handwritten corrections of 1939 and 1941 for Caligula is held in the same collection. Some Camus papers are in the collection of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas, Austin.

**WEB SITES**

Albert Camus Critical Interpretation Home-page. http://www.sccs.swarthmore.edu/~pwillen/lit/indexa.htm. This site features several English translations of short essays by Camus, including an excerpt from his essay “Between Yes and No,” in a readable format. It also offers student essays on aspects of Camus’s work, including comparative approaches.

Albert Camus Discussion Group. http://www.eGroups.com/list/albert_camus. This discussion group is devoted to information about Camus’s life, his works, and existential philosophy.

Albert Camus Photo Gallery. Several photos of Camus as a child and as an adult can be viewed here.


collection. Some Camus papers are in the collection of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas, Austin.

*Albert Camus: The Stranger.* http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Aegean/1311/Camus.html This site includes a biography of Camus, a plot summary of *L'Étranger*, and a few excerpts from Camus’s writings. Its best feature is a definition of existentialism, with links to biographical entries on philosophers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre.

*Caligula: A Play by Albert Camus.* Critical reactions to Camus’s play and various productions of it are featured on this site. It also focuses on the figure of Caligula, both as he appears in the play and as he is viewed by historians.

*Camus Studies Association.* http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/gaycros/Camus.htm. This site is devoted to the activities of the Camus Studies Association and provides information on membership. The Association’s vice president, Raymond Gay-Crosier, maintains a bibliography on the site. Accessible in French or English, the bibliography covers books and articles published on Camus in the 1990s.

*The Existence of Albert Camus.* A well-organized source for information on Camus’s life and writing, this site includes a bibliography of his works, as well as excerpts of criticism from published sources and student essays. The site also features a useful listing of quotations from Camus arranged by subject. It has extensive links to other sites and to articles about Camus from American newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *The Boston Globe*, including an interview with the writer’s daughter, Catherine Camus.

The *Existence of Albert Camus Forum.* http://www.netbabbler.com/goto/?forumid=21336. This is a discussion group allowing participants to exchange comments on Camus’s literary and philosophical writings.

*Existentialism: Albert Camus.* http://www.tameri.com/csw/exist/camus.html. This site provides information on Camus’s life and works, including a chronology and a list of quotations with their sources. It also features a few links to sites on other existentialist writers.

*The First Man.* http://www.randomhouse.com/vintage/read/firstman/. Part of a series of web pages designed to encourage book clubs, this site provides questions to enhance discussions of Camus’s unfinished novel. It includes a bibliography of related fiction and nonfiction by other authors.

The *Stranger Review Questions.* http://teachers.net/lessons/posts/1000.html. This site consists of comprehension questions to aid teachers covering *The Stranger* in the classroom.

**NOTE**

1. There is a subsequent printing of the Doubleday edition, also dated 1979, that is paginated differently from the first printing. All page references in this volume are keyed to the first printing.

**Critical Essays: Camus, Albert (Vol. 1)**

**Camus, Albert 1913–1960**

Camus, a French existentialist philosopher, novelist, and playwright, is remembered especially for *The Stranger, The Myth of Sisyphus*, and *The Rebel*. He won the Nobel Prize in 1957.
It was, of course, Camus who first spotted the significance of [the] new style of nihilism and identified it, in *The Stranger*, with the pathological apathy of the narrator Meursault—the French were far in advance of the Americans in seeing that the "rebel" was giving way in our day to the "stranger." In … [the] collection of stories called *Exile and the Kingdom*, Camus [continued] to deal with the predicament of men and women moving dully through an indifferent universe (he is very much a man in quest of solutions, and not at all content with mere diagnosis), but my impression is that he … lost the firm grasp he had on the problem in his earlier work. The decline set in with his … novel, *The Fall*, a book that seems to me only a mechanical repetition of what he had already accomplished before, and even at their best these new stories have nothing of the clear brilliance and beauty of *The Stranger* or the thickness of texture that distinguished *The Plague*….

The source of his power is not in my opinion his superior artistry (indeed, as a craftsman of the novel he is rather poorly endowed by comparison with a dozen lesser writers), but in the very delicate balance he manages to strike between identification with the nihilists he writes about and detachment from them. Reading Camus is like watching a man plunge over a precipice and then grab the edge of the cliff with his nails and hold on by God knows what miraculous instinct to survive. It hardly matters that this instinct is inarticulate, that Camus's solutions (submitting to the knowledge of the predicament, sharing the burdens of the oppressed) are no solutions—or at least nothing more than individual solutions. What matters is that he has looked upon the face of death and lived, that he has visited chaos and returned with the message that all we can do is try to think our way back into a world of meaning, to create a new world of meaning that makes no concession to the bankrupt philosophies of church or state.


Camus's creative strength derives not from his ideational faculty but from his capacity for responding sensuously to the variegated beauty of the earth. Like the Algerian people among whom he was born, he appreciates "The glories of our blood and state" as substantial things, not shadows, and therefore looks upon death as the enemy. It is the intrusion of death that transforms the Garden of Eden into a charnel-house of horror, so that the human quest for happiness turns into a curse. The precarious present is all a man can hope to enjoy. Hence the necessity for revolt. The crime of crimes is to resign the self to this intolerable condition, to sink into the morass of routine, even if it is done in the name of duty. There is the dichotomy which is a perpetual source of anguish in man: the craving for life without end is opposed by the knowledge that he is doomed to die….

Camus's early work tried to utilize the myth of the absurd and invest it "with much of the intensity, inevitability and universality of classical tragedy." Death, as in *Caligula*, is the crowning feature of the absurd. Just as all truth must be uncompromisingly faced, so must one learn to live with the absurd, not by resigning himself to it but by revolting against it. The absurd is thus transformed into a kind of "negative" religion, providing the spiritual basis on which the tragic affirmation can stand….

From the beginning Camus sought to create a form of tragedy in which man would be presented as the doomed victim. His early plays marked an attempt, earnest though unsuccessful, to shape tragedy out of the knowledge that life is meaningless. *The Misunderstanding* is, like *The Stranger*, a representation of the encounter with the absurd. It is not tragic in structure or content simply because the absurd is not tragic. Influenced in his conception of tragedy by the writings of Nietzsche, Camus held that tragedy emerges when two equally strong forces are in conflict. Man must assert his desire for freedom, but he meets the resistance of an external order that is indifferent to his needs, and these conflicting forces cannot possibly be reconciled. The Camus protagonist is, like Kafka's heroes, a victim; the fate meted out to him is one that his mind cannot grasp. In his battle against death, however, he beholds the blinding truth which redeems him from the clutch of illusion….
Camus raised aloft the banner of metaphysical revolt. Art is a protest in the name of life against the immutable decree of death. That is how Camus sought to affirm life and repudiate the nihilism on which his vision of the absurd is based.


[Some] have claimed—Sartre is one—that Camus' fiction doesn't really belong in the category of the novel at all, but rather stands in the tradition of the Voltairean moral tale. The postwar American reader, then, read Camus, and still reads him, for largely nonliterary reasons. He reads him not so much for pleasure or delight, but for guidance.


Camus is honest, and his style, his sense of myth, his authentic passion, his ability to become involved in an issue without being dominated by a program, have earned him a hearing: so much so that he has been called "the conscience of a generation". He is indeed a "moralist" in a great tradition, that of La Rochefoucauld, Montaigne, Pascal. What is more, when he was alive he managed to use this gift of insight and of style to very good effect not only in his novels but in the newspapers….

Camus is not a "philosopher of the absurd" in the sense of an *advocate* of the absurd. The popular image of him shows Camus as one who somehow prefers the absurd, who finds it more interesting, more real, than rationality, and who takes it as the basis for complete freedom from all law: since everything is absurd, do what you like. In actual fact he is at once more exacting and more traditional. He first shows that what seems to be rational in accepted ethical and social systems is in fact irrational and largely meaningless. But the discovery of this meaninglessness calls for a revolt that will replace empty forms with authentically significant acts. Camus opposes to nihilism a certain "human measure" of which the best examples are to be found, he thinks, in the Greek and Mediterranean tradition. Camus is, if anything, a Classic moralist on the stoic pattern rather than an existentialist thinker.


It is questionable whether Camus … will remain for posterity one of the masters of the art of fiction. But few are the French writers who would not prefer the title of 'moralist' to the glory of being a novelist, a dramatist, a philosopher, or even a poet…. Few moderns have as warmly as did Camus, admired those classical moralists of France [who flourished chiefly between the time of Montaigne and Diderot], their wisdom nurtured on the experience of life and directed toward the practice of living…. Camus, however, except in his posthumous *Notebooks*, did not usually sum up his wisdom in those somewhat bitter pills of disillusion of which authors of maxims are fond. He is a moralist in another sense: in his novels and in his short stories, one senses the presence of a man who is looking for reasons for living, tormented by the concern to lead men to the elusive goal of more happiness; he is obsessed by the need to justify his characters' behavior, indeed to justify literature itself, which he is perpetually calling in question. Little did he care for the elaboration of a system of abstract and logical thought. It is easy to refute each of the intellectual attitudes which he adopted and to take issue with the ambiguity of his positions (on existentialism, on his criminal Christ-figure Meursault, on the sarcastic narrator of *La Chute*, on the Algerian problem). Any meditation which would not lead to action would hold scant value in his eyes….
The art and the thought of Camus are closely bound up with his life, with circumstances which provoked some statement by a man who was attentive to every event, irked by any contradiction which he judged to be mean or unfair, a journalist of the very highest order and a polemicist in the noblest sense, that is, a loyal adversary of all that struck him as false, base, or nefarious. He was predestined to become a rebel against injustice, a fighter in the ideological and ethical controversies of his age, and first of all by his origins. He was French, doubly so for having risen to culture and to the wielding of a magnificent prose amid many handicaps; and yet he felt alien to much that was narrow, conventional, gloomy, and, as he would say, sunless in the traditions of France….

Camus's natural, or early bent, as evinced in Noces and L'Eté was for a vibrating and romantic prose in the tradition of Chateaubriand and Barrès. He imposed upon himself almost impossible restraints in his novels in order to pare down all that might be superfluous flesh and caressing resonance to his voice. When successful, his style reached a muscular sparseness which is in the truest lineage of the classical moralists. At times, however, its sobriety verges on dryness. The romanticism preliminary to any classical pruning and softening was perhaps not strong enough to be overheard through the novelist's fear of orchestration. The finest pages of writing by Camus are to be found elsewhere than in his three novels and six short stories….

*The Stranger* is a minor masterpiece of restraint and of effectiveness: but too much is lacking for the protagonist to rise to tragic stature. There is some trickery in the author's stacking all the cards against Meursault and emptying him of will power, of anger, passion, even of psychological substance. The romantic condemnation of a 'bourgeois' society whose judges sentence a murderer too harshly is a little facile. But the young Camus had thus to begin by setting himself against the world as he found it; before he could discover how to change it or how to rethink it, he had to depict it as unsatisfactory. The starting point of any ulterior message had to be found in the solitude and the clear sightedness of Meursault….

*La Peste* is an allegory, as are many novels of our time…. All that normally makes fiction attractive to readers, imaginative escape, love adventures, seductive women characters, surprise in the invention of incidents, is excluded. Camus felt still too close to the events symbolized in his fiction to relate them and to elicit their moral purport otherwise than with a Jansenist severity and a haughty nobleness. The style of the volume is deliberate and restrained, almost dry. The romantic, perhaps the Spanish, facet of Camus's personality was obscured there. He felt profoundly that the French novel has a special mission, which sets it apart from the other great fictional literatures of Europe. That mission is, thanks to a very limited number of situations, to express and illustrate a certain conception of man. The primary role belongs to intelligence, which rules over the conceptions of such a novel and imposes upon it 'a marvellous economy and a sort of passionate monotony…. To be classical means to repeat oneself and to know how to repeat oneself,’ as he put it in his essay of 1943 on ‘L'intelligence et l'échafaud.’ The texture of the novel strives after monotony. There are hardly any touches of humor, no superfluous adornment, and very few evocations of scenery to appeal to our senses: all takes place in the dullest of provincial cities, with no lurid scenes of horror, which the subject might easily have seemed to call for….

*La Chute* … is the most complex, and not the least baffling, of the author's three novels. It disappointed those who expected in Camus an evolution toward faith, or at least toward para-Christian ethics. The sarcastic tone and the use of Christian allusions in a spirit of blasphemy … seemed to denote a return to Camus's early nihilism, from which he had emerged with *La Peste*. 'It is from ironical philosophies that passionate works spring,' Camus had remarked. There is both irony (indeed brilliant wit also, and striking epigrammatic thoughts) in *La Chute*, and there is passion. As a work of art, this long monologue which recalls Diderot's *Le Neveu de Rameau* and some of Robert Browning's 'apologies' is even more successful than *L'Etranger* as a virtuoso feat of writing….

Death cut short the promises of more mature achievement at the very time when Camus was meditating most intensely on the position and duties of a man of letters in the modern world….
Camus is not likely to remain among the supreme novelists or the most gifted of imaginative writers. Fiction to him was a convenient mold in which to elucidate his own conflicting doubts; it was also a medium for judging himself with objectivity while avoiding the dryness which preys upon the abstract thinker or the complacent coiner of moral aphorisms.


The literary importance of Albert Camus, and his influence and reputation as a moralist and philosopher, are as great as those of Jean-Paul Sartre. Like Sartre, Camus cannot be considered simply as a novelist; like Sartre, he found expression both in the theatre and in the essay; and like Sartre, he played and still plays the role of a spiritual advisor. His sudden death, at a time when he had just attained the eminence of the Nobel Prize and had so much more to say, crowned his work with a halo of tragedy….

In L'Etranger, Camus borrowed the narrative techniques and to some extent the style of such American novelists as Hemingway. The novelist himself remains objective; he refrains from intervening in the fate of his characters, from using them as mouthpieces for himself and from making explicit their thoughts and feelings. He limits himself to describing the actions and gestures of his hero, Meursault, to noting the phases of his behaviour within the Behaviourist discipline. Meursault does not 'exist'; he merely reacts to the impulses he receives.


Albert Camus is a thinker …, but he has joined the classic writers (he died prematurely) as a great novelist, not as a great philosopher. Books like The Plague, State of Siege, The Just Assassins are primarily studies of real people and places—they impress as fiction—and only secondarily imaginative expressions of ideas…. An empty universe, man as an absurdity, the necessity for action—these form the central themes of Camus's fiction…. What we admire in Camus, apart from the skill of the novelist, is the courage and honesty with which he tries to attack the nothingness which seems to be the human lot. The human condition is absurd, the universe is indifferent to man; why not then commit suicide? But this is to play into the hands of the enemy; moreover, a suicide is an individual act which may or may not be performed—it cannot be posited as a general philosophical principle. We are left—as in Sartre—with the necessity of being human, which means performing the acts of a human being.


[The] fundamental theme of Camus's writings [is] at once a bitter protest against the injustice of man's position in the universe and an examination of the ethical problems which this implies. Camus, even in his earliest writings, instinctively rejects the amoralistic views that might seem to be the logical consequence of his sense of the absurdity of human existence. From the very outset he is seeking an intellectual foundation of some sort for his deep-seated ethical convictions…. Camus's general attitude toward life resembles that of a Christian who believes in an unchristian God. He has retained the protest, but rejected the consolations of the Christian faith. It is nonetheless a religious attitude toward life. The emotion comes first, the intellectual justification of the emotion second…. Both nature and society, as seen by Camus, are evil; both, certainly, are powerful; and both exact the same sort of sinister idolatry from their victims. It is against this spiritual sanctification of material force, and the ignorance and the illusions on which it thrives, that Camus speaks….
Each one of [Camus's] novels is written in the first person, and each is written in an entirely different style: a sort of linguistic equivalent for the different forms of being depicted in the different novels, which reveals Camus's extraordinary gift for verbal mimicry as well as his talent as a writer.


Camus's thought did not stop with the Absurd treatise, The Myth of Sisyphus. In the postwar years he moved away from the atomistic view of man (the individual in independent revolt, as in The Stranger) toward an emphasis on human solidarity in the revolt against the irrational (represented as suffering in The Plague). We might say that Camus became "socialized," or at any rate more humanistic, in the modern sense. Although few could accept the Absurd equilibrium as a pattern for living, and although Camus's solution is perhaps too tainted by his own personality to have universal validity, his insight into the basic problems of being human is very keen, and its literary expression is undeniably beautiful.


Camus, Albert (Vol. 11): Introduction

Camus, Albert 1913–1960

Camus, an Algerian-born novelist, dramatist, and essayist, had a profound influence on modern philosophy, particularly on existential thought. His philosophic and literary concerns revolve around the question of the nature and meaning of existence. Camus's conception of the human condition is predicated upon the constants of evil and death. Rejecting religion for reason, Camus concluded that the universe was itself irrational. It was individual action and the power of the individual will that provided life with a value and purpose for Camus. He received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957. (See also CLC, Vols. 1, 2, 4, 9.)

Camus, Albert (Vol. 11): Serge Doubrovsky

On the whole, it can be said that Camus is the great writer American literature has waited for and who never came. The generation of Faulkner, Dos Passos, and Hemingway already belongs to the past and to history. Its value is one of example and no longer of witness. It so happens that the succession is vacant. There are a hundred authors not wanting in talent, but there is no writer who attacks the problems of our time in depth. If happy peoples can be said to have no history, perhaps prosperous peoples have no literature. (p. 17)

Through the allegorical turn of his mind, through his effort to confine himself to the universal, through his wish to give meaning solely at the level of the human condition, Camus offered in his novels an image of man bare and free enough of the particularities of nationality or history to be immediately accessible. Sartre, on the other hand, whose intellectual and personal approach is so deeply rooted in one moment of both pre- and postwar French consciousness—or "bad conscience"—intrigues, irritates, or fascinates Americans. In general, he remains fundamentally foreign to them. Camus, however, presents through literature what is for the Anglo-Saxon mind often the essential thing: an ethic. And this ethic finds fruitful soil here in America. I would not say that Americans are always sensitive to what is deepest in Camus's thought: the sense of a tangible, vital participation in life that one might call "the solar joy." What they like most is the Old Man and the Sea aspect of Camus, the concern he shares with Hemingway or Melville for man's struggle within the universe and against it. Camus continues and expounds a humanistic ethic that stresses effort more than
success, and that unwittingly nourishes the ascetic spirit still alive in America in spite of the cult of success and well-being.

But even more, Camus's sense of the tragic goes to the heart of the American situation. In the polemic debate which separated them, Sartre reproached the author of The Plague for making the struggle against Heaven the central theme of human activity, for translating the "ideal" situation of occupied France's fight against Nazism into the Manichaean vision of a Humanity aligned together against absolute Evil. Sartre argued that this was a betrayal of the true conditions of man's struggle to make an ideal of humanity triumph. Now—and this is striking—the allegory of the plague retains all its force within the American context, where it seems to find a natural setting. In American society there are no class conflicts; racial conflicts never for an instant put the social structure in doubt; and nothing basic separates either political parties or spiritual group. In the final analysis, because the collective organism is confronted neither with internal dissidence nor really harrowing problems, men of good will automatically find themselves united in the face of evil…. [It is] the medical element in Camus that is most acutely felt [in The Plague]; the courage which rises above ultimate and inevitable failure, the day-to-day love for men as they are, and a certain confidence in man, in spite of faults which are never moral defects. Here, in short, is an ethics rigorously separated from politics, or, if you prefer, inseparable from the sort of politics that can be reduced to ethics. Camus's humanism is the spiritual face of American democracy.

It is true that if for Camus the human struggle can only end in provisional victories that will ceaselessly be questioned, American optimism tends rather to envisage a progress that is slow perhaps, but sure—a unilateral advance, in spite of retreats or pauses. At first glance one might see in this remark a conflict between two points of view. This would be to misunderstand the writer's role in America. The best American writers have attempted to give body and a voice precisely to those tragic elements that society officially wishes to ignore, but that survive in the unspoken consciousness of many. Hemingway and Faulkner spoke out for those who keep silent. So does Camus in our own day…. I would venture to say that it is not in spite of his atheistic humanism, but because of it, that Camus is so popular here. Here at last is someone who has expressed in black and white the secular ethics which is at the heart of this American civilization, where piety is most often merely a pious fraud. (pp. 17-19)

Another of the motivating forces behind both Camus's actions and his work was a violent and apparently never resolved struggle of opposing character traits. Like his Caligula, Camus had a drive toward self-affirmation, which, unchecked, might have turned into a cruel form of self-indulgence that he seemed to identify with the amorality, indifference, and serenity of the cosmos. But Camus also had a passionate need for self-denial, for a kind of effacement within the "world of poverty" that was his as a child. Each one of these powerful inner forces could have led to forms of self-destruction, which the act of writing seems to have held in check. The climate of Camus's work is inseparable from his struggles to maintain a sane equilibrium. At all times Camus refused the romantic delectation of thinking of himself as an individual apart from all others, marked by fate for a singular career. (p. 5)

[The] silent uncomplaining figure of his deaf mother seems to have created in the child an overwhelming sense of compassion, all the harder to bear because of his helplessness. She was the inspiration for one of the essential figures in many of his later plays and novels and suggested a fundamental symbol: the silent mother, the land of Africa, the earth, death.

The silence that both separated and united the mother and son, born as much of her endless labor as of her deafness, was later to influence the young writer's thought deeply concerning the problems of communication and expression. He was often to define the writer's "commitment" as the obligation to speak for those who are silent, either because, like his mother, they are unused to the manipulation of words, or because they are silenced by various forms of oppression…. A major source of Camus's work, which from the very start carried it beyond the frontiers of social satire or recrimination, is Camus's understanding of and sensitivity to that part of all lives which is spent in solitude and silence. He, too, struggled with that almost intolerable compassion which rings in the words of his youthful Caligula: "Men die and they are not happy." It was from this depth of compassion that Camus drew a sense of solidarity with human beings so profound that he could accept them in their fundamental nudity—an acceptance certain doctors come to experience, such as Camus's Dr. Rieux in The Plague.

To this basic experience of sadness, Africa added an experience of joy. No one has spoken of the glory of the Mediterranean landscape better than Camus. As a boy he roamed over its beaches and hills. The landscape of North Africa appears in all his writing, carrying with it the sense of freedom and life through his essential symbols: the sun, the sea, and many different sorts of light. "There is a solitude in poverty" he wrote, "but a solitude which gives its proper rank to all things. At a certain level of wealth the sky itself and a night full of stars seem natural possessions. But at the bottom of the ladder the sky takes on all its meaning: a grace without price."

To lose either the sense of one's human vulnerability and therefore solidarity with others, or the sense of one's participation in the grandeur of the cosmos is in Camus's language to move into the "desert" of exile. One can accept a drastic simplification which Camus himself made when he said that he was born in a country—North Africa—which, unlike Europe, taught no lesson other than that "there is on the one hand man, in his essential poverty and vulnerability; on the other, the glory of the cosmos in which he moves." (pp. 5-6)

Young Camus, rather like his character Meursault in The Stranger, seems to have had an infinite capacity for living fully in the sensuous plenitude of each passing minute. If death is the essential discovery and the beginning of lucidity in Camus's first works, this awareness seems to be due partly to his confrontation with a problem he might not otherwise have envisaged in the same way. His reaction was first one of revulsion, then of refusal and of a passionate commitment to fight this personal form of "the plague."

The word "revolt" is not used by Camus in any generally accepted sense, and that is where the arguments and admonishments of some of his more highly abstract commentators have failed to reckon with Camus's meaning. His revolt is not directed against the romantic aspiration to transcend and destroy the limitations of the human being. It is directed against all that conspires to lessen any man's capacity for functioning with the
greatest chance for happiness within these limitations. The enemies Camus detected and relentlessly fought were all the forces that stifle human beings—another of his basic symbols—whether these forces be mental, individual, or institutional; stemming from somnolence, insensitivity, or the myriad ideologies and systems, the complacent "godless theologies," of our time.

It is in this very personal context, rather than in abstract intellectual formulas, that one must seek the genesis of Camus's work and its freshness. The full flavor of the personality, sensitivity, and imagination of the man has often been lost in unnecessarily complex analyses. If, as seems likely, *The Stranger* continues to be one of the significant works in twentieth-century literature, it is not merely because of the new qualities of tone and energy in the writing. (pp. 6-7)

He was never hampered by the grinding and obsessive sense of limitation and guilt that Sartre seems to feel as a "petit-bourgeois" in the era of "the Masses."… Sartre settles with his conscience through speech and writing, whereas Camus took positions and acted directly in the political issues of concern to him, whether with or against the point of view prevalent in his entourage. The football player and lightweight boxing champion of Algiers that he had once been never mistook a battle of words for a real battle with all the physical risks, violence, and dangers it involved. Both what he had to say and the way he said it stood out with startling distinctness against the complex and often nebulous background of a literature richer at that time in literary savoir-faire than in authentic literary creativeness. (pp. 7-8)

His natural Mediterranean flair for drama and mystification found an outlet in his passion for the theater—all facets of the theater…. A feeling of the stage, of the voice speaking directly to an audience, of dialogue projected across the footlights to link audience and actor is present everywhere in his work. Camus was immensely sensitive to the quality of the human voice. It is one of his major tools of creation and establishes with the reader a certain carefully calculated rapport. Whatever the work, there is always a dialogue implicit in Camus's fictional universe: between himself and his main characters; between them and the reader; between the reader and the author. He and his characters address themselves to an audience.

Camus's unusual capacity for "dead-pan" impersonation, satire, and hoax is one of the highroads to the understanding of the peculiar, paradoxical form of imagination most obviously at work in *The Stranger, Caligula,* and *The Fall*…. [His] playfulness and sometimes grim irony have no small part in the genesis of much of Camus's early work and in his favorite method of fictional creation: impersonation. Of *The Fall* Camus explicitly said, "Here I used techniques of the theater, the dramatic monologue and the implied dialogue, in order to describe a tragic comedian." Perhaps *The Stranger* and *The Fall* prove so disturbing to many readers precisely because they are … deliberately intended to disrupt the reader's tranquility…. [Few] critics have remarked upon the ferocious humor everywhere evident in *Caligula* and the more apparent but even more devastating humor pervading *The Fall.* Some of the confusion concerning Camus's ideas arises from a tendency to equate them with the points of view of his fictional characters. A dramatic monologue, obviously, is not the same thing as a personal confession. The aesthetic intents in these two forms of writing are basically opposed. Clamence, the Satanic impersonator, is Albert Camus's creation, only ironically his mouthpiece, and never Albert Camus himself. In a sense Clamence is a very modern version of Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew,* although no "philosopher," unless it be the reader himself, is there to maintain the dialogue. Camus asks a great deal of his reader. (pp. 8-9)
It is customary to think of Camus as the great apostle of life in this century, and to view his work as testimony to the acceptability, indeed the worthiness of the human condition. It is equally routine to regard Beckett as an exploiter of nihilism, and to brand his literary output as cadaveric, as one denoting a paralyzed, indeed a corpsed universe. Their concept of suicide, however,… precludes such simple conclusions and points instead to an unsuspected rapport between the two writers.…

In Camus the persona discovered one of its most subtle and sophisticated advocates. The subtlety of Camus found that it was necessary to insist on the integrity of the absurd experience. The "integration" of the persona resulted from the insistence that "There is thus the will to live without rejecting anything of life, which is the virtue I honor most in this world."… Camus worked from the presupposition that life is acceptable, even though in the more cynical mood of The Fall he conceded: "But in certain cases carrying on, merely continuing, is superhuman." Nevertheless for Camus suicide constituted the avoidance of the absurd, rather than its confrontation, for which he opted. (p. 105)

In the work of Camus … numerous are the instances when his rejection of suicide appears without qualifications. The Myth of Sisyphus is in fact a treatise on suicide, the one and only serious philosophical problem, a phrase made famous by the author at the very beginning of his essay. The point which Camus wishes to reveal to us immediately is that, if one becomes conscious of the vanity of the human condition, of the nonsense of life, one is no longer capable of accepting the trap of going on, because of habit, or because of the force of inertia. One is tempted, instead, by that exile without return which death exemplifies. Camus writes:…

Dying voluntarily implies that you have recognized, even instinctively, the ridiculous character of that habit, the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering.

But then he asks the question: "Does denying that life makes sense imply that it is not worth living?"… On the contrary, it becomes obvious to him that the less sense there is in a life which carries its own degenerating factors, and which is temporal, the more it is worth living. A challenging approach, to be sure, but one which, if espoused, leads inevitably to the conclusion: "One must imagine Sisyphus happy."…

But can one? Does his intolerable burden, or ours, permit such an optimistic ergo? Perhaps the answer depends on the temperament of the one who poses the question and cannot be imposed on him by a philosopher, no matter how seducing, or even decoying his language is. For Camus and his followers, however, there is no doubt about the cathartic quality of confrontation, of staring into the face of the absurd … and of experiencing the thrill of combat even if the negative outcome is known in advance. For as he declares in his Lettres à un ami allemand: "I continue to believe that this world has no superior meaning. But I know that something in it makes sense, and that is man, because he is the only being to require meaning. This world contains at least the truth of man, and our task is to supply him with reasons against his destiny. And the world has no other reason outside of man, and it is the latter we must save." And if man is saved, or saves himself by rejecting the alternative of suicide, then he may be able to join Camus in the great lyrical outburst: "The world is beautiful, and outside of it there is no salvation."

This is not to say that Camus opts for life in view of a future compensation of some kind. Rather, as is evident throughout The Rebel, he opts for life because self-annihilation presents a number of insurmountable problems. To begin with, it tends to be considered a flight, a copout, a cowardly form of escapism, or even a trickery. Secondly, suicide cannot be concordant with absurdist reasoning … [for absurdist reasoning accepts,
in Camus' words, the "desperate encounter between human inquiry and the silence of the universe"). (pp. 105-06)

But the most powerful argument evoked by Camus against suicide is the fact that the absolute negation that it appears to be, fails to negate very much at all. Suicide is usually thought to be the ultimate act of destruction. But such an act is always willed, always performed in the name of some value. It is always preceded by a because and always followed by a therefore. It cannot be otherwise, and it follows that, on the contrary, suicide becomes a most powerful act of affirmation. In fact Camus considers it so idiosyncratic that, in his opinion, when occurring, it can only rehabilitate life by renewing its meaning or adding to it. Such a rehabilitation is, of course, tardy for the deceased. But for those who survive, the reintegration into the kingdom of man is facilitated. Little wonder, then, that although he examines the question of suicide, and for a brief time he gives it the status of an alternative, the entire literary production of Camus can be viewed as an apologia of life. (p. 107)

[Both] Camus and Beckett unequivocally reject suicide, but whereas Camus' rejection represents a celebration or affirmation of life, no such acceptance of life is implicit in Beckett's resolve to go on living. There is no glorification or exaltation of the state of animation in Beckett, nor does his rejection of suicide represent a synthesis or solution. Camus exorcizes Thanatos, the death urge, with the resolve to abide within the context of the absurd, while in Beckett the ubiquitousness of the absurd causes the distinction between life and death to become blurred, thus removing the possibility of suicide. Whereas both consider it often, Camus merely rejects it; Beckett, on the other hand, goes further: he invalidates suicide altogether. (p. 110)


Camus, Albert (Vol. 11): Allen Simpson

The movement … from unconsciousness to consciousness and despair and back to unconsciousness, has been analysed by Albert Camus in his essay The Myth of Sisyphus. (pp. 278-79)

Camus' essay deals exclusively with … the question of one's response to the awareness that life has no transcendent meaning. The essay "attempts to resolve the problem of suicide … without the aid of eternal values which, temporarily perhaps, are absent or distorted in contemporary Europe."… [It] was written during a major world disaster and … was acclaimed as an important contribution to the resolution of the problems raised by that disaster….

Camus views Sisyphus' … hopeless struggle as monumental, heroic….

[The] emphasis is placed on the torment of consciousness, because it is consciousness that brings the recognition of ultimate futility and defeat. (p. 279)

Camus, at the end [of his essay], returns his hero to his futile labor, stands back and, on behalf of this hero, celebrates his life; and,… Camus … makes an assumption—a leap of faith, really—about his hero's feelings about his life: "One must imagine Sisyphus happy." Like all leaps of faith, [the author begs] the question. (p. 280)

Camus' absurd hero does not gradually "return into the chain."… The struggle to remain awake, to remain always aware of the absurdity of what one does, and yet to avoid paralyzing, nihilistic despair, continues all his life….
In “The Myth of Sisyphus,” Camus insists that modern man's greatest task, and his only chance to completely realize himself, is to acquire the knowledge that Camus possesses, and to preserve this knowledge intact and yet not despair…. (p. 281)


**Camus, Albert (Vol. 11): Irène Finel-Honigman**

**IRÈNE FINEL-HONIGMAN**

In his notebooks and in his novel *The Plague*, Albert Camus often describes the city of Oran in negative terms. He stresses the qualities or characteristics Oran lacks, seeing in this absence a source of inspiration.

In Camus' universe the cities of North Africa, Oran and Alger, serve an essential function. They are not only the background for his works but they are the embodiment of man's relationship with his environment. The topos of Camus' world revolves around a desert-city dichotomy. (p. 75)

In all of Camus' fiction, the city imposes its own personality and attributes upon its inhabitants….

Camus' initial impressions of cities are visual and organic. He focuses on minutia…. Camus mentions the city's spiritual indifference and climatic excesses such as Oran's autumnal "deluges and floods of mud."… Oran is not in coordination with nature: it is a city which has denied its natural boundaries with the sea and has, therefore, destroyed an essential communion. (p. 76)

Oran in *The Plague* becomes a living entity. The city dictates the habits and concerns of its population. Oran is an enclosed microcosm of modern urban society where nature is denied and forgotten…. He endows the city with the literary form given to people. Oran personified in *The Plague* becomes a collective protagonist in its own right.

Textually and contextually Oran structures the novel. In the first line Oran establishes the novel's geographic boundaries: "The unusual events described in this chronicle occurred in 194- in Oran."… The limits of the text and of the city are synchronized. The reader and the narrator are imprisoned within the city limits of Oran, escaping only once in the scene of the sea bath. The last line in the novel transcends the specific context of Oran but emphasizes the city: "... it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city."... The last word "city" is translated from "cité." The use of "city" distinguishes it from the "town" ["ville"] of Oran.

*The Plague* is divided into five parts, each section focusing on the progressive relationship between Oran and the plague….

Rieux, the narrator, does not provide political, socio-economic, or statistical information. The leaders and administrators remain anonymous both in name and function, referred to only as "the authorities," "the municipality," or "the administrators." The city is a living organism which acts collectively; its leaders are only appendages. (p. 77)

The plague gives Oran mythological dimensions. In Camus' works the modern city is a mythic archetype of death, exile, and isolation…. The stone, like the other elements in nature, is part of the natural harmony of the desert. In the city these same elements become indifferent or antagonistic….
Before the plague, Oran was a city without a past. Oran personified must wait for the advent of the Plague to realize its myths and history. Rootless, neutral, and indifferent to its surroundings, the plague gives Oran a particular heritage, identifying it with a long line of plague-ridden cities throughout history. (p. 78)

In Camus' work, Rieux is among the very first to hear the word, and immediately the word, "Plague," provokes a proliferation of images of cities turned into charnel houses and graveyards:

Athens, a charnel-house reeking to heaven and deserted even by the birds; Chinese towns cluttered up with victims silent in their agony; the convicts of Marseille piling rotting corpses into pits;... men and women copulating in the cemeteries of Milan; cartloads of dead bodies rumbling through London's ghoulish darkness-nights and days filled always, everywhere, with the eternal cry of human pain....

For Rieux the connotations are abstract and literary, yet the text has already made its impact on the reader by this profusion of horrifying flash-images. Through the plague, Oran takes its place among these hellish cities. (p. 79)

_The Plague_ can be read on two superimposed contextual levels, as a literal description of the disease's impact on the city of Oran or as an allegory of the Nazi occupation in a European city. Camus prefaces the novel by a quotation from Daniel Defoe: "It is as reasonable to represent one kind of imprisonment by another, as it is to represent anything that really exists by that which exists not."...

Camus wrote this work during the war and published it in 1947, the first major French novel after the war. His introductory quotation calls for an allegorical reading. The allegorical structure of the novel is progressively interwoven into the text by a pattern of historical and sociological analogies. The plague is an emblem of exile, death, and arbitrary evil. The city of Oran is not only a besieged city but contains within its walls two substructures: the bureaucracy of death leading to the creation of crematoriums and the all-male quarantine camp, allegories of the concentration camps and the prisoner-of-war camps. Oran in this interpretation transcends its definition as a city and becomes a microcosm of the war-torn state.

The transformation of Oran from a neutral, indifferent city to a victimized, closed, and occupied city becomes the underlying theme in the narrator's chronicle. Indifference gives way to gradual awareness as the plague invades all neighborhoods and affects all citizens regardless of their position or rank.... Like the German troops in French cities, the plague supersedes previous administrative systems. The occupied city must adapt to a new order. (pp. 79-80)

The end of the narrator's chronicle of _The Plague_ is a denial of the city. Even liberated Oran remains "stifled, strangled" in contrast to the free natural world around it. As protagonist, myth, or allegory, the city is linked to the plague. It can never be entirely free of this association. (p. 81)


**Camus, Albert (Vol. 124): Introduction**

Albert Camus 1913–1960

French-Algerian novelist, dramatist, essayist, short story writer, journalist, and critic.
The following entry presents an overview of Camus's career through 1997. See Albert Camus Short Story Criticism, Albert Camus Literary Criticism (Volume 1), and Volumes 2, 4, 9, 11, 32.

A celebrated novelist and postwar intellectual, Albert Camus is considered one of the most important writers of the twentieth century. His short novel *L'étranger* (1942; *The Stranger*) and existentialist treatise *Le mythe de Sisyphe* (1942; *The Myth of Sisyphus*) are regarded as seminal works of "absurdism," a literary philosophy founded on the belief that human existence is inherently meaningless and futile. The long essay *L'homme révolté* (1951; *The Rebel*) and subsequent novels *La peste* (1947; *The Plague*) and *La chute* (1956; *The Fall*) fortified Camus's reputation as a formidable independent thinker and uncompromising artist. Public and critical interest in his work was renewed by the posthumous publication of his unfinished novel *Le premier homme* (1994; *The First Man*). His Nobel prize-winning novels, essays, and plays evince his commitment to social justice and the possibility of moral integrity in the modern world. Once hailed as the conscience of France, Camus is an internationally renowned literary figure whose poignant metaphysical concerns and arresting prose style exert a profound influence on contemporary letters.

**Biographical Information**

Born in Mondovi, Algeria, a French colony in North Africa until 1962, Camus was raised in poverty by his illiterate Spanish mother. His father, an itinerant laborer of French descent, was fatally wounded in the First World War before Camus reached his first birthday. In 1914 Camus moved with his brother and emotionally detached mother into a small apartment in Algiers which they shared with his uncle and grandmother. The adverse circumstances of his upbringing forged a lasting respect for his hardworking mother and the plight of the underprivileged. With the encouragement of Louis Germain, an elementary school teacher who early recognized Camus's abilities, he won a competitive grant to enter the Grand Lycée in Paris in 1924. At the Grand Lycée, Camus's intellectual mentor was philosophy teacher Jean Grenier, whom he later studied under at the University of Algiers. Shortly before enrolling at the University of Algiers at age sixteen, Camus suffered a near fatal bout with tuberculosis, a chronic illness whose physical and emotional effects haunted him for the remainder of his life. After a period of convalescence, he began studies in philosophy and literature at the University of Algiers, from which he graduated in 1936. While still a student, Camus married briefly and divorced; he remarried Francine Faure in 1940. Camus became increasingly involved in political activities during the 1930s. He joined the Communist Party in 1935, though resigned his membership in 1937 over ideological differences. He published his first two books, *L'envers et l'endroit* (1937; *The Right Side and the Wrong Side*) and *Noces* (1937; *Nuptials*), the same year. He also wrote and abandoned his first novel *La morte heureuse* (1971; *A Happy Death*). Between 1935 and 1938, Camus was active as an actor, writer, and producer with Theatre du travail (Labor Theater), renamed Theatre de l'equipe (Team Theater) after he abandoned the Communist Party. During the Second World War, Camus wrote *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Stranger* while living in France and Algeria. He also wrote for *Combat*, the clandestine newspaper of the French Resistance, through which he met existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. Upon the Allied liberation of Paris in 1944, Camus was awarded the Medal of the Liberation. Acclaim for *The Stranger* and his contributions to *Combat*, which he presided over as editor until 1947, quickly established Camus as a foremost French writer and intellectual of the postwar period. Over the next decade he produced *The Plague*, *The Rebel*, and dramatic works including *Caligula* (1944), *Le malentendu* (1944; *The Misunderstanding*), *L'état de siege* (1948; *The State of Siege*), and *Les justes* (1949; *The Just Assassins*). During the 1950s, Camus's disdain for Soviet communism precipitated his highly publicized estrangement from Sartre and other Left Bank intellectuals. Camus's passivity during the Algerian struggle for independence also drew heavy criticism that damaged his reputation and plunged him into depression and writer's block. Despite such setbacks, he produced *The Fall*, the collection of essays *L'été* (1954; *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*), and the volume of short stories *L'exil et le royaume* (1957; *Exile and the Kingdom*). Camus was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957. Three years later he was killed in an automobile accident near Paris. The manuscript for *The First Man* was found in his briefcase at the site of the wreck.
**Major Works**

Camus's fiction, discursive writings, and dramatic works revolve around the central themes of existential alienation, moral dilemma, and revolt. His first novel, *A Happy Death*, and early autobiographic essays in *The Right Side and the Wrong Side* and *Nuptials* adumbrate the lucidity, irony, and lyrical quality of his subsequent works. *The Right Side and the Wrong Side*, considered a pivotal early text, sheds light on Camus's experience with poverty and his relationship with his silent mother. His most important works are contained in two triptychs, each comprised of a novel, essay, and play. The first grouping, often referred to as the "cycle of the absurd," includes *The Myth of Sisyphus, The Stranger, and Caligula*. In the philosophical essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus examines the fundamental paradoxes of the human condition as evidence of the absurd. The title refers to Sisyphus of Greek legend who was condemned to repeatedly roll a massive stone up a hill only to roll it back down after reaching the crest. Dismissing suicide as a viable response to such futility, Camus suggests that consciousness of the absurd and vigilant resistance to its terms may facilitate the formation of personal identity and value. *The Stranger*, a novel set in Camus's native Algeria, features protagonist Meursault, a French-Algerian youth who impulsively guns down an Arab man on the beach while overcome by the blinding sun. Arrested, jailed, tried, and sentenced to death, Meursault begins to reflect on his actions and the absurdity of his situation. Emotionless over the recent death of his mother and unrepentant for the murder, Meursault welcomes his fate and resigns himself to his execution in open defiance of society and its imposed morality. In the play *Caligula*, Camus portrays the eponymous Roman emperor's tyrannical quest for unbridled individual freedom. Stunned at the death of his sister, who is also his lover, Caligula becomes cognizant of the absurdity of life, whereupon he initiates an orgy of random rapes, murders, and punishments to act out his disillusionment. In *The Misunderstanding*, another significant play from this period, Camus presents a variation of the Oedipus myth in which a man is mistakenly murdered by his mother and sister. Camus's second major triad, unified by the theme of revolt, includes *The Plague, The Just Assassins*, and *The Rebel*. *The Plague* recounts the impact of a fictitious epidemic on the populace of Oran, a city in Algeria. The protagonist and narrator is Dr. Bernard Rieux, a secular physician committed to the systematic treatment of the afflicted. His spiritual foil is Father Paneloux, a Jesuit priest who appeals to divine intervention and the promise of salvation. Though the pestilence is eventually brought under control by a medical, or human, solution, their cooperative effort suggests the importance of fraternity and courage in the face of oppression. Regarded as a allegory of the Nazi Occupation of France during the Second World War, the novel illustrates the imperative of revolt against agents of persecution. *The Just Assassins* dramatizes the human cost of political violence in the service of ideology or expediency. The play centers upon Kalayiev, an idealistic poet and revolutionary who volunteers to throw a bomb at the Grand Duke in a planned assassination. However, when he notices the Duke's niece and nephew beside him in the carriage, he changes his mind, realizing that for this act he would be a murderer rather than a "just assassin." Camus elucidates the history and varieties of revolution in *The Rebel*, an extended essay in which he attempts to formulate the ethical conditions for revolt free of murder or malefaction. Opposing the nihilistic, violent tendencies of mass revolutions, Camus concludes that the individual must revolt against injustice by simply refusing to be a part of it. Camus's last novels, though extensions of earlier investigations, reveal a new vitality and theological interest. The novel *The Fall* presents the enigmatic, hypocritical confessions of Jean-Baptiste Clamence, a successful trial lawyer who, through rambling, self-mocking conversation with an interlocutor, excoriates himself for his perversity and numerous transgressions. The title refers to his guilt at having once failed to rescue a drowning woman. In his unfinished novel *The First Man*, Camus began to reconstruct the story of his life in the experiences of autobiographic protagonist Jacques Cormery. The existing narrative, a fragmentary account of Jacques's childhood, reveals Camus's deeply personal search for self-identity and connection with his prematurely deceased father.

**Critical Reception**

Camus is widely recognized as one of the most provocative and enduring literary figures of the postwar period. He is consistently praised for his perceptive evocation of metaphysical despair, the stark intensity and
natural imagery of his lyrical prose, and his unequivocal condemnation of political tyranny. A preeminent absurdist writer who captured the moral climate of his generation, Camus defined the philosophical and artistic sensibility of many contemporary authors, especially those affiliated with the Theatre of the Absurd during the 1950s and 1960s. His popular association with existentialism, a classification that he dismissed, is traced to the philosophical legacy of Fydor Dostoyevsky, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Soren Kierkegaard. While *The Stranger* and *The Myth of Sisyphus* are viewed as his greatest accomplishments, Camus is also highly regarded for *The Plague*, *The Fall*, and his examination of revolution in *The Rebel*. Critics note that *The First Man*, though incomplete, is further evidence of Camus's remarkable sensitivity and narrative gifts. *Caligula* and *The Misunderstanding* are generally considered Camus's most effective plays, however, his dramatic works as a whole are typically viewed as secondary to his novels and essays. *The Stranger*, his best known work and a brilliant study of modern alienation, continues to attract rigorous critical scrutiny directed at the moral and psychological motivations of its protagonist, particularly as informed by Camus's aversion to capital punishment and his relationship with his mother. Critics frequently comment on the significance of Camus's early poverty and the Algerian landscape in this and all his writings. Though Camus enjoyed a mercurial rise, he became the subject of ridicule following his notorious break with Sartre, intensified by his neutrality during the Franco-Algerian war. Camus's detractors, especially those allied with Sartre, cite egregious elements of political naivete, moral intransigence, and philosophical amateurism in his writing. Despite such criticism, Camus's literary reputation rests largely upon the power of his prose, his unshakable commitment to his art, and his compelling effort to fashion meaning out the absurd.

**Camus, Albert (Vol. 124): Principal Works**

*L'envers et l'endroit* [The Wrong Side and the Right Side] (essays) 1937  
*Noces* [Nuptials] (essays) 1937  
*Le mythe de Sisyphe: Essai sur l'absurde* [The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays] (essays) 1942  
*L'etranger* [The Stranger; also published as The Outsider] (novel) 1942  
*Caligula* (drama) 1944  
*Le malentendu* [The Misunderstanding; also translated as Cross Purpose] (drama) 1944  
*La peste* [The Plague] (novel) 1947  
*L'etat de siege* [The State of Siege] (drama) 1948  
*Les justes* [The Just Assassins] (drama) 1949  
*L'homme révolté* [The Rebel] (essays) 1951  
*L'été* [Resistance, Rebellion, and Death] (essays) 1954  
*La chute* [The Fall] (novel) 1956  
*Requiem pour une nonne* [adaptor; from the novel Requiem for a Nun by William Faulkner] (drama) 1956  
*L'exil et le royaume* [Exile and the Kingdom] (short stories) 1957  
*Caligula and Three Other Plays* [contains Caligula, Le Malentendu, L'Etat de Siege, and Les Justes] (drama) 1958  
*Les possédés* [adaptor; from the novel The Possessed by Fydor Dostoyevsky] (drama) 1959  
*Lyrical and Critical Essays* [includes L'envers et l'endroit and Noces] (essays) 1967  
*La mort heureuse* [A Happy Death] (novel) 1971  
*Le premier homme* [The First Man] (unfinished novel) 1994

**Criticism: Alan W. Woolfolk (essay date Summer 1984)**

In the following essay, Woolfolk discusses Camus's political sympathies and overriding artistic ideals. According to Woolfolk, Camus resisted participation in revolutionary causes due to his belief that political ideology limits the artist's experience and creative vision.

"True artists," Camus stated in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, "force themselves to understand instead of judging." In this respect, he is not unlike his character Tarrou, the former political revolutionary in *The Plague*, who admits:

For many years I've been ashamed, mortally ashamed, of having been, even with the best intentions, even at many removes, a murderer in my turn. As time went on I merely learned that even those who were better than the rest could not keep themselves nowadays from killing or letting others kill, because such is the logic by which they live; and that we can't stir a finger in this world without the risk of bringing death to somebody. Yes, I've been ashamed ever since; I have realized that we all have plague, and I have lost my peace. And today I am still trying to find it; still trying to understand all those others and not to be the mortal enemy of anyone…. I leave it to others to make history. I know, too, that I'm not qualified to pass judgment on those others.

Similarly, the title of the novel itself suggests Camus' critical attitude toward judgment, the "plague" being the ancient Biblical symbol of punishment for wrong-doing.

At the same time, however, Camus also sensed that understanding had its limits, and that it was necessary to preserve the ability to deny, to say *No* to experience, to judge or condemn those who committed violence in the name of history. And it is this recognition that is the key to his attitude toward the writer's role in society.

Despite Camus' unquestioned sympathy for the victims of social injustice and political exploitation, art did not encompass for him, as it did for many of his contemporaries, an overwhelming involvement in politics. Art might be required to limit politics, but never should politics limit art. Political commitment or *engagement* was for him an entanglement which led to contemporary nihilism. Accordingly, rather than the expression *engagement*, Camus chose with a note of irony the term *embarqué* to indicate his deep reluctance at finding himself, almost against his will, compelled to address political concerns. I say *almost* because Camus was anything but unmoved by "history's woes." For instance, his early and consistent theme of passionate indignation over the miseries of poverty was perhaps most openly expressed in his 1939 reporting for the leftist newspaper *Alger Républicain*, in a series entitled "*Misère de la Kabylie.*" Later, this indignation was overshadowed by his unflagging resistance to political violence and terror enacted in the name of abolishing such impoverishment in Algeria and elsewhere. In both cases his passionate rejection of misery precluded political commitment: "The only really committed artist is he who, without refusing to take part in the combat, at least refuses to join the regular armies and remains a freelance." Camus found that he could not more side with left-wing militants than with right-wing militarists, since both groups were prepared to engage in violent acts that would destroy art and ultimately all civilization.

At nearly the same time that Camus began writing during the early 1930s, the image of the *engagé* intellectual became popular in French culture. According to the leftist Catholic, Emmanuel Mounier, who was one of the first to reintroduce the idea to the educated French public after the Dreyfus case, "to be viable one's action must have both a will to be efficacious and a spiritual ingredient. It is a double polarity, prophetic and political, and a constant tension between the two poles must exist." Despite a brief membership in the Communist Party and two years of anti-government newspaper reporting, which resulted in his being evicted from Algeria, as a young man Camus rejected, albeit ambivalently, the criterion of political efficacy. In a prewar review of communist Paul Nizan's *La Conspiration*, he stated that "Nizan requires an *engagement* in which a man relinquishes himself, and with himself his prejudices and choices…. We cannot follow him on that terrain." Camus' reluctant attitude toward judgment, however, immediately moved him to equivocate:
"But, all things considered, it is as futile a problem as that of immortality, an affair that a man solves for himself and upon which one should not pass judgment." He concluded, on this occasion, that in the case of the writer his work must serve as evidence for judging the effect of engagement.

Building upon this criterion in his later writings, Camus grew to oppose political commitment precisely because it threatened to overwhelm the higher discipline that art represented in the distracting immediacies of the struggle for power. It was not simply a matter, as he wrote nearly twenty years after the Nizan review, of art being "threatened by the powers of the state." It was "more complex, more serious too," as soon as it became "apparent that the battle is waged within the artist himself." Art loses from such a "constant obligation." It loses that "ease, to begin with, and that divine liberty so apparent in the work of Mozart." Camus thought it obvious "why we have more journalists than creative writers, more boyscouts of painting than Cézannes, and why sentimental tales or detective novels have taken the place of War and Peace or The Charterhouse of Parma." Implicitly, he understood that all genuine art, as higher culture, lives only if it can successfully discipline the momentary imperative to become engaged.

Camus did not escape unscathed from the conflict between politics and art. His statement on the occasion of accepting the Nobel Prize that "to create today is to create dangerously" reflects his recognition that the literary imagination had come loose from its traditional forms and was opening itself to dangerous creative possibilities. Elsewhere, too, he stated that "if we bring ourselves as artists into the positions we take up as men the experience will, in an unseen but powerful way, weaken our power of speech." In his role as artist, he recognized the danger of incoherence first of all within himself. Yet, like Marx and Engels in nineteenth-century London and the revolutionaries of eighteenth-century Paris, Camus found it impossible to avert his eyes from the misery and unhappiness of the masses: "What characterizes our time, indeed," he stated, "is the way the masses and their wretched condition have burst upon contemporary sensibilities."

In the course of his lifelong response to the social question, Camus developed a bold and perhaps fatal artistic strategy: he returned to the fundamental demands for justice underlying modern politics in its revolutionary form and swallowed them whole into his art, on the gamble that successful incorporation would allow for a more meaningful and less violent externalization of emotions. Thus, the imperative of responding to raw physical suffering and biological need witnessed in "Misère de la Kabylie" reappears again and again in his writings. Prompted by what Hannah Arendt has called passion in its noblest form, "compassion," Camus stubbornly refused to let go of the theme of abject suffering. Implacable, he insisted on recruiting what he thought was the raison d'être of Marxist and socialist politics into the camp of literature rather than allowing them to subsume art: "We writers of the twentieth century … must know that we can never escape the common misery and that our only justification, if indeed there is a justification, is to speak up, insofar as we can, for those who cannot do so." Caught between the demands of his art and the demands of political commitment, Camus attempted to work out an apology for the relevance of art in the twentieth century. As in the case of the Christian apologists, the crucial question, from the perspective of all higher, ennobling culture, hinged on whether he could successfully close the abyss of possibilities that he dared to open.

There have been several notable attempts within European literature to broaden the imagination to the point where it might control or at least contain the involvement of thought and action in modern politics. George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four is perhaps the best known example, but it is notable in particular because of Orwell's attitude of total acceptance toward the corruptions of political power. Winston Smith, after all, does not symbolically triumph over O'Brien. In the end Winston has moved beyond personal despair because he has been so completely emptied of any memory and the capacity for love that there is nothing left to do but consummate his totalitarian surrender and "love" Big Brother. Winston's acquiescence to the ultimate political regime imaginatively represents what Orwell elsewhere predicted in a mood of total despair: "The autonomous individual is going to be stamped out of existence. But this means that literature, in the form in which we know it, must suffer at least a temporary death."
Another political novel of the same era, Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, is almost as pessimistic in that it ends with the sacrifice of the old Bolshevik, Rubashov, to the totality of the Party. Yet it extends beyond what Orwell himself described as the unusual ability of a good political writer—"to imagine oneself as the victim"—to what Rubashov calls the evil of the Bolshevik mind: "We have thrown overboard all conventions, our sole guiding principle is that of consequent logic: we are sailing without ethical ballast." Ignazio Silone's *Bread and Wine* goes still further in its attempt to dominate and transform the meaning of political commitment. Just as Rubashov expresses his speculation about the nature of the Party evil in the privacy of his diary, so the committed Marxist Pietro Spina asks in the privacy of his jottings whether his denial of "petit bourgeois prejudices" is not the source of his error. But, as Camus once pointed out in a review of *Bread and Wine*, Silone's lesson represents a "return from an abstract philosophy of the revolution to the bread and wine of simplicity." In consequence, Silone stands closer to Camus' goals of assigning limits to revolutionary thought and establishing the supremacy of artistic insight.

These goals are most clearly expressed in Camus' own interpretation of Martin du Gard's *Les Thibault*, which he considered one of the first novels to have mastered the dangers of political commitment. Camus makes his case for the superiority of artistic over political meaning by arguing for the symbolic strength of the rebellious Antoine over his revolutionary socialist brother, Jacques. While both men are deeply moved enough by the existence of human misery to leave the narrowness of their private lives for a broader world of public purpose, Jacques' character transformation is "less significant," less profound, less persuasive because he adheres to the reason of revolutionary doctrine. In Camus' analysis, the unreality of revolutionary ideas introduces a shallow thought-world that uproots and destroys lives. Their emptiness is betrayed in the impatience of Jacques "who can be satisfied only by action" and who dies, finally, as a terrorist. In contrast, Antoine proves to be the "true hero" precisely because he is the deeper or "richer character" when compared with his politically committed brother. Politics does not consume his social relationships. The revulsion he feels at "the recognition of a common misery" extends beyond politics into his profession of medicine, which, Camus implies, helps both to deepen and to order his life. In the end Antoine is the more uncertain but stable, even when confronting death, for having rejected the ideological passions of political commitment.

Camus' rejection of political commitment, intellectually and emotionally, rests upon the argument that revolutionary doctrine corrupts the original feeling of indignation and revulsion over the perceived injustices of the world by narrowing their expression to the political realm alone. As to the desirability of having these feelings in the first place, Camus simply took this for granted, implicitly invoking the insights of the modern novel in particular. As he saw it, Dostoevsky had established beyond a doubt the justification for intense and passionate revolt in the face of human misery through the character of Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Ivan's fault lay not in his revolt against creation but in the rationalization of his rebellion to the point of imagining that "everything is permitted." Intellectualization marked his fall into the political temptations expressed by the Grand Inquisitor.

Camus thought it quite clear that not "everything is permitted." But he was not about to appeal to a vision of sacred order to narrow the possibilities that the imperatives of suffering and misery raised. If any created order existed, it was created by men; hence, the importance of the artist. As an exemplary rebel, the artist represented a disciplining of creative energies, a tempering of experience, because of a loyalty to the very forms on which art depends. "Both the historical mind and the artist seek to remake the world," Camus wrote, "but the artist, through an obligation of his very nature, recognizes limits the historical mind ignores." As to where this "nature" came from, Camus, except on rare occasions, did not deign to ask.

Camus' case against Marxist thought repeats many familiar points concerning its questionable scientific basis, the inaccuracies of its economic-historical predictions, its bourgeois prejudice in favor of economic-technological development, and its similarity to certain aspects of Christian thought. But the crux of Camus objections pertains to the subordination of the personality to historical demands, especially the demands of faith. Since Marxism, like Christianity, places man within a historical rather than a natural
universe, Camus sees Marxist doctrine as suppressing both the opportunity for spontaneous revolt and the achievement of self-limitation by the autonomous personality. It is only insofar as Marxism envisions a release from the demands of history that he is sympathetic: "the aims, the prophecies are generous and universal," Camus writes of Marxism, "but the doctrine is restrictive, and the reduction of every value to historical terms leads to the direst consequences." More specifically, these serious consequences result from the denial of "ethical demands that form the basis of the Marxist dream." According to Camus, Marx himself was a rebel: "he rebelled against the degradation of work to the level of a commodity and of the worker to the level of an object." He affirmed the natural dignity of man. But Marx corrupted his original ethical demands when rebellion against injustice gave way to prophetic demands, not so much the prophecy of release from history into the Communist community of true individuals, as the prophecy of a protracted historical development that places the meaning of history at its end. In Camus' terms, Marx was a "fatalist," for by accepting the necessity of class struggles and economic progress, Marx accepted the necessity of misery and violence, of punishment in the name of the future. It no longer matters that the Kingdom of Ends is established by dictatorship and violence, that suffering becomes merely provisional and will be forgotten. And even if the "New Jerusalem" is achieved, "echoing with the roar of miraculous machinery," Camus asks, "who will still remember the cry of the victim?"

Despite the fact that Marxism is built upon what Camus sees as the Hegelian destruction of transcendence, parallels between the Old Jerusalem and the New Jerusalem run throughout Camus' analysis. Behind the historical interpretation of social reality, Camus ultimately finds the demands of faith. The punishing consequences of the fatalistic acceptance of misery result from neither an economics nor a science of history but from a religion of history imposed by a doctrinal faith. While he finds much to criticize in Marx's economic predictions and his submission to "the economic imperative" in a world governed by "the cult of production," it is the subordination of economic and scientific reasoning to the prophecy of an end to history that turns reason toward the rationalization of terror and violence. Doctrinal faith, in the form of Marxism, repeats the mistake of Christianity, which subjected "living reason to dead faith and freedom of the intellect to the maintenance of temporal power." Intellectualization corrupts the original moral demands associated with the virtues of revolt and leads to the quest for power. Because Camus operates from the assumption that there are no final or religious answers to the misery of living, he links all doctrines proclaiming such saving answers to the tendency toward "intellectual Caesarism." All authority is seen as a consequence of this bad habit of intellectualizing, which, if it is not simply a mask for power, certainly is a metaphor for the same.

Camus' reading of Western cultural history responds with an acute sensitivity to the problem of legitimacy in the modern state that Max Weber most clearly identified. He simply could not accept an ordinary answer to the extraordinary problem of justifying the use of violence. But his sensitivity to the violence at the root of the modern state—which will not be resolved, as he grasped in his anguish, by the intellectual trick of equating authority with legitimate power—was complicated by his anarchistic revolt against any theory of public authority. Having pointed to the crippled capacity to distinguish right from wrong peculiar to our times, Camus proceeded to call into question all authoritative standards of judgment, traditional and otherwise, by suggesting that they are a "plague" without purpose. The terror of power asserts itself not merely through intellectual creeds but especially by means of the repressive judgments, the thou shalt nots, against the spontaneous expressions of the human spirit. Camus compounded a variety of irreconcilable theories of the decline of Christianity to arrive at the charge that it is the Judaic heritage in Western culture that has led to the punishing demands of history and to the destruction of the Greek concept that man lives in a natural universe. Frightened by the injustice of the modern state, Camus simply projected his sense of injustice backward into the Western traditions that he otherwise recognized as having been decisively rejected by modern revolutionaries, with the result that he accentuated the continuity of religious and revolutionary traditions at the same time that he questioned their unity.

Camus' confusion of religious and revolutionary motifs can be directly traced to his concept of the sacred. He assumes that "only two possible worlds can exist for the human mind: the sacred (or, to speak in Christian
terms, the world of grace) and the world of rebellion.” As a consequence, the revolutionary thought-world of Marxism is assimilated to the realm of the sacred. But under the category of the sacred he conflates two contradictory motifs. The world of the Old Testament, for example, is antinomian. It is simultaneously controlling and violative, interdictory and transgressive, resulting in a violence that always subverts but never subserves traditional judgments. Themes of gratuitous violence, hatred, frenzy and massive infliction of injustice dominate any possibility of impulse control. Punishment is meaningless, senseless, absurd: The Plague "shows that the absurd teaches nothing" because the Biblical symbol of repressive control punishes without purpose. God prefers Abel's sacrifice over Cain's and demands Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. Likewise, the Christian God permits the sacrifice of Ivan's innocent children for no apparent reason, just as Marxism in practice demands sacrifices in the name of the future. Camus' understanding of judgment completely ignores the notion of punishment as a sanction that supports controls upon experience. But even more significantly, his understanding closes off the possibility of revelation. There is no revelation of criminal possibilities in the heart of man and, therefore, no opportunity to repent and live under a new collective and individual order.

Prophecy is a dead tradition as seen through the eyes of Camus. Its remoteness from urban-technological culture is explicit in the sermons of Father Paneloux in The Plague and in the inverted apologetics of the false prophet Jean-Baptiste Clamence in The Fall, and implicit in Camus' conception of prophecy as a literal prediction about the future unrelated to an inner return to the past in The Rebel. In the latter work, especially, Camus overlooks the fact that the Western prophetic traditions were a recall to the repressive limits of the past, which were revolutionary only insofar as they were culturally conservative. To the Jewish prophets, for example, punishment was a revelation of violation of the Commandments. Camus' linking of Judaic and Christian traditions with Marxist prophecy obscures the complete break with traditional conceptions of man envisioned by Marx: for the Marxist prophecy of the future Communist identity liberated from traditional necessities carries powerful anti-repressive implications for the personality. When Camus states that "by demanding for the workers real riches, which are not the riches of money but of leisure and creation," Marx reclaimed the "dignity of man," he assumes the continuation of an ascetic personality type which Marx did not. For Camus, "creation" and "leisure" involved repressive necessities that mandated withdrawal from the world. A literary vocation was no leisure time activity worked in between some morning hunting and afternoon fishing, but rather an exclusive act of devotion which opened the way into a meaningful life. Fixation of activity was the very precondition of the achievement of identity.

Camus did not subscribe to the Marxist and humanist conception in which a person becomes fully human only through liberation from specific vocational, communal, national and religious identities. Yet his rejection of Western religious traditions inevitably pushed him toward the abstract humanist language of "humanity" and "mankind" (which Marx transformed into the "proletariat"), conceptually cutting him loose from the moorings of particular commitments. Camus' great admiration for Simone Weil, however, betrays the conservative assumptions implicit in his idea of human dignity. In The Need for Roots, for instance, Weil makes quite explicit the theological grounding of her defense of restraining commitments to vocation, community and nation. Camus simply ignored any such theologizing while exemplifying in much that he said and did the importance of particularity, of the need for roots, even though the demand for engagement pulled him toward an abstract, rootless conception of mankind and justice. Ungrounded in either an explicit or implicit theology, Camus found his roots in his literary vocation and French-Algerian homeland.

Unconsciously, at first, and then by conscious design, Camus became increasingly obedient to what he saw as the demands of the French literary tradition in modern society. Much the same pattern of return to constraining demands linked to the past repeats itself, but at a slower pace, with regard to Camus' commitment to French Algeria. Distraught over the increasing terror and violence of both "liberation" and colonial forces during the 1950s, Camus adamantly rejected the policies of both sides. Despite his protests against the irresponsible conduct of French colonial rule, Camus' sympathy with the misery-stricken population of Algeria precluded "a policy of surrender that would abandon the Arab people to an even greater misery, tear
the French in Algeria from their century-old roots, and favor, to no one's advantage, the new imperialism now threatening the liberty of France and of the West."

Increasingly, the binding character of communal-national origins became a significant aspect of Camus' thought, progressing to the subject of Camus' own origins in his unfinished autobiographical novel, *Le Premier Homme*. But Camus followed the conservative theorizing of theologians such as Weil only so far, for in his conception writing was a "man's trade" and not a "gift of grace." The background of *Le Premier Homme* was to have been "those lands without a past" of which he wrote in *L'Été*, "lands of imagination, composed of a mixing of races." He imagined "a 'first man' who starts at zero, who can neither read nor write, who has neither morality nor religion." It was to have been the story of the creation of human culture, but this time without the antinomian excesses of historical doctrines.

Conservative modern theorists from Burke and Tocqueville to Arendt have assumed that people can become and remain human only to the extent that they identify with, and thereby limit themselves by means of, binding communal commitments. These commitments have been *public* commitments to vocation, community, class, nation and religion. Because Camus refused to articulate a public doctrine to oppose the radical break with traditional commitments explicit in Marxist doctrine, he frequently emphasized the importance of personal commitments, especially friendship, as the basis of social order. For him, justice, morality and social order were the consequence of personal loyalties, close to what American sociologist Charles Horton Cooley called primary relationships. Denial of binding affective ties permitted the excesses of nihilism. For this reason, Camus underscored the nihilistic significance of Nechave's sacrifice of friendship and love for the revolution. (Paragraph 6 of the *Revolutionary Catechism* reads: "Hard with himself, he must be hard towards others. All the tender feelings of family life, of friendship, love, gratitude and even honour must be stifled in him by a single cold passion for the revolutionary cause.") Camus assumed that political commitment suppresses the personal experiences necessary to the creation of public life, that it prevents their diffusion into society by destroying the private life of love and friendship itself.

The same basic charge is at the heart of Camus' argument that Lenin "never ceased to fight mercilessly against the sentimental forms of revolutionary action." Although Camus has in mind anarchism and syndicalism, the sentiments to which he refers spring from the affections of private existence. But in the case of Lenin, Camus openly admits what is elsewhere unstated—that Lenin "wanted to abolish the morality of revolutionary action because he believed, correctly, that revolutionary power could not be established while still respecting the Ten Commandments." Here, Camus not only acknowledges the importance of traditional controls to his conception of the private sphere, but he also specifically refers to prohibitions that are at the center of what he rather vaguely calls "the Judaic heritage" and "the God of the Old Testament." Plainly, if Lenin was despotic because he opposed the Commandments, then despotism must not result from traditional judgments. Camus' very understanding of the spontaneous expressions of the private life was so deeply imbued with traditional assumptions about the hierarchical nature of man that he could not imagine human nature without them.

Camus' continual opposition of theory and spontaneity, doctrine and nature, then, is misleading. It assumes the unqualified rejection of neither traditional controls nor the intellect, but rather the denial of theories of the state and public authority. Only in the closing pages of *The Rebel* does he begin to make clear that the history of our time is the history of "the struggle of German ideology against the Mediterranean mind"—of the "Caesarian revolution" against tradeunionism, the State against the commune, absolutist society against concrete society: "The profound conflict of this century is perhaps not so much between the German ideologies of history and Christian political concepts, which in a certain way are accomplices, as between German dreams and Mediterranean traditions, between the violence of eternal adolescence and virile strength, between nostalgia, rendered more acute by knowledge and by books and courage reinforced and enlightened by the experience of life—in other words, between history and nature." What is *natural* is a world without the power politics of the State, without the sometimes terrible demands of public authorities. While profoundly anti-political, Camus' vision of society may also be seen as culturally conservative. The "irrepressible demand
of human nature" is not for a life without impulse repression, but against a life of political suppression. Camus expresses the anarcho-syndicalist dream in which the State is itself the dream of historical theorists.

Camus rightly points to Lenin as a key figure in understanding the modern state. However, he fixes upon Lenin's subordination of the spontaneity of the masses to a theoretical vanguard in What is to be Done? as further confirmation that the heart of the Bolshevik evil is located in theory or doctrine. While recognizing that Lenin "jettisons economic fatalism and embarks on action," Camus makes nothing of the fact that Marxist, like Hegelian, doctrine is heavy with the hidden purposes of history, and that therefore Lenin's moral indifference, and especially his activism, may be more the product of doctrinal subservience to the Party than doctrinal discipline. This shift from the superiority of doctrine to organizational tactics, which Camus overlooks, is clear, for instance, in Lenin's use of the term ideology. According to a strict Marxist definition, ideology refers to false consciousness, to conscious expressions that mask unconscious responses to the imperatives of a particular economic-historical circumstance. Lenin eliminates the weight of this unconscious element. By writing of a choice between either bourgeois or Socialist ideology, he shifts focus to the importance of consciousness alone.

This does not mean that the culpability of Marxist doctrine can be dismissed, for the Marxist concept of ideology itself functionalizes away the very possibility of moral, intellectual and religious opposition. With his transformed concept of ideology, Lenin simply took this denial one step further by making it a matter of organizational rather than doctrinal discipline. He pushed the Marxist denial of traditional commitments toward its logical conclusion, making the leap from theory to practice with disastrous consequences. Commitments to Party and then State replaced all others, with the result that not merely private sentiments but public purposes, such as nationality, were denied. As Solzhenitsyn has recently made clear, the Soviet Communists have never been nationalists. From Stalin to the present, they have systematically suppressed and destroyed all evidence of national culture, loyalties and affections, driving a wedge between Nation and State. Similarly, the committed Communist Pietro Spina in Silone's Bread and Wine is not only alienated from the simplicity of the private life by his commitment to the Party, as Camus thought, he is also dangerously close to the Fascists whom he opposes in his rejection of communal purposes that transcend Party interest.

Not simply doctrinal commitment but doctrinal subordination defines the problem. "Man takes refuge in the permanence of the party in the same way that he formerly prostrated himself before the altar" only after doctrine has failed in its highest function from a sociological perspective, which is to preserve the capacity to resist inwardly the corruptions of the established social order. Writing during an era in which the professional revolutionary, like the clergy of an earlier day, could no longer claim moral superiority and spiritual leadership, Camus exemplifies the anti-creedal idealism of a culture suffering from a disenchantment with public commitments from which we have not recovered.

**Criticism: Robert Greer Cohn (essay date October 1986)**


*In the following essay, Cohn provides an overview of Camus's literary career. Cohn praises Camus as "beyond all intellectual fashions and ideological factions, the finest, most authentic voice of his age."*

Let us start modestly, as Albert Camus did. By the time he was stopped, when he died brutally in his forty-seventh year, he was widely regarded as the most important literary figure in the Western world.

He could hardly have come from humbler circumstances. His French father, who died in World War I almost as soon as Albert was born, was an agricultural worker in Algeria. His Spanish mother could not read, seldom spoke, and was partially deaf. Her mother was a straight-laced old lady who raised Albert and his older
brother with strictness and, at times, the whip. Camus grew up in Belcourt, a working-class neighborhood of Algiers. As he looked back on it later, his childhood seemed happy despite the hardships. He loved the life of the streets and the beaches in the sun. A dedicated teacher took an interest in him and encouraged him in his studies. Camus worked with fierce concentration and went on with scholarships to the University of Algiers, where he specialized in philosophy. But at age 17, he contracted the tuberculosis which never really left him, though it came and went. He dropped out of school and took a series of odd jobs. At age 20, he married but divorced a year later; his first wife, Simone Hié, was a beautiful drug addict who betrayed him and wounded his psyche deeply. Camus's affair with the Communist Party shortly after this was rather similar; youthful hopes and swift disenchantment. Simultaneously, he founded a politically-inspired theater group which attracted some local attention. He did some writing as well as acting and directing for it, loved it all passionately. He had meanwhile recovered enough to go back and get a diploma in philosophy. In 1937, he published his first little book, *L'Envers et l'endroit*.

This bring us to the literary Camus who most concerns us, for it is a marvelously honest and tender piece of writing about his early years, and when it was republished shortly before his death, he said that unless he returned to the unspoiled simplicity and piety of that book he would never do anything worthwhile. So let us have a look at it, remarking only that what happened to Camus after that is quite well known: how he fought for justice to the Arabs in the local press, went on to help edit and write for the Resistance paper *Combat* during the war; how he remarried and had twins, how he became famous with *L'Etranger, Le Mythe de Sisyphe, La Peste, L'Homme révolté*, and so on; the quarrel with Sartre; the Nobel prize; his dismay at his fame; and at the Algerian conflict in which he refused to take sides, out of loyalty to his mother; his stupifying death in a car accident in 1960. We will return to some of these items later.

The title *L'Envers et l'endroit* refers to the deep, honest ambivalence that runs throughout Camus; typically for him, particularly in his first manner, love and hate, beauty and ugliness, life and death go hand in hand. Eventually, this total cancellation will be identified with the absurd, referring especially to the tension between the mind's quest for unity or meaning and the world's chaotic refusal of it. One would speak too of heaven and hell, if it were not for the fact that Camus, like his parents, had little use for organized religion though he was baptized a Catholic. But he was a profoundly religious man in his own way and said "God is beauty" to an intimate friend. Later, he will reintroduce into a world threatened by valuelessness the moderate religious concept of "the sacred." Altogether, a pantheism not unlike that of the other great artists of modern France or Europe, or Emily Dickinson here, is close to his untrumpeted belief. But the God of beauty, or of the wistful sacred, is remote indeed from often-grim human affairs, and in these pieces we see an old woman whom no one is interested in staying with any more. The young folks go off heedlessly to the movies and leave her alone with her cold crucifix. Young Camus goes off too, but with a stab of concern in his heart, and we see him, in a sense, betraying those other young'uns, becoming himself with his deeper awareness. There is another sketch about an old man, similarly avoided in a café, going home alone in the dusk toward his eventual death.

There is a scene where Camus is sitting in an Arab café overlooking the twinkling port alone, listening to the foghorns in the night and wondering about his future itinerary through life. The key notes are sounded in the darkness of his love for his strange "indifferent" mother—she never caressed him but they were utterly in league and he knew it—and his need to be a man.

This is a telling point. He was fatherless like his Stranger, of whom it is said tersely "He had never known his father." In *La Chute*, equally tersely, Clamence laments "Il n'y a plus de pére, plus de régles!" It is suggestive to note that any number of France's greatest writers, from Du Bellay and Racine through Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Sartre were orphaned or otherwise deprived of their fathers. The impact is fairly obvious. The normal father provides a role model which mediates the boy's struggles to manhood. Failing that, the process of dissociating oneself from the mother becomes quite problematic, and an excessive pattern is apt to develop of "proving oneself as a man." This is confirmed by Ernesto Guarner (revealed to me by Charles McCabe), a
Spanish psychiatrist whose clientele was exclusively matadors. Without exception, they were fatherless. Before I had learned that, I had spoken in print of Camus's bullfighter psychology, mindful of his Spanish inheritance as well as Michel Leiris' essay, "De la littérature considérée comme une tauromachie" (in L'Age d'homme [Paris: Gallimard, 1939]). I was naturally pleased when Herbert Lottman's biography disclosed the fact that one of his closest friends thought of Camus in just that way. The fact that Patrick McCarthy in his recent book dismisses this notion loftily causes me no particular pain. McCarthy's book (Camus [New York: Random House, 1982]) is often hasty and insensitive, though it has its uses and is cleverly packaged.

In another scene, Camus stares for hours at a mother cat that has just devoured some of her kittens. This is the other side of his special courage and one which I particularly admire. He describes in an unbearably powerful understatement of tenderness a night he spent lying next to his mother after she had been frightened by an unknown assailant, breathing in her perspiration and her silent anguish. In this daring to stay with the unmediated mother, he resembles Proust whom he, unlike Sartre, worshiped. We know about Proust's stubborn relation to his mother; few normal people are honest about their deepest affections and anxieties as this pair of artists were.

Further, as in the case of Proust whose mother could become an object of fierce hatred out of jealousy, in Jean Santeuil to the point of wishing her death, so too Camus sees in the mother cat the hideous "wrong side" of his total attachment, what Jung refers to as the "terrible mother." The Stranger tells the examining magistrate that his indifference before the death of his mother can be partly explained by the fact that everyone desires the death of loved ones at times. This is repeated elsewhere in Camus, and it is an important theme of La Chute. Camus' play Le Malentendu is about a mother who, with the help of her daughter, strangles the incognito traveller who turns out to be her son.

No doubt the betrayal by Simone Hié has something to do with all this and with the well-known don Juanism of Camus, but of course, beneath all that, there are universal facts of life, which some people are more candid about than others. Not that one should wallow in them; Camus thought of his Misunderstanding as a modern tragedy, and that, one feels, is the proper way to handle these matters, just as Sophocles did with his Oedipus. But let there be no misunderstanding here: woman is at the core of Camus' earthly world, where the mother securely is in La Peste.

In L'Etranger, which came out in 1942 and made his reputation, Camus' protagonist seems dazed at first. He has been inwardly stabbed by a new awareness, as we gradually learn with him; he is "on to something," the absurd. The consolations of religion had departed from lots of lives in his time, but it is another thing to feel in depth that the world is made of a profound cleavage between mind and reality. The fact of mortality alone when it hits you truly can make mockery of the quest of meaning; or the simple confrontation of self too close-up in a mirror when you see a sort of alien moon-landscape. Where is our identity, or anything fixed in this fleeting, ephemeral existence? But all that Angst is familiar by now, and I would like rather to emphasize that this is one of those dazzling, infinite half-truths of which reality is obviously made, such as freedom and determinism, continuity and discontinuity, heredity and environment. Since each is infinite, one can get hooked on it as on an infinity-opening drug and Camus did for a youthful while, as did a lot of young people in his time, partly through reading him. As a result of the impact of World War II which, as he said, "made me modest," he discovered or rediscovered the other half-truth, that life is not absurd. From then on, those two half-truths together interested him more in what he described as a "higher balance," in connection with his doctrine of limits and moderation. One infinite balances off and limits the other in his more mature perspective.

But for the moment, his hero is stuck in his half-truth of the absurd which Camus will further explore in Le Mythe de Sisyphe. The vertical posture of the young matador can usefully characterize this steep excessive and one-sided honesty which leads or allows him to commit murder. Everyone remembers the scene where he yields to a sort of universal indifference under a dazzling sun on the beach and numbly shoots the Arab who
was harassing his friend, Raymond. The fact that he shoots one shot and then four more has been often explained: his honesty dictates that he, as it were, endorse his dazed act, take fully responsibility in a sort of Nietzschean mood of superman suspension of ordinary morality. The Stranger becomes, it is widely agreed, the full conscious absurdist at this fateful juncture. But the usual comments are less sure of the puzzling accompanying thought which runs through Meursault's head, that he was aware that he had "unbalanced the day". Though nothing can be proven here, I submit that this is the germ of the movement to maturity in the "higher balance" I alluded to earlier. The Stranger's steep, vertical, infinite honesty is tentatively crossed by a ghostly dimension of other-relatedness, equally infinite as he will discover later, in La Peste and L'Homme révolté and which moderates our individual juvenile-omnipotent drives.

This dimension had already existed in his play Caligula, written a few years earlier, in the mouth of his spokesman for decency and sanity, Cherea. But Camus had gone on to get smitten by the new kind of awareness which, as he said in the preface to Le Mythe de Sisyphe, he had found on the "street corners of his time."

In that essay, published in 1943, Camus accepts practically as axiomatic—though he hedges a little in the preface about its being merely a tentative proposition—the manifold contradictions he finds throughout western culture from Zeno and Aristotle on to the existential exponents, such as Kierkegaard, Jaspers, Heidegger and Chestov, of "humiliated thought." So taken is he by this view that he seriously considers whether suicide might not be the proper response to the universal absurdity of our lives, and that is the subject of his essay. To explore, as he puts it, a logic to its extreme consequences even if it dictates our death. A Spanish stubbornness, which Camus was known for, is at work here, very clearly, and I think a succinct comment might be: Olé. Fortunately, he finds for life. Suicide, it turns out, would be a sort of evasion, a copout or "leap." This is a term he applies to a number of thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Chestov, Jaspers, Husserl, who accept the absurd to a point and then find a way out through religious salvation or some equivalent resolution. In this sense, they abort the unending tension which is the essence of absurd contradiction. Suicide would obviously do the same thing. But for this Camus the absurd is our only reality, our only good and must be lived with all the bittersweet way, with passion, lucidity, revolt—by this last term, he means never giving in, as in suicide or consoling religion. It is equivalent to consciousness or high consciousness. In other words, suicide would take away all we have, bitter as it is at times, and even in essence. A long, lucid, and intensely indifferent life is the defiant révolté answer to such a fate, and he imagines Sisyphus, rolling his eternal rock up the hill only to have it roll back down again, as being happy, as he says at one decisive point.

All this can bear another look. What is really going on underneath is this: at the point where Camus considers suicide as a solution to the absurd, he is confronted with another kind of absurdity, namely that it makes no sense to end a life to solve a life's dilemma because at the moment you die, the very problem disappears; at death, you have solved nothing since there is no more problem. Or if one imagines a tiny instant between life and death and the wavering that would occur between a problem to be solved and a no-problem (in death), then you have what can be seen as the absurd formula folded back or turning on itself. The absurd, which is a contradiction, can—as a total proposition of truth—be seen itself as contradictory. The absurd is both true and not true or, as I said earlier, it is a half-truth.

In the case of Meursault, a tilt from the vertical bullfighter dimension to the horizontal dimension of other-relatedness occurred at least in his mind: it would have provided a balance, the "balance of the day," which he sensed he had broken. Here too, an excessive drive to honesty, a kind of mortal logic which could dictate his death is providentially moderated by a tilt or pivoting: the logic of the absurd, and the suicide which might result from it, give way to an illogical, merely human impulse. Incidentally, even in his early lyrical essays, we find that promising, humane giving-in in terms of tenderness and, at times, a flow of tears. If suicide turns out to be the problematic, wavering solution we just saw it to be, then there is no point committing suicide. Rather, one does nothing drastic in that self-canceling direction but just keeps on living
impulsively, which is what we all do all the time. Camus' "logic" has encountered a limit in the breakdown of the absurd, contradicted by its own self, fortunately. It is precisely such a tilt which characterizes the "happiness" of Sisyphus, which is not at all warranted within the absurd. In fact, it looks suspiciously like what he accused others of: a leap into another dimension of existence, away from the too-perfect logic of the "absurd." This is also true of the statement the good-hearted Camus makes at one point in his essay. Although theoretically his absurdist heroes accept no conventional morality, at that point Camus, obviously frightened of some of the implications, says that there is no reason to commit a crime any more than there is not to commit it, adding that to perform evil would be "childish." If that is not an arbitrary "leap" in his terms, what is it?

Still, the whole doctrine had an immense appeal, as we know, and set the tone of Camus's reputation at that time. Even recently, one heard William Styron speaking of Camus as his guide to whatever replaced religion for him.

But for those who followed Camus into his later phase, during and after and occasioned by the war, we find something quite altered. The tilt to the horizontal of other-relatedness is fully described and accepted in the preface to L'Homme révolté in 1951.

Partly because his reputation was so bound up with it, Camus at this point is at some pains to square his new view with his previous absurdist "logic." But now he clearly states what I have stated a few moments ago: the "profound ambiguity of the absurdist position," or what we have seen as the absurdity or arbitrariness of the absurd. Camus is left quivering at a crossroads: between the two horns of the original absurd contradiction in one direction, the vertical, and between its acceptance and rejection in another direction, the horizontal. At this crucifying juncture, he throws up his hands and sees himself bereft of all but a blind "impulse," life itself just going on at this crossing of dilemma and protesting against the mess. Moreover, the protest is against a world which has seen murder on such a staggering scale in World War II. Indeed, the book L'Homme révolté, which he is prefacing, is an attempt to answer the problem of mass murder in his time, just as Le Mythe was supposed to deal with individual suicide. So he is left only with the protest, this "impulse" which he now calls "revolt." Earlier, you will recall, revolt was the expression of a defiant response to life's absurdities and it just kept you living in the absurd, not coping out. That revolt led to no solution to anything. But now it is his answer to murder, as follows: a "révolté," or rebel, is a person who says no to an unacceptable situation, for example, an exploitative master. But he says "no" in terms of a right, a right to be free of exploitation or injustice. This right is a "yes" which goes with the "no." In other words, a true rebel revolts in the name of a principle which is universal, a right. Since a principle is by definition not just for one individual but a general law, the tilt to the horizontal occurs here, of which I spoke earlier. Since that right encompasses all men, one has no justification for murdering anyone in the name of rebellion, Camus claims. One may well sympathize, as I do, and still see that this pivoting or tilt is just another impulse with no real foundation in logic, absurd or otherwise. It is just the feeling one can have that I and you are all bound up and one slides into the other easily, as in life. There is, indeed, a great mystery of reality here—the problem of identity and intersubjectivity—but it is obvious that people who do not feel it just go ahead and murder anyway, and by the millions, in wars. Camus is sensitive and does feel the connection and compassion, just as he did for the old woman in the early essay we spoke of. He wants us all to feel it and stop killing each other. He is singularly good-hearted. Alas, his notion that we must in true revolt always balance the "no" and the "yes" as well as the I and the we—the striking and the caring or scrupulosity—is not easily observed in the heat of action which is not simultaneous, balanced, but serial or successive. Typically, one will strike and then regret it, or mourn a dead enemy if it comes to that; but not both together.

In a section of L'Homme révolté Camus alludes to Ivan Kaliaev, a Russian poet who insisted on giving his own life to pay for the life of the tyrant which he took. Camus called him "an innocent assassin" and wrote an admiring play about him, called Les Justes. Well, not too many will emulate him and it is clear that there is no sure-fire formula here. Yet, I think Camus is doing as well with all this as one can. By adding the horizontal
dimension to his earlier perspective and maturing into his doctrine of limits and "higher balance," he has powerfully and convincingly shown at least what is desirable. He knows that this impulse toward The Other, including an enemy, is just that, an impulse. It is a tilt to the side and The Other and on-going life, even as you radically revolt in depth and cut through (vertically) a status quo. But, knowing that, he nudges us in the humane direction, and that is a good thing. In this way, he gives comfort to all those who would temper the ruthless revolts of Marxism by a limit, a cross-cutting dimension of humanity, as in the views of Silone and Gramsci in Italy and the modern Socialists in Western Europe generally, including France under Mitterrand.

If you look at this another way, viewing history along a timeline—seeing a ruthlessly goal-directed drive in the modern totalitarians, a deification of history as leading to a final justice for all, then Camus's good heart and sense of balance tell him, in *L'Homme révolté*, that we must limit the drive of that "horizontal religion" by a perspective of the sacred, which cuts across it in the name of individual (vertical) human rights, a value outside of history. In this sense, he contests the Sartrean doctrine of existence always preceding essence, and a constantly open relativistic "situation." Rather, he rediscovers that man has a nature after all, a sort of moderated essence which can serve as a value; this or that man is infinitely precious in himself, stemming from the sacred, and history has no right to treat him as a mere pawn toward some utopian end in a remote future.

In this way and others, I believe Camus got the better of Sartre in their famous quarrel. I totally disagree with Patrick McCarthy as to the value of *L'Homme révolté* and Camus' thought in general. *L'Homme révolté* is a heart warming attempt to figure out what went wrong in our Western culture to the extent of the massive atrocities of the twentieth century. He traces our sins of imbalance and hubris from the roots in Judeo-Christianity, which is too obsessively judgmental and goal-oriented as compared to the temperate and relatively now-oriented Greek view of life. His investigation and analysis take him through numerous figures of our tradition, up through the Hegels, Marxes and Nietzsches. He does not always do them full justice—though he is usually generous in admitting this too—but he tries to, and mightily, and for me this is the key book of modern historico-political theory. Camus is not a philosopher and says so, but he is a non-specialized thinker, a poetically visionary, intuitive one, rather like Heidegger's *Denker*. The wrestling with the absurd dimensions which I noted is right in line with the most sophisticated patterns of thought such as we find in Lacan, Foucault, and Jakobson. If he gets no final answers, it is because there are none, for these others as well. The new social concern and the mature higher balance were already evident in *La Peste* of 1947. There is now a definite tilt away from the perfect tension or ambivalence of the absurd in the new formula: "There is more to admire in man than to despise"; such a tilt is, also, sideways, into the flow of time and humane emotion. The hero, Dr. Bernard Rieux, is described as being square-jawed, aged 35, and stocky. It would be hard to be more four-square balanced than that … Because of the new emphasis, Rieux is a doctor, and the people who are too individualistically concerned about (vertical) salvation, such as the Jesuit Paneloux and even the philosophical Tarrou, are somehow doomed and succumb to the plague, whereas an ordinary guy, the journalist Rambert who just wants to be happy with his girl, makes it. For similar reasons, the artist-figure Joseph Grand is cut radically down to humanity in that his art is risible though his decency is great; he too survives, partly because in the midst of the crisis he burns his manuscripts, which is a surefire way to lower your hubris. The later Camus was much concerned about his reputation, pride, and ego getting in the way of breathable life and creativity. Everything in *La Peste* moves in this direction in emphasis, though the vertical is preserved too in proper proportion through Rieux's meditative depth and even Grand's renewed art, in the end. The very tone of the novel is moderated, cool, a chronicle, with a new objectivity and workaday calm befitting the doctor narrator. The emphasis is collective, and the events of the chronicle are seen from several viewpoints. Fraternity, unpretentious struggle against a still-absurd fate which brings plagues that come and go when they want, courage with refusal of heroics, just life wanting to go on and be normally happy, all this had a considerable appeal to young people who were looking for guidance in a world without much belief after the second World War.
One of his last books, and some think his best, was *La Chute*, of 1957. It is a bitterly funny portrait of a former Parisian lawyer living in Amsterdam. He had a golden youth and thought very highly of himself as a lover of his fellow man until one day he failed to respond to a dangerous call for help from a drowning woman in the Seine, and then his whole ego-structure collapsed. "The lights went out" on the party, as it did for Salinger’s girls in *Uncle Wiggly in Connecticut* or, really, all of us privileged people. No longer being able to keep up an image of his goodness and innocence, he resorts to a stratagem of spreading universal sense of guilt; "misery loves company." This was his fall from a sort of grace, and his name and much of the symbolism allude to Saint John the Baptist and the theme of baptism which the plunge into the nocturnal river would have been, a sacrificial descent leading to salvation, rebirth. So he calls himself a "false prophet," living in duplicity like all the rest of existence, and this is the constant, searingly amusing theme: all our little self-deceptions and hypocrisies are paraded before us. And there is the higher duplicity of the Hegelian notion that evil is just a part of the on-going synthesis of good and evil, which Kierkegaard trenchantly revolted against with his either-or. Camus is solidly, underneath, on the side of Kierkegaard here, though he is never mentioned. The muddy, verbose dialectics of his own time, Sartre’s included, are being subtly invoked. But the pure light of the Greek islands stands for that clear innocence we can never find again in our northern mists amid the hustling, hassling, self-seeking, conning, half-lying millions in our semi-polluted cities like Amsterdam, the site of one of the greatest crimes in history, as Camus puts it, the genocide of the Dutch Jews. But the protagonist, Jean-Baptiste Clamence, goes rattling on about this and that, always worrying about his own self-justification. He even tries to pull Jesus down to his all-too-human size, seeing him as guilty because of his awareness of the children of Rachel, the slaughter of the Innocents killed for his sake, and he hears the cries of Rachel refusing to be consoled. Here, Camus and Clamence want us to break through at least for an imagined instant, a flash. There is not the slightest question of Clamence speaking for Camus, as some (like Simone de Beauvoir) thought; Camus denied this roundly in an interview, and poured scorn on Clamence. No, but in those break-through moments, we see the original Camus whom Patrick McCarthy and others rightly deem a deeply religious man without a church—a man who could reject organized religion and the afterlife again and again and, yet, say to an interviewer "The anti-religious view is vulgar," or "God is beauty", and speak of the sacred as the only resource—a Value—against the ruthless nihilistic plunge into merely secular history. A beggar who comes up to Clamence in the street whispers humbly "We have lost the light." Those few words are quite sufficient for those who have eyes to glimpse with.

Camus in an interview put truth above all other values, but as we noted, he was a good-hearted decent man and, on the whole, he was a sort of higher centrist. He stayed in the middle of controversies such as the Algerian war for independence, and at the end of *L’Homme révolté* he comes out for a whole series of mid-positions: moderation in revolt, the mild, reasonable Mediterranean, and an idea of Europe as being humanly in-between excesses in Russia and technology-driven America (as he saw it then); the village as opposed to big cities—he rather loathed New York and did not often care for Paris—or rural emptiness on the other side; the season, as of the harvest, between overambitious teleological or eschatological reaches of time or the too short sighted daily perspectives; the trade-union movements in politics; and so on. He spoke for the centered literary work, e.g., the novel, as against formalistic art on one hand and journalism on the other; and it was supposed to be balanced between private concerns and public. As a novelist, he was a daring innovator, and yet he spoke again and again of his love for the French classic era and style: Pascal, Molière, Madame de LaFayette. He wanted to write a modern tragedy, and, in a fine essay, he saw tragedy as arising on its two august occasions, in Greece and Renaissance Europe, between an age of faith declining and a rising age of reason. Altogether he was a sublime muddler-through, in the enlightened middle as it were. That is not a comfortable position to be in, especially when everyone else is taking sides as they usually do. You get hit by both parties at times, like a referee. Politics is not carried on this way and he can be said, in brief, to be largely apolitical despite his struggles to pitch into his time. McCarthy calls him "indifferent" in contradiction to the popular image of Camus as a moral leader, but that is excessive. No, he was a fiercely caring man, but in his own far-seeing and superior way. At times, of course, these higher syntheses drop into a dreadful opposite of nothingness, indifference in that sense, and Camus with his recurring tuberculosis, certainly had his black or
zero moments; his friend, Martin du Gard, even spoke of his misanthropy. But taking that with the sacrificial and deep concerns, still, all in all, including the sensitivity, the courage, the lucidity, the culture, the style, the sense of humor, he was probably what we Americans all along tended to think he was: beyond all intellectual fashions and ideological factions, the finest, most authentic voice of his age.

**Criticism: Vicki Mistacco (essay date 1992)**


[In the following essay, Mistacco offers a psychoanalytical feminist reading of The Stranger, drawing attention to elements of femininity in the pre-oedipal relationship between Meursault and his mother.]

In his last interview, when asked what he felt critics had most neglected in his work, Camus replied: 'La part obscure, ce qu'il y a d'aveugle et d'instinctif en moi.' Many have since sought to approach this dark, enigmatic side from the perspective of psychoanalysis, emphasizing, as Freudian and Lacanian orthodoxy requires, the oedipal moment, and in so doing repressing or devaluing the maternal bond, giving primacy to the phallus and the threat of castration. To my knowledge, however, no sustained effort has been made to view Camus's writing from the perspective of psychoanalytic feminism, stressing rather the importance of the pre-oedipal stage in which the primary figure is not the father but the mother and the primary relationship is a dual not triangular one, between mother and child. Feminist critics have most often adopted this approach to study the mother/daughter dyad in women writers. Shifting the context, I propose here to effect a kind of 'naive' reading, to 'overread' Camus, as if he were a woman writer, for traces of the relationship between the feminine and text production, bracketing psychoanalytic orthodoxy to allow the 'underread,' the feminine maternal, to emerge from the shadows of critical repression and be seen in Meursault's revolt in L'Etranger, the text's ambiguities, and the author's concept of the Absurd. By referring positively to Meursault as a 'mama's boy,' I am drawing upon the hero's infantile vocabulary to suggest the transgressive potential in this relationship and to question the term's pejorative cultural connotations of a somehow 'effeminate' boy whose excessive attachment to the mother extends scandalously beyond the 'normal' time.

It is difficult to appreciate the consequences of this critical move without a sense of the constraints of previous masculinist psychoanalytic interpretations. These have instituted and reinforced a kind of doxa, a rigid hermeneutic grid that only permits repetition of the same, phallocentrism, and generates the greatest degree of critical excitement around the ideas of incest and castration.

The standard procedure among the Freudian critics is to interpret all of Camus, and especially L'Etranger, in the light of L'Envers et l'endroit, a collection of autobiographical essays first published in 1937 just prior to the composition of L'Etranger, then republished in 1958 with an all-important preface in which Camus points to the childhood world of poverty they evoke—and above all the silent mother—as the source of his work. These critics then focus on two features of the mother/son relationship as portrayed in one of the essays, 'Entre oui et non,' the boy's ambivalence toward maternal silence and an incident in which the mother is attacked by a male intruder and the son, called in to tend to her in her state of shock, ends up spending the night on her bed watching over her. Camus uses the third person to refer to the son in the recollected past, distancing himself from what may in fact be fiction or fictional transposition of lived experience for aesthetic ends, something most Freudian critics tend to overlook, keen as they are to (re)discover the 'events' determining Camus's psyche and writing that will allow them to replay the usual gynophobic Freudian scenarios.

Let us first consider maternal silence. Camus's mother as depicted in L'Envers et l'endroit was nearly deaf, practically mute, inarticulate, feeble-minded, illiterate. Conversation between mother and son was sparse as the mother withdrew into a solitary, immobile, and unreflective world of silence. On the one hand, her silence
is described in positive terms as a form of presence and plenitude ("A quoi tu penses?" "A rien," répondait-elle. Tout est là, done rien'), timelessness ('un temps d'arrêt, un instant démesuré') and knowledge ('A se taire, la situation s'éclaircit. Il est son fils, elle est sa mère. Elle peut lui dire: "Tu sais"). On the other hand, it inspires fear and pain in the young boy and is presented negatively as 'mutisme', 'irrémédiable désolation', 'silence animal' and as a form of indifference reinforced by deprivation of maternal caresses and linked with feelings of estrangement and strangeness ('L'indifférence de cette mère étrange!).

According to Costes, Gassin, Lazere, and other Freudian critics, this ambivalence and the frustrations that the mother's seeming indifference 'must have' (a key phrase in these analyses) caused the child, led to a splitting of her imago as a defence mechanism. She thus becomes both Good Mother and Bad Mother and is endowed with both maternal (good) and paternal (bad) characteristics, including in the latter instance, a phallus. What is interesting is that although Camus stresses in these essays ambivalence and tension maintained between opposing notions which ultimately revert back to the mother ('Entre cet endroit et cet envers du monde, je ne veux pas choisir, je n'aime pas qu'on choisisse'), for all these critics the scales definitely tip toward the Bad or Phallic Mother whose phallus is her silence. Costes goes so far as to say that the Phallic Mother presides, 'en maîtresse absolue' over the early cycle of the Absurd. Clearly, this type of simplification is commanded by the critic's own desire for unity, an unproblematised unity which, unlike the one I see at work in Camus, enables interpretive mastery of the author's psyche and writings and a repetition of the same, the masculine, the valorised term. The Good Mother and the positive attributes of her silence are essentially dismissed as an idealisation, a defence wrought by castration anxiety. The persecuting phallus turns out to be nothing but a mask for the mother's lack and her silent mouth none other than a castrating vagina dentata. Critical gynophobia is transformed into the hermeneutic key that will unlock the secrets of Camus's work protecting us all (all of us men) from the enigmatic Sphinx who devours young men: 'l'oeuvre entière de Camus n'avait d'autre fonction-de son seul point de vue inconscient, évidemment-que de combler ce silence maternel, véritable gouffre à fantasmes.' The threatening hole must be filled, repressed, covered up with a phallus, lest the 'nothing' be acknowledged to harbour a something and the 'admirable silence' that Camus sets forth in the preface as the centre of his work and an ethical model be viewed positively. Contradictions must be swept aside by the 'symbolisme latent et négatif' of the Mother psychoanalysis relentlessly redisCOVERs.

The second critical move, involving slippage from the preoedipal to the oedipal, from positive symbiosis to incest, and from maternal discourse to 'incestuous language,' may be discerned in the standard Freudian interpretations of the scene of the attack on the mother and the ensuing night with her son. Gassin and Costes are essentially in agreement that this is Camus's version of the primal scene fantasy—that of the child's witnessing of parental intercourse—with its accompanying panoply of sadism, masochism, and guilt. It is an anxiety-inducing scene in which the mother appears to castrate the father and incorporate his penis. The son's identification with the aggressor, here seen as his taking the place of the aggressor/father in his mother's bed, yields guilty incestuous feelings as well as anxiety about his own potential castration by father and mother combined. Only Lazere suggests that the night shared by mother and son on the same bed may be interpreted as a fantasy of the womb, a pre-genital fantasy of symbiotic union with the mother, although, retrospectively, he too shifts to a negative oedipal interpretation in analysing the remainder of the essay. Incest is clearly but one possible interpretation of the scene which may also be read in a way that highlights pre-oedipal union where vivid memories of the womb subsist and where the simultaneous breathing, the solitary bonding of mother and child against the rest of the world ('Seuls contre tous. Les "autres" dormaient, à l'heure où tous deux respiraient la fièvre'), even abolishing the outside world ('Le monde s'était dissous'), and 'les liens qui l'attachaient à sa mère,' are most important. To view L'Etranger 'dans son ensemble,' not to mention all of Camus's oeuvre, in the exclusive light of an oedipal and primal scene interpretation of this one episode is to blind oneself to the workings of the maternal in Camus and to foreclose all possibility of a hermeneutics of the feminine. It is hardly surprising, then, that Costes should fail to recognise a crucial distinction in his own terminology when he conflates 'la langue maternelle' with 'le language incestueux' as the aim of Camus's literary discourse.
Barthes pondered in *The Pleasure of the Text*, 'Doesn't every narrative lead back to Oedipus?' I suggest we reformulate the question, asking 'does every narrative have to lead back to Oedipus, even if the subject is male?' Perhaps the oedipal perspective is not, as Freud would have it, 'the only angle on the pre-oedipal.' Freed from the oedipal grid, would we not also be freed from the requisite remarks about Camus's fear and hostility toward the mother and therefore toward women in general? Would we not then be able to see beyond obvious thematics—Meursault's treatment of Marie, his participation in Raymond's sordid scheme of revenge, his apparent indifference to his mother—and come to a more nuanced appreciation of the novel's ambiguities? And as feminists, to escape repetition of the same, must we not propose a feminist reading that is first and foremost a reading of the feminine?

What does this mean? To read the feminine is not primarily to psychoanalyse the hero or the author, but rather to draw attention to traces of maternal discourse, to the workings of the pre-oedipal in the signifying system of the novel. This frame of reference makes it possible to recontextualise previous critical findings and illuminate the text otherwise. Take, for example, the famous opening paragraph:


*Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe. I don't know. I got a telegram from the home: 'Mother deceased. Funeral tomorrow. Faithfully yours.' That doesn't mean anything. Maybe it was yesterday.*

This text represents the first cut, a disruption of undifferentiated pre-narrative existence that sets the story in motion. As such, it figures not so much a death as a birth, the cutting of the umbilical cord which precipitates the child into a first, pre-oedipal, signifying process not structured by the phallus, into a *process of differentiation* between self and other (Julia Kristeva on maternity, discussed in Jacobus). The first emblem of this process is lexical: 'maman.' In the absence of a father he never knew, Meursault seems to prolong into adulthood the pre-oedipal phase and the early linguistic relationship to the mother. Whether or not this is by choice, as his remark about abandoned studies suggests, is not immediately relevant. Many have noted Meursault's childish, simple vocabulary, his elementary syntax, his childlike attitudes, and infantile occupations (the games he plays to pass the time, his long hours of sleep). What interests me here is that, by ironic juxtaposition with the formal, stilted language of the telegram, a first incursion of the symbolic, the language of patriarchy, Meursault's infantile vocabulary and syntax reinscribe the pre-oedipal in much the same way as feminist theoreticians such as Kristeva, as both a marginal space and a space of dissidence, projecting into meaninglessness language as we know it: 'cela ne veut rien dire.' The feminine maternal thus becomes the vantage point for the crisis in language that is evidenced throughout the novel and for the crisis in meaning it engenders. The pre-oedipal archaic mother presides over a narrative of non-mastery, of meaning decontextualised and deferred, of unresolved enigmas: 'peut être..., je ne sais pas.'

At the threshold and in the margins of the narrative, the mother's body unsettles the border between absence and presence, inside and outside, beginnings and endings, perturbing, by this liminality, identity, representation, and truth. We never actually 'see' the mother's body: 'J'ai voulu voir maman tout de suite. Mais le concierge m'a dit qu'il fallait que je rencontre le directeur.' Paternal figures intervene to screen it. The concierge explains: 'On l'a couverte, mais je dois dévisser la bière pour que vous puissiez la voir.' Later the director reiterates the invitation to view the body in the casket. What this amounts to is maternal repression. From the point of view of the Symbolic Order, to look at the mother can only mean to see death—or lack, as the director's expression 'veiller la disparue' suggests. Above all, for patriarchy to function smoothly, the maternal body must simply be *buried*, for it is only after the burial, Meursault concludes, that 'tout aura revêtu une allure plus officielle.'
Situating the mother's absence differently, Meursault's refusal to view the body draws attention to society's repression of the maternal and rewrites feminine lack as dissidence. This is the real crime for which he is punished by the judicial system, the most ostentatious manifestation of the Law of the Father in the novel. In the words of the prosecutor: 'j'accuse cet homme d'avoir enterré une mère avec un coeur criminel.' This symbolic 'matricide' turn out to be in society's eyes the equivalent of patricide: Meursault has threatened patriarchy by killing its body-effacing image of the mother.

The pre-oedipal attachment to the mother is not without contradiction and attempts at distancing, however, just as her procreating body itself marks a space of differentiation. By putting her in an old-people's home, Meursault has re-enacted an infant's primal distancing from the mother as not-yet-object. To explain his impassiveness at the funeral, he tells his lawyer: 'Tous les êtres sains avaient plus ou moins souhaité la mort de ceux qu'ils aimaien.' We need not invoke the oedipal drama, incest, maternal indifference or rejection to account for these apparently negative moments in the son's relationship to the mother. They are part of the self-differentiating process that brings about subject-formation and therefore a pre-symbolic type of signification, a process Julia Kristeva has called 'abjection': 'A massive and sudden emergence of unc anniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten [pre-natal?] life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome.' The 'abject' or maternal pseudo-object represents a first attempt to distinguish ourselves from the maternal entity even before we exist outside her through the autonomy granted by language. The mother in this perspective is same-but-different and the mother/child relationship is one of estrangement as well as union. It seems difficult not to recognise in these the ambivalent terms of the mother/son relationship in *L'Envers et l'endroit* also, and not to read a reference to abjection in that ur-text of the maternal in Camus, the first entry in the *Carnets*: 'le sentiment bizarre qu'un fils porte à sa mère constitue toute sa sensibilité. Les manifestations de cette sensibilité dans les domaines les plus divers s'expliquent suffisamment par le souvenir latent, matériel de son enfance (una glu qui s'accroche à l'âme).' The bizarre feeling that a son has for his mother constitutes all his sensitivity. The expressions of this sensitivity in the most varied spheres can be sufficiently explained by the latent, material memory of his childhood (a glue that sticks to the soul'). Union and estrangement/abjection at once, not only are these the basis of Camus's art, they also anticipate the fundamental contradiction of the Absurd.

Neither fully absent nor present, dispersed and disseminated, the mother's body returns with insistence throughout the novel. During the vigil, Meursault unconsciously discerns its every presence everywhere, from the Arab nurse with her back to him whom he imagines knitting and whose face is covered except for her eyes, to the silent old women with their huge, bulging stomachs protruding under their aprons. These are all anonymous, marginal figures of subordinate otherness with respect to the dominant white, French male colonialists represented here by the paternalistic director and to a certain degree by the concierge—both refer to the old people as 'the others.' But seen through the eyes of Meursault these enigmatic characters recast difference as differentiation rather than polar opposition reducible to the dominant term, just as they multiply and disperse, same and different, the body of the mother—silent, gazing, or pregnant—from whom the child has been severed. Similarly, the old woman's crying and the toothless old people's bizarre sucking sounds displace the infant's instinctual behaviour after being torn from the womb. In this entire episode of the vigil, Camus is calling attention to the originary trauma of birth which creates a space at once separating and linking mother and child where otherness and dissidence may eventually find a voice. The mother's body and her body language—her silence, her gaze ('Quand elle était à la maison, maman passait son temps à me suivre des yeux en silence'), replicated in the judgmental looks and silent intimacy of the old people—become the potential site of an alternative non-symbolic discourse of vigilance, repressed anger, and truth that would unsettle the institutions of patriarchy.

A less obvious attack originating in the maternal takes place on the level of naming. 'Maman' may be buried, but her name surfaces everywhere confounding identity and blurring gender distinctions. The already reduplicated 'ma' reappears in the names or designations of other female characters; *Marie,* 'la Mauresque,' 'l'infirmière arabe,' 'la petite femme automate;' 'la femme de Masson.' But, more importantly, the infant's
rhythmic, pre-discursive signifier is disseminated in the names of practically all of the male characters as well: Emmanuel, Masson, Salamanco. In the case of Raymond, as if to compensate for the reversal of phonemes, the maternal is inscribed in Sintès, Camus's own mother's maiden name. The feminine maternal surfaces as non-expressive rhythm, word-play, traversing the symbolic and displacing the founding opposition of female to male upon which the entire oppressive dialectics of patriarchy rests. Summing up this subversive gesture by which sexual difference and the categories it supports are confused and exceeded is the name of the mother's fiancé: Thomas Pérez, 'maman/père,' mama/father.

An apparently marginal figure, Thomas Pérez is nonetheless present at two strategic moments: the beginning where Meursault's lingering fascination yields perhaps the most elaborate, if repugnant, physical portrait in the novel and the climactic final revelation in which he comes to understand why, on the eve of death, his mother had taken a fiancé. This and the fact that a substantial portion of the opening chapter is devoted to Thomas Pérez suggest that this figure merits even more scrutiny than his name alone would warrant. The director's embarrassed dismissal of his relationship with Mme Meursault as 'childish' intimates that here too we might look for subversive traces of the feminine maternal or, more generally, Woman. What is 'embarrassing' to the director and fascinating to Meursault is the intimation by way of Pérez of the mother's sexuality, her existence as woman, both sexual and maternal.

Beyond the surface, in between or outside the categories of the symbolic, the most deeply repressed figure of the orgasmic mother points enigmatically to a truth other than man's, the half-herd truth of woman's jouissance. Thus, the text forges an elusive link between the mother, Pérez, the landscape, and truth. Meursault observes Pérez while the director explains that often Pérez and Meursault's mother would take evening walks to the village.

Je regardais la campagne autour de moi. A travers les lignes de cyprès qui menaient aux collines près du ciel, cette terre rousse et verte, ces maisons rares et bien dessinées, je comprenais maman. Le soir, dans ce pays, devait être comme une trêve mélancolique.

I was looking at the countryside around me. Seeing the rows of cypress trees leading up to the hills next to the sky, and the houses standing out here and there against that red and green earth, I was able to understand Maman better. Evenings in that part of the country must have been a kind of sad relief.

Access to maternal truth-jouissance will be indirect, via the landscape and/or Pérez. The mother earth figure, which others have discussed in Camus, is actually not a figure, a substitute for the mother's body that erases it. The conjoining of mother and earth is, in my view, a manifestation of the confusion of boundaries, of the mingling of same and other in non-contradictory synthesis, that Lacanian and feminist psychoanalysis attributes to feminine jouissance. The feminist psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray analogises this feature of woman's jouissance from her body:

As for woman, she touches herself in and of herself without any need for mediation, and before there is any way to distinguish activity from passivity. Woman "touches herself" all the time … for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact. Thus, within herself, she is already two—but not divisible into one(s)—that caress each other.

In this light, the mother earth connection represents the insistence in the text of the mother's body as the locus of a non-figural truth beyond meaning and mastery. Thus, Meursault's final revelation, precipitated by sense impressions from the landscape, reconvenes the same elements, including some of the same phrases, that are linked in this passage:
I thought about Maman. I felt as if I understood why at the end of her life she had taken a 'fiancé,' why she had played at beginning again. Even there … evening was a kind of wistful respite. So close to death, Maman must have felt free then and ready to live it all again.

Mersault's reading of Woman justifies his refusal of patriarchy and culminates in rejection of the binary oppositions that support it. Endings, of novels and of lives, are also beginnings, and in this non-hierarchical imbrication of opposites lie truth, freedom, and the real unity sought in Camus's writings. As we shall see, these are not the only traces of the feminine in the last pages of the novel.

Truth is in neither term of the opposition, but in between, 'entre', 'inter-dit.' Unlike the lighting at the vigil described by the concierge as 'tout ou rien,' 'she-truths' burst forth where contradiction is maintained. In 'Le vréel' ('she-truth' or 'true-real') Julia Kristeva theorises that in this space where the symbolic falters the pre-oedipal archaic mother surfaces and reclaims her right to language, pointing to ineffable jouissance and causing the real to appear as a jubilant enigma. This perspective is strikingly close to Camus's when he meditates on truth in 'L'Enigme' (1950):

Tout se tait … De nouveau, une énigme heureuse m'aide à tout comprendre … Le soleil … coagule l'univers et ses formes dans un éblouissement obscur … cette clarté blanche et noire qui, pour moi, a toujours été celle de la vérité.

Everything grows quiet … Once again, a happy enigma helps me to understand everything … the sun … coagulates the universe and its forms into a dazzling darkness … the white and black clarity that, for me, has always been the sign of truth.

In the inscrutable, unimaginable space between alternatives in Camus's writing may be glimpsed an elusive 'mother's truth' whose roots are buried in childhood:

Si ce soir, c'est l'image d'une certaine enfance qui revient vers moi, comment ne pas accueillir la leçon d'amour et de pauvreté que je puis en tirer? Puisque cette heure est comme un intervalle entre oui et non,… recueillir seulement la transparence et la simplicité des paradis perdus: dans une image.

If, this evening, the image of a certain childhood comes back to me, how can I keep from welcoming the lesson of love and poverty it offers? Since this hour is like a pause between yes and no … only to capture the transparency and simplicity of paradises lost: in an image.

'She-truths' or the lost paradise of maternal jouissance, these represent both the source ('image') and the aim ('image') of Camus's thought and art. When it refuses to repress otherness, when it affirms non-hierarchically both elements of an opposition ('oui et non'; 'Il n'y a pas d'amour de vivre sans désespoir de vivre'), the discourse of the Absurd approximates a discourse of the feminine. By the same token, Meursault's celebrated indifference—apparent in such formulas as 'cela m'était égal,' 'dans un sens … dans un autre,' ‘d'un côté … d'un autre côté’—may be understood not as difference annulled but rather as an illustration of this 'feminine' kind of difference.

Most important for their implications of alterity and for Meursault's evolution with respect to otherness are the Arabs. In much the same way as the mother the Arabs contribute to Camus's myth of utopian otherness. 'Ils
nous regardaient en silence, mais à leur manière, ni plus ni moins que si nous étions des pierres ou des arbres morts.' These are the same silent looks as the mother's, looks of the oppressed/repressed whose silence may signify anger. They recall the alternative discourse of dissidence suggested in the attitude of the old people during the vigil and the blend of familiarity and estrangement we have traced to the preoedipal relationship to the mother. Marginalised, colonised, depersonalised, presented anonymously as 'Arabes' or 'groupes d'Arabes' or more exotically as 'Mauresques,' from an abstract semiotic point of view—though not, as many of Camus's critics have observed, a pragmatic, political one—they serve in L'Etranger to critique Western notions of identity and the self. In Part 2, the murmured communication between the crouching Arab prisoners and their visitors beneath the din of their French counterparts forms a 'basso continuo' that suggests the repressed semiotic subtext of the symbolic, a non-figural (hence the musical comparison to convey the impression their Arabic makes on Meursault) and more authentic form of communication ('malgré' le tumulte, ils parvenaient à s'entendre en parlant très bas').

Camus reinforces the association with the semiotic or dissident maternal discourse by juxtaposing the Arabs' conversation with the silent communication between two other characters, an old woman and her son, who stare intensely at each other. At parting their silent looks are seconded by gesture and the pre-discursive 'maman,' the only time it does not refer to Meursault's own mother: 'Il a dit: "Au revoir, maman" et elle a passé sa main entre les deux barreaux pour lui faire un petit signe lent et prolongé.' Meursault describes the son as 'un petit jeune homme aux mains fines,' (italics mine) as if to emphasise his childlike relationship to the mother and a feminine trait that evokes the sameness-in-difference preceding the oedipal cut and the constitution of sexual difference.

If the Arabs carry all these positive, maternal connotations, then what does it mean to murder an Arab? As others have noted, this is the oedipal moment. Raymond has progressively dragged the passive Meursault into man's world: 'il m'a déclaré … que moi, j'étais un homme,' 'Raymond … m'a dit qu'entre hommes on se comprenait toujours.' Reflecting the Symbolic Order, this world of the white Western colonist grants Arabs and women existence only as subordinate others. Thus, Meursault is becoming more 'normal.' He agrees to marry Marie and recognises in the conventional Masson couple an image of his own conjugal future. In the murder chapter there is strong emphasis on traditional gender roles: the men go for a walk while the women do the dishes, the men get into fights and the women cry. Furthermore, Meursault is uncharacteristically patronising: 'Là, nous avons trouvé nos deux Arabes' (italics mine).

This process culminates in the murder. Raymond's revolver, itself emblematic of his phallocentric world, is symbolically related to the sun, the primary paternal symbol in the episode. The sun glints on the gun when he hands it to Meursault. But in this second encounter with the Arabs Meursault remains poised in a quasi-maternal world of equilibrium and suspended choices, of silence and water: 'tout s' arrêtait ici entre la mer, le sable et le soleil, le double silence de la flûte et de l'eau. J'ai pensé qu' on pouvait tirer ou ne pas tirer' (italics mine). 'Everything came to a stop there between the sea, the sand, and the sun, and the double silence of the flute and the water. It was then that I realised that you could either shoot or not shoot.' When he returns to the beach alone, he is both rejecting Raymond's world with its stereotyped femininity and trying to shake off the 'blinding' sun which opposes his advance to the shade, repose, and the cool maternal spring ('je me tendais tout entier pour triompher du soleil'). The play of the sun of the Arab's knife becomes more obviously a metaphor for the threat of castration. The paternal sun in fact prevents him from turning back and pushes him toward the constitution of the Arab—and Woman—as polar Other. The associations between the Arab and Woman are numerous. Not only does the Arab occupy a space connoted maternal, he is lying in a 'feminine', almost seductive pose. And he is there to exact revenge on behalf of his sister. Finally, the sun here recalls the primal separation from the mother's body at the funeral: 'C'était le même soleil que le jour où j'avais enterré maman.' With the passive firing of the first shot under the influence of the sun, Meursault has destroyed 'l'équilibre du jour' and happy silence. He now fully enters the Symbolic Order, firing four more shots with Raymond's gun to complete the repression of Arab and Woman as Other.
Cut from the pre-oedipal by this act, Meursault will (re)discover in it a positive rhetoric of dissidence. The prison visit represents an important turning point in this development. Camus builds on the implications of maternal semiosis in the scene by devoting the rest of the chapter of Meursault's infantile regression. The prison cell becomes a womblike environment returning him to maternal wisdom ('C'était d'ailleurs une idée de maman … qu' on finissait par s'habituer à tout') and unsettling adult temporality, antinomy, fixed boundaries, as well as language: 'Je n'avais pas compris à quel point les jours pouvaient être à la fois longs et courts … ils finissaient par déborder les uns sur les autres. Ils y perdaient leur nom. Les mots hier et demain étaient les seuls qui gardaient un sens pour moi' (italics mine). 'I hadn't understood how days could be both long and short at the same time … they ended up flowing into one another. They lost their names. Only the words "yesterday" and "tomorrow" still had any meaning for me.' But these pages also suggest the dangers of pure silence through the cautionary tale of the Czech who fails to speak his identity when he returns to his village after twenty-five years and ends up being killed by his mother and sister who have not recognised him.

Not until the final chapter, however, does Meursault emerge from his characteristic 'rien à dire' to speech. Before his outburst against the priest, his efforts at symbolisation are striking. He tries, for example, to represent the unrepresentable, the moment his heart will stop beating. More importantly, there is a long meditation on the guillotine, the core of which is the memory of a story his mother used to tell about the father he never knew. Access to the father occurs only via the mother who does not embody here the 'feminine' stereotype of a mute presence whose silence may be rich with meaning. She assumes rather the 'masculine' role of speaking subject, of storyteller, and in her story the father, unlike all the other paternal figures in the novel, appears in a positive light. For in his openness to the man whose execution he witnessed, in his refusal to perceive the assassin as absolute Other, in his bodily protest against death and the horror of the guillotine—he vomits, a reaction not unlike the body language of female hysterics—the father transcends traditional gender roles. Like Thomas Pérez, he mingles the maternal and paternal, the feminine and masculine, just as by speaking the mother embodies both masculine and feminine. In playing out sexual differentiation rather than difference, in suggesting a process, a back-and-forth movement between same and other rather than rigid divisions, the mother's discourse opens a space for the unrepresentable and offers in its form as in its content a model for an authentic language—and literature—of dissidence.

Assuming a feminine maternal posture, Meursault puts this discourse of dissidence into effect against the priest and in his climactic nocturnal vision. His revolt against the priest turns a passionate outcry into a reasoned rejection of the hierarchised world of Fathers and Others. The pre-oedipal origins of this revolt are suggested in the introduction to his tirade: 'Alors, je ne sais pas pourquoi, il y a quelque chose qui a crevé en moi. Je me suis mis à crier à plein gosier et je l'ai insulté' (italics mine). 'Then, I don't know why, but something inside me snapped. I started yelling at the top of my lungs, and I insulted him.' Meursault identifies with the self-differentiating mother's body. He is both mother and child. The waters break and he gives birth to the cry, the semiotic of the infant converted into the language of protest of the adult. 'J'étouffais en criant tout ceci….' 'All the shouting had me gasping for air.'

By far the most spectacular feminisation of Meursault and the most far-reaching identification with the mother occur after the priest's departure in the closing paragraph of the novel. Calling upon those elements of nature already connoted maternal, Camus presents Meursault's revelation as an opening up to the mother: 'Des odeurs de nuit, de terre et de sel rafrîchissaient mes tempes. La merveilleuse paix de cet été endormi entrait en moi comme une marée … Je m'ouvrais pour la première fois à la tendre indifférence du monde' (italics mine). 'Smells of night, earth, and salt air were cooling my temples. The wondrous peace of that sleeping summer flowed through me like a tide … I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world.' If in the scene with the priest he identifies with the procreating mother, here his identification is with the orgasmic mother. Opening up to the maternal brings understanding of the mother's taking a fiancé and experience of the limitlessness and confusion of boundaries in maternal jouissance: 'maman devait s'y sentir libérée et prête à tout revivre … Et moi aussi, je me suis senti prêt à tout revivre.' 'Maman must have felt free then and ready to live it all again … And I felt ready to live it all again too.' The world allows Meursault to re-enact this positive
movement between same and different, self and other: 'De l’éprouver si pareil à moi, si fraternel enfin, j’ai senti que j’avais été heureux, et que je l’étais encore.' 'Finding it so much like myself—so like a brother, really—I felt that I had been happy and that I was happy again.' Maternal and fraternal, the world confounds feminine and masculine, just as Meursault figures in non-contradictory synthesis his mother, his mother’s son, and his mother’s daughter. Rather than a reversal of the sexual hierarchy with Woman in the dominant position, feminisation entails the displacement of opposition and ‘results in an excess, a spilling over of categories and an ambiguous surplus of meanings.’

Meursault has learned to ‘read’ ambiguous maternal signs ‘cette nuit chargée de signes et d’étoiles’—and in dying commits to turning his own body into an equally enigmatic Woman-sign capable of inciting revolt: ‘il me restait à souhaiter qu’il y ait beaucoup de spectateurs le jour de mon exécution et qu’ils m’accueillent avec des cris de haine.’ With death imminent, Meursault can never really translate feminisation and reading Woman into effective action in his own life. This can lead one to interpret the ending as a death-wish signifying pre-erotic escapism rather than heroic dissidence. But if Meursault is viewed as a sign to be read and not just a character to be psychoanalysed, then like Janine in 'La Femme adultes'—a more explicit figuration of Woman who also identifies with the orgasmic mother in a nocturnal ecstasy—he can be interpreted as an expression of Camus’s own repressed feminine and as the positive outcome of his concerted effort to symbolise the maternal in art and praxis. However surprising it may seem to those who view him chiefly as the proponent of virile fraternity, Camus appears in fact to be one of those rare male writers of whom Hélène Cixous writes, who are ‘able to venture onto the brink where writing, freed from law, unencumbered by moderation, exceeds phallic authority, and where subjectivity inscribing its effects becomes feminine.’

This gesture is not without its own ambiguity and I wouldn't be much of a feminist reader if I didn't end by problematising it. For in the long run we have to ask ourselves some questions. Does Meursault/Camus speak for or with the mother? Is the mother effaced as usual as subject and her discourse finally appropriated by man? Is this yet another instance of symbolic ‘matricide’ and a male fantasy of self-engenderment after all? But ambivalence toward the mother as enabling/engulfing, as eliminated subject yet object of a sustained quest, is as much a feature of women's writing (see, among others, [Marianne] Hirsch). Camus’s artistic dilemma, so poignantly voiced in the preface to L’Envers et l’endroit, namely, to find a discourse of love that would ‘balance’ yet incorporate admirable maternal silence, reflects many women writers' entanglement with the maternal. Not until we approach the writing of men with the insights into the maternal and the critical tools gained from studying women writers will we begin to appreciate the primordial role played by Woman in the generation of literary texts.

**Criticism: Renee Winegarten (essay date March 1993)**


[In the following essay, Winegarten provides analysis of Caligula and Camus's literary preoccupations and career.]

Camus, after Kafka, a fellow sufferer from tuberculosis, was haunted by judgment, by those who judge, and by the question of their right to do so. "Before the bar of history, Caligula, the bar of history!" cries Camus's odious yet fascinating Roman emperor. Caligula's very last words in the play, uttered with a gasping laugh as he is being struck down, are—astonishingly—"I am still alive!" Like so much of Camus's writing, with its deceptive surface of classical clarity, these words resonate with mystery as well as savage irony.

Caligula is still conscious of life, still full of life, when he is stabbed to death by the conspirators he awaits in a form of "superior suicide"; he is defiant and triumphant at the very moment when he is overcome and breathes his last. Does it mean that the spirit of this aspiring monster, who tests and goes beyond every limit
on human conduct, is alive in the world and even in ourselves? That is what Camus once implied. Is Caligula one aspect of the plague that Camus later suggested can never be totally eliminated? What values remain, what embargo is there on violence and cruelty, if all is nothingness? Unable to pass beyond good and evil as a proper disciple of Nietzsche should, and obsessed with violence all his life, Camus hovered about the problem of inner and outer darkness, which somehow he could not elude. In this regard, Camus's work remains as central to the accumulating horrors of our age as ever.

In the first sketch of the conclusion of the play, which was to be entitled, tellingly, *Caligula or the Awareness of Death*, the emperor appears at the end saying, "No, Caligula is not dead. He is there, and there. He is in each one of you. If you were given power, if you had courage, if you loved life, you would see this monster or this angel that you bear within you break out." So wrote the young Camus in his early notebooks in 1937, with all his yearning for personal happiness, for the absolute, for the unattainable—together with his confrontation of danger within and without. Caligula was the role that Camus the actor and actor-manager originally wrote for himself to perform with the theater company he ran in Algiers as a young man.

Like all his work, even the most seemingly detached, the play is intimately bound to his own personal concerns. Even Caligula's weird anguished reach for the moon could derive from personal reminiscence for, according to Camus's brother Lucien, their frustrated and dominating grandmother used to speak of "having the moon." In "Le Vent à Djémila" ("The Wind at Djémila"), Camus declared: "You live with a few familiar ideas. Two or three. As a result of chance encounters with worlds and men, you polish and transform them. It takes ten years to have an idea that is really your own—one you could possibly speak about." Then he added with characteristic irony, "Naturally, it is a little discouraging." His imagination returns constantly to a few vital experiences and images.

The mirror is one recurring image. The reflection of himself in the mirror that endlessly fascinates Caligula is and is not the true self, that goal of authenticity for the artist and actor whose sense of alienation and solitariness Camus identified in his notebooks. "Et tout m'est étranger, tout …" ("And everything is foreign to me, everything …"), owned the author of *L'Etranger (The Stranger).* Added to this feeling of estrangement was the detachment of the creative artist, of the observer of human conduct, and of the actor (as defined by Camus in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe [The Myth of Sisyphus]*)). Brought up under the French educational system to seek horizons beyond his working-class origins, Camus was an Algerian-born Frenchman who afterwards never felt quite at home either in Algeria or among the Parisian literary and intellectual élite.

Like his Caligula, Camus himself now stands before the bar of history: he, too, over thirty years after his death in a stupid car accident at the age of forty-seven, is very much alive. Among the signs of his enduring presence are two recent productions of *Caligula,* one of them given at the Comédie Française. The probing texts of a conference on Camus's theater, the most controversial part of his literary output (as distinct from his politico-cultural essays and journalism), have been published. The fiftieth anniversary of that widely read novel, *L'Etranger,* influenced by the American "though guy" school of James M. Cain, and first published in 1942 during the Occupation, has been duly celebrated in France.

Camus's fiction has long attracted filmmakers with intellectual pretensions like Luchino Visconti, who made a movie of *L'Etranger,* and Ingmar Bergman, who apparently regrets not having transferred *La Chute (The Fall)* to the screen. A new film has just been made of that strange allegory, *La Peste (The Plague)—*a work inspired by Kafka and Melville—by the Argentinian film director Luis Puenzo, who seems to have found similarities between Camus's Oran in the grip of the plague and the situation under dictatorship in his own country. One prospective filmmaker who wanted to film *La Peste* professed to see a link between the nihilism of Camus's era and that of the present day.

In addition to this activity, a selection of Camus's journalistic writings from 1944–47 in the Resistance newspaper *Combat* is now presented in English translation, with the evident conviction of their relevance to
present-day affairs. In his sharp account of the aberrations of French intellectuals, few of whom escape whipping, Bernard-Henri Lévy declares: "I am fond of Camus…. A writer who is scarcely ever found wanting in nobility and courage is exceptional. Besides, I am sure he was amusing." (Like Kafka, Camus had a humorous side, and he himself once remarked that people did not take sufficient note of his sense of humor.) Given all this interest in his work in the spheres of stage, screen, and the written word, it looks as if the end of the Cold War has not dimmed Camus's reputation. Instead, this epoch-making upheaval has perhaps moved the angle from which the writer can now be viewed.

To return to Caligula, first performed in 1945: it marks—along with Camus's adaptation of William Faulkner's Requiem for a Nun, staged in 1956—a rare highpoint of his popular success in the theater. Each play offers an attempt to wrestle with the problem of evil in a life shorn of values. These dramas also reflect Camus's tireless (and possibly misguided) concern with the creation of a modern form of tragedy in an age that he found deeply tragic. (He though that Faulkner's powerful baroque novel, composed in semi-dramatic form, was "one of the rare modern tragedies.") It is well known that the original production of Caligula owed much of its impact to the début of the young Gérard Philipe in the demanding title role. Delicate and vulnerable in appearance, with the innocent air of a perverse adolescent, and endowed with the inimitable musicality of his voice, Gérard Philipe (all who saw him agree) has proved without equal as Caligula in conveying charm, vanity, cruelty, and ambivalence. By common consent, his successors, in France and elsewhere, however talented in other respects, have mostly been competent but ordinary, lacking charisma, unable to efface the original image of a unique presence that can still be felt even in theatrical photographs.

So it was with the recent staging of Caligula at the Comédie Française. The production there, under the aegis of the noted Egyptian film director Youssef Chahine, took the form of an elaborate conflation of ancient and modern in the current fashion, a mélange of togas and motorbikes, Rome and North Africa—visually striking and even cinematographic where perhaps simplicity might have fared better. The producer was not averse to changing the order of scenes to suit his own purpose. But which is the "correct" text? There are several versions of the play, which occupied Camus at different moments between 1937 and 1958, as he moved the emphasis of Caligula's revolt from the sphere of the cosmic and metaphysical, where it was placed originally, to that of the political and social, from solitariness to the implication of solidarity with humankind.

Shattered by the sudden death of his sister-mistress Drusilla, the all-powerful young Caligula embarks on a series of arbitrary acts of folly and cruelty. He (like his creator), and not only when he is impersonating the goddess Venus, is an actor-manager of considerable talent. His destructive indifference to human life and human suffering springs, paradoxically, from a passion for life. His monstrous madness has a certain absurd literal logic to it, breaking the hypocrisy of conventionally accepted norms and forms. If, for instance, the Treasury is to be regarded as all-important, then clearly human life is not. He shares the bitter sardonic humor of the atheist Meursault, condemned to death in L'Etranger, who rejects the spiritual comfort offered by the priest by saying that he is not interested in the things that do not interest him. Caligula's one merit is that he tries to force people to think about the truth of their condition, though finally he is driven to acknowledge that, in acting against other human beings, "I have not taken the proper path, I have achieved nothing. My liberty is not the right kind." On the stage, the play remains dark, difficult, disconcerting, and challenging.

What did Camus see in this catalogue of horrors to occupy him for so long? The simple commonplace that human beings die and that they are not happy sets the young Caligula on his frenzied path to make life give up its secrets, to change life as it is commonly lived unthinkingly. Camus was only about seventeen, fond of swimming and playing football, when he was struck down by tuberculosis: he thought he was going to die; he dreaded nothingness with "that physical fear of the animal who loves the sun." He was to suffer recurrent attacks of this illness for the rest of his life—a matter that is often overlooked. Latterly, much has been made of the fact that—like André Malraux—he came late to the Resistance. Where Malraux's commitment took the form of armed resistance. Camus's involvement was moral, in the shape of clandestine journalism for Combat. As "Albert Mathé" he was also engaged in underground activity that carried considerable risks of
imprisonment, deportation to the camps, death. Given the state of his health, his conduct should seem creditable enough.

Camus's early years in Algeria had been marked by extreme poverty. His father, of French ancestry, was killed in the battle of the Marne in 1914 before the boy was a year old. His illiterate mother, of Spanish descent, found work as a cleaning woman to try to hold the family together. Yet such poverty, one possible source of his ill health, did not by his own account bring unhappiness, or preclude his profoundly sensuous and lyrical enthusiasm for the Algerian landscape, for the violent sun and radiant sea, the Roman ruins of Tipasa, the palimpsest of Djémila, all those life-enhancing elements of his youth that he would encapsulate in what he later liked to call the Mediterranean spirit. This was less an idea—to be scorned by academic philosophers—than a personal experience or response transformed into a value that would help to guard him (and, possibly, others) against the fearful destructive consequences of the powerful nihilistic ideologies that tempted him and his contemporaries.

It was not long before Camus's reputation was hedged about with misunderstandings. He was taken for the conscience of his age—a sort of French George Orwell—because he came to defend certain humane principles, and to advocate measure and the recognition of human limitations. Most notably he stood out against racialism, against the death penalty, against the criminality of "the end justifies the means," against the bloodshed of the would-be utopia of "the new man," against institutionalized murder on the grounds of "necessity" or for the supposed benefit of future generations. The Swedish Royal Academy, in awarding Camus the Nobel Prize for literature in 1957, cited his treatment of the problems facing the conscience of humanity at the time. Camus would scarcely have been human if he had not felt some gratification at his celebrity, at the path he had traversed from the poor district of Algiers. Yet he also knew that his fame as a kind of "secular saint" was a millstone around his neck, irritating some (notably one-time friends like Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir) and generally preventing people from seeing him as he truly felt himself to be.

Protest as he might, though, few appeared to pay much attention to his disclaimers. In a manuscript note to L'Homme révolté (The Rebel), Camus the Don Juan complained about the painful misunderstanding under which he labored: "I bear the weight of a reputation for austerity at once undeserved and rather ridiculous. If I have fought so firmly and uncompromisingly against those who legislated or killed in the name of the absolute, it is because I was aware of my own shortcomings and because I found only in them the permission to say that nobody is sufficiently just or pure to arrogate the right to judge without appeal…. Neither in my work nor in myself has there been an attempt to convert people to virtue but a logic that derives from frailty and a difficult struggle to attain to greater light. That is all." Years later, in an interview with the novelist and playwright Jean-Claude Brisville, published in 1959, Camus was still elaborating the same theme, declaring that his name as a guide and guru made him laugh.

Even in the very last interview he gave, in December 1959, he went on insisting that "I don't speak for anyone else: I've enough trouble to find my own manner of speech. I don't guide anybody: I don't know, or scarcely know, where I'm going. I don't live on a pedestal: I walk like everybody else in the streets of the day. I ask myself the same questions as men of my generation, that's all." In his acceptance speech in Stockholm he had quietly talked of being gifted with his doubts alone. "Why am I an artist and not a philosopher? It is because I think in accordance with words not ideas," he had once observed in his notebooks.

This tendency to work slowly and with no little effort toward a position that he can regard as true and just—one that is then held firmly and is publicly defended—may be traced throughout his life. What separates him from the "German friend" to whom he addressed those powerful "letters" in 1943–44? From an intellectual point of view, very little, it would seem, since they both derive from the same masters of nihilism, from Nietzsche and the rest. And yet it turns out to be a great deal, when Camus finally opposes the Nazi and his like, offering resistance in the name of humanity and justice. "I have chosen justice … so as to stay faithful to the earth," he wrote. "I continue to believe that this world has no supernatural meaning. But I know that
something in it has meaning, and that is man, because he is the only being who demands meaning for himself." The determination to resist, to take a stand, has no sacred sanction, it is not rooted in some philosophical system. It is a free choice made from an inner propulsion ("I know"). Here, Camus's debt to André Malraux (in their photographs, even down to the manly cigarette ever hanging between the lips) is evident, in his attempt to rescue "man" from the forces that would destroy him. Camus's vocabulary derives from that of Malraux, in its assumption (characteristic of the day) that there is no need to mention woman in the definition of humankind.

Equally plain is Camus's debt to Henry de Montherlant's aristocratic view of "qualité" or nobility and a kind of Spanish point of honor. He shared Montherlant's reliance on scorn, and his distaste for the "shopgirl's morality" that in his opinion flourished under the Third Republic. Literature could still inculcate some of the attitudes of aristocracy even in those who were not born aristocrats. The seductiveness of Montherlant's writings lay in his prose, in his hedonism and his death-oriented nihilism. Yet ultimately Camus drew away from Montherlant. He came to reject Montherlant's stress on equivalence. For Camus, life cannot be regarded from the point of view of eternity.

A similar kind of slow development or revelation is to be found in the matter of the excesses of the purge at the Liberation. In the exaltation of the moment, in Combat on October 20, 1944, Camus could justify the purge in the name of a terrible law which obliged Frenchmen "to destroy a still living part of this country to save its very soul." Gradually, though, Camus moved away from his rallying call to revolution, from being the new "Saint-Just issuing alive from Malraux's L'Espoir," as a contemporary expressed it, in the immediate post-Resistance period. He turned into the journalist who wanted neither victims nor executioners. It is clear, then, that when in 1951 Camus published L'Homme révolté, his influential critique of revolution (as indeed with Caligula in 1945), he was not composing a detached study or work but was writing out of his own temptations as well as those he witnessed among leading fellow writers and intellectuals.

It is from this angle that we should now view L'Homme révolté, that mine which many writers have since worked and reworked, a book once seen as integral to the polemics of the Cold War. (Indeed, this influential book would soon connect with the horrors of the Franco-Algerian War, which raged from 1954 until two years after Camus's death, with the use of torture on the French side and terror on the other.) The notorious polemic instituted by Sartre and his spokesman, Francis Jeanson (who even today expresses no regrets), on the subject of L'Homme révolté remains central to the history of ideas and to the culture of our age. The tone of Sartre's reply to Camus, criticizing the loftiness of Camus's objections to Jeanson's review, is not just deeply wounding, it intends to wound. It would be tough on someone unknown to the author: addressed to a sensitive friend whose every vulnerable spot is familiar, it is cruel. Whenever afterward Camus declares that he does not seek to put himself on a pedestal, one can be sure that he is still smarting from Sartre's accusation that he carries a kind of "portable pedestal" around with him.

Camus's working-class origin is coldly discounted by Sartre, who levels at him the deadly charge of turning "bourgeois" and of betraying the proletariat and the Left. Unlike Sartre, he was not prepared to defend Communism and the USSR at all costs, supposedly in order to save the workers from the loss of hope, from the harsh truth of what was going on there. The one-time ardent young Communist of 1935–37, who grew indignant when the party line changed and the Algerian Moslems were left to their fate, and who was expelled for his pains, would always see himself as a man of the Left. He was neither a liberal (in the European sense) nor had he gone over to the Right Wing whose luminaries sought to co-opt him. Moreover, during the Cold War, despite his loathing of Soviet tyranny, he could not give his whole-hearted faith to the United States because of the notion of "my enemy's enemy is my friend," and the policy of support for dictators, most notably for General Franco. Camus was extremely keen on his Spanish heritage through his mother, and he treasured his debt to it; he was emotionally attached to the distinguished actress Maria Casarès (daughter of Santiago Casares Quiroga, former prime minister of the Spanish Republic), who played leading roles in several of his plays; and his greatest friends in Paris were to be found among the Spanish Republican exiles.
Where Camus sought to take his stand was on truth and justice as he understood them: these were the great rocks that, like Sisyphus, he was endlessly pushing up the hillside to see them roll down again. His concern for them, and for moderation, came to save him from the self-righteous intransigence of Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and their allies as they favored first the USSR, and then Mao's China and each new and usually murderous revolutionary "utopia" in turn, in the name of a changed world and "the new man." In this way Camus eluded the deception, the lies, the passion for the extreme and, above all, the advocacy of the use of violence and the condonation of terror which besmirch the reputation of Sartre, Genet (if the word reputation may be used of him), and the Maoist intellectuals who followed.

This is not to say that Camus was lacking in a certain "nostalgia" (as his editor Roger Quilliot calls it) for the nineteenth-century Russian terrorists, like Ivan Kaliayev, who was responsible for the assassination of Grand Duke Serge in 1905—but then much of our culture is rooted in nostalgia for violence. Here was another contemporary temptation (see the celebrated opening pages of Malraux's La Condition humaine, with the terrorist's murder of a sleeping man). Camus depicted Kaliayev and his associates as "fastidious assassins" in L'Homme révolté, on which he was working when his play on the same theme, Les Justes (The Just), was first staged in 1949. They are seen as "fastidious," admired as pure, noble, and honorable because—unlike the terrorists of Camus's day and our own—they are ready to yield up their own lives after killing in the name of an ideal. As has been pointed out with regard to this specious view, murder is murder, no matter how refined the scruples of the assassin.

Certainly, by the time of the Algerian revolt, and the indiscriminate terror practiced by the FLN (the Algerian Front de Libération Nationale)—keenly supported and justified by Sartre and his circle—Camus made no secret of his opposition to political murder. He particularly scorned intellectuals who advocated terror and who sympathized with terrorists from the comfort of their armchairs. In a much commented-upon observation, he said that he put the life of his mother, who was still living in Algiers, first. In the end, with him as a writer and a human being, it was not just words but people that came before ideas.

A good deal of ink has been spilt over Camus's attitude to French colonialism in Algeria, especially by his judges on the Left or by the politically correct. Camus found himself in a cleft stick. By origin descended from settlers, he would have liked to keep a reformed, democratic Algeria linked to France. In his youth he had favored the reforms proposed by the Léon Blum-Maurice Vialatte bill, reforms that were stymied by powerfully entrenched French colonial interests. As a young journalist he had written a moving report on poverty among the inhabitants of the Kabylie region. He was outraged by the terrible repression of the uprising at Sétif in 1945, which left many dead. After all, he was brought up among Algerian Moslems, some of them future political leaders, who counted among his friends and acquaintances.

What he did not seem to take into account was the driving force of fanatical nationalism which, once unleashed, would inevitably propel Algeria to full independence, democratic or no. There was a certain naïve idealistic strain in Camus, one-time supporter of Gary Davis, the now long forgotten would-be citizen of the world. Camus tried to do what he could for peace and reconciliation: in January 1956 he went to Algiers to speak in favor of a truce. Events outstripped him. Thenceforward, fearing to aggravate the situation by public declarations, he intervened constantly behind the scenes on behalf of numerous Algerian Moslems who were on trial or in prison awaiting execution. The list of those he tried to save is long.

It was inevitable that the Franco-Algerian tragedy would leave Camus torn with ambivalent feelings. Central to his impassioned self-inquiry is the masterly monologue La Chute of 1956. There, Camus probed the theme of "Judge not, that ye be not judged," with its religious connotations. Now, after the Fall, nobody can be innocent. The work is a cry of critical and self-critical irony, issuing from his own profound self-dissatisfaction as well as from his acute perception of the self-righteousness and self-deception of his pontificating fellow intellectuals on the Left who judged him to be a traitor to the cause. That super-subtle former lawyer, Jean-Baptiste Clamence, heir to Diderot's eccentric personage, Rameau's nephew, has left
France for Amsterdam, abandoning his profession, spending his time there in button-holing strangers, like the one whose responses can only be gleaned from the words of Clamence himself.

Clamence's sustained sardonic confession provides at the same time a way of accusing everyone else. The details of his disquisition or indictment are left deliberately vague, and are constantly being called into question, so that his words have a wide reference. Are all of the utterances of this womanizing self-styled actor really true? There is reason to doubt it. The great sin of omission that (he claims) changed his life as a do-gooder of repute, his failure to respond to the cries of a drowning woman, can stand for all sins of omission and commission, all the acts that obsess the human conscience with the burden of guilt and destroy the virtuous self-image. The piece is a sustained dramatic parable where the judge-penitent flays human weakness in himself and in others: "... I am concocting a portrait which is that of everyone and no one. All things considered, a mask.... Yet, as the same time, the portrait I offer my contemporaries turns into a mirror," says Clamence. Here is a later version of Caligula's mirror—the reflection of the darkness within.

Where does Camus stand today now that the Cold War, in whose intellectual or cultural history he figured so largely, has come to an end? The collapse of the Communist system in the USSR and its former satellites has not actually eliminated die-hard Communism and the many shades and varieties of radical Left Wing sympathy. (The ability of members of extreme movements of Left and Right to shed skins in renewal, like the snake, has been witnessed countless times.) That collapse has merely shown up the bankruptcy and bad faith of the intellectuals who championed Stalin, Mao and the rest, and who whitewashed terror as a political instrument. Certainly, the cry of violent revolution as a substitute faith or a fashionable shibboleth is not being heard at the moment. In this sense, the mature Camus has been vindicated.

Yet to regard the end of the Cold War between the superpowers as a victory for liberal democracy and a new world order would surely be premature. Camus well knew that freedom—like truth and justice—has to be conquered. Violence and terrorism have not been erased from the imagination or from actuality. A Pandora's box of moral, political, and economic ills has now been opened: extreme nationalism, racialism, religious zealotry, "ethnic cleansing," together with Fascism and Nazism, have reappeared in late-twentieth-century Europe. An idea, however perverse, cannot be killed. It goes underground to re-emerge when times are ripe. In Le Monde of December 5, 1992, that well-known authority on Sartre, Michel Contat, could inquire whether Marxism has taken refuge in the catacombs.

Toward the end of Camus's allegory La Peste, there is a shatteringly resonant passage: "But he knew nonetheless that this chronicle could not be that of the conclusive victory. It could only be the witness of what had had to be accomplished and what, doubtless, all men ... would still have to accomplish against terror and its tireless weapon.... For he knew what this joyous crowd did not know: ... that the bacillus of the plague never dies or disappears, that it can remain dormant for dozens of years in furniture and linen, that it waits patiently in rooms, cellars, trunks, handkerchiefs and bundles of papers, and that, perhaps, the day would come when, for the misfortune and the education of men, the plague would reawaken its rats and would send them to die in a fortunate city." In La Peste the plague is not only Fascism and Nazism, perverse ideology, violence, injustice, inhumanity, dictatorship, and the Occupation of France: in one of its aspects, the plague is life itself and all the ills and evils that flesh is heir to. The warnings of Camus are there to remind us of a never-ending struggle where we are not granted to complete the work.

As Camus wrote in 1950 in an essay entitled "L'Enigme" ("The Enigma"): "In the darkest moment of our nihilism, I looked only for reasons to go beyond that nihilism." Not, he added, out of virtue or loftiness of soul but out of a passion for light and life. In Aeschylus, he suggested, there is an enigma, a meaning deciphered with difficulty because it dazzles the view. Something of that kind of enigma is to be found in his own works. Indeed, it is neither as a "secular saint" nor as the partisan of a particular cause that Camus should be viewed today, but as a fallible human being who made mistakes and was aware of many of his own shortcomings, who struggled for justice and decency, and whose writings stand as moving testimony to that struggle. He
could be wrong at times, of course, but the amazing thing is how often he was in the right, and how much he
still has to say to us in a dark hour.

**Criticism: Robert R. Brock (essay date Spring 1993)**


[In the following essay, Brock provides an overview of critical interpretation of The Stranger. According to
Brock, scholarly debate centered upon psychoanalytical speculation obscures the novel's primary significance
as a treatise against capital punishment.]

Although d'Ormesson was referring to the critic's approach to literature in general, it should be obvious to
anyone reading learned articles on *L'Etranger* that he could have had their treatment of Camus' short
masterpiece specifically in mind. This desire to explain, rather than to understand, means that the book will
not be discussed as a whole, as an entity, but as a series of all but unrelated segments. There may well be
some discussion of the story as a manifestation of the *absurde*, as well as arguments over just what that word
entails, but the book will be examined primarily as an expression of some political, social or psychological
cant based on a subjective reading of one or two scenes.

For most critics, the book is either an indictment of the French judicial system that deprives the proletariat
of an effective voice by stealing its language, or it is the case-study of a man with more Oedipal problems than
even Freud ever dreamed of. One doesn't have to spend much time in a musty library to verify my charge: Ben
Stoltzfus has already done the essential legwork for his article "Camus' *L'Etranger*: a Lacanian Reading."
Perusing it will prove d'Ormessson's point, and mine; some scenes will be "explained," but the basic message
of *L'Etranger* will not be noticed, let alone understood.

Stoltzfus's research shows that Meursault is either a nihilistic juvenile delinquent (René Girard) or a man of
rigorous honesty (Germaine Brée). He could have been condemned to the guillotine because he won't play the
game (Sartre and Robert Champigny) or because he is inept and wants to die (Monique Wagner). The death of
the Arab was either an accident (Louis Hudon) or a *crimen ex machina* (Girard). On the other hand, perhaps
the judges condemn Meursault in order to "destroy the truth he embodies" (Albert Maquet). Of course, the
whole thing might be a *fatum* as in ancient Greek literature (Carl Viggiani).

As to the four extra shots that baffle the judge, J. H. Mathews says they might be the first manifestation of
Meursault's will, while Hudon sees them as an expression of exasperation. However, Julian L. Stamm is
certain that Meursault was really a homosexual and that the shots on the beach were ejaculations. In his
article, Stoltzfus goes on to note that Brian T. Fitch has covered these and various other interpretations of
*L'Etranger* in his study and concludes by citing Alain Robbe-Grillet's comment, "I am the stranger." *(L'étranger, c'est moi)*. Stolzfus then comes to the very dangerous conclusion that the book is "a work that
reads the reader." In other words, "We each read the book with our own unconscious desire."

The unfortunate thing here is that he is right. It is unfortunate in that a too personal identification with the
work, or its hero, leads to readings that are then presented to us not as one person's very subjective
interpretation of, in this case, *L'Etranger*, but rather as objective, self-evident truth. The book becomes then
not what the author wrote in fact, but what the critic would have written/meant given his/her personal bent had
he/she written it. The critic does not say, for instance, this scene makes me think that Camus may have wanted
to supplant his father in his mother's bed, but that it is perfectly obvious that he wished to do so. As Hudon
wrote in his essay on *L'Etranger*, "Many put their nickel in the philosophical slot, and existentialism comes
out of everywhere, others in the new critical slot, and it rains symbols."
Critics are willing to quote authors on any given subject save one: what the authors think of critics. Stoltzfus, whose article presents a highly personal view of *L’Etranger*, takes Freudians to task and insists that his approach is the only valid one. (For those who do not subscribe to either dogma, the difference between them is not all that obvious.) In any event, perhaps all critics should read, or reread, what Sartre had to say about literary criticism.

When I picked up a book, it made no difference if I opened it and closed it twenty times, I could see that it didn’t change. Sliding over this uncorruptable surface: *the text*, my sight was only a minuscule surface accident, it disturbed nothing … I left my bureau, turned off the light: invisible in the darkness, the book continued to glow; for itself alone. (*Quand je prenais un livre, j’avais beau l’ouvrir et le fermer vingt fois, je voyais bien qu’il ne s’altérait pas. Glissant sur cette substance incorruptible le texte, mon regard n’était qu’un miniscule accident de surface, il ne dérangeait rien… je quittais le bureau, j’éteignais: invisible dans les ténèbres, le livre étincelait toujours; pour lui seul.*)

In other words, the reader has no part to play in the work. It exists independently of him and must be approached on its own terms and not as a mirror or manifestation, of "our own unconscious desire." *L’Etranger*, then, must be seen as a mirror of Camus' soul, not the critic's, a point to which I shall return.

Stoltzfus also quotes Robbe-Grillet's statement, "each of us has a tendency to conceive a history of literature that is his own story." (*chacun d'entre nous a tendance à concevoir une histoire de la littérature qui est sa propre histoire.*) That is, we tend to see literature as a reflection of ourselves. Stoltzfus gives this quote in order to shore up his argument for a Lacanian reading. He is correct in citing Robbe-Grillet, since this innovative author has based some of his method of writing, not his philosophy, on Camus, as evidenced in his critical essays. However, Robbe-Grillet does not approve of this sort of interpretation. He also wrote that there is no connection between man and things, where Stoltzfus, and others, see the word *lame*, used to describe both the waves and the knife blade, as being highly significant. (Has any such critic seriously wondered what choice of vocabulary items Camus had to describe knife blade and wave, *lame*, or sea and mother, *mère* and *mer*? As the French say, there aren't thirty-six.) One must also wonder why such psychological interpretations are always predicated on the most morbid and/or prurient readings possible.

Robbe-Grillet, in any case, does not see things the same way that Stoltzfus and the partisans of psychological interpretations do. For Robbe-Grillet, man is man and things are things and things do not have human qualities. This attitude will be seen as antihumanist and therefore criminal and—be ignored.

The crime is to affirm that something exists in the world that is not man, that addresses no sign to him, that has nothing in common with him … he sees these things, but he refuses to appropriate them, he refuses to enter into any shady understanding with them, any complicity; he asks nothing of them. (*Le crime c'est d'affirmer qu'il existe quelque chose, dans le monde qui n'est pas l'homme, qui ne lui adresse aucun signe, qui n'a rien de commun avec lui… il les [les choses] voit, mais il refuse de se les approprier, il refuse d'entretenir avec elles aucune entente louche, aucune connivence; il ne leur demande rien.*)

This statement is clearly counter to the Freudian and Lacanian approaches to literature.

Moreover, the difficulty of a conventional psychological interpretation of *L’Etranger* was noted by John K. Simon in his article in *Yale French Studies*. He considers the book to be the first successful novel in a contemporary movement that will lead to Robbe-Grillet and Claude Simon, a movement marked by its refusal of conventional social and psychological readings.
Critics who are partial to such interpretations have claimed that the beach scene that leads to the shooting is the first outburst of poetic writing in a book previously most noteworthy for its resolutely pedestrian narration and that it must therefore have special significance. Forgetting the wake, the funeral procession and their figura, such critics should at least look at the afternoon and evening Meursault spent on the balcony watching life in the streets. Even students reading their very first novel in French and struggling mightily with the simplest language, are struck by the sheer beauty of Camus' description. As Sunday came to an end, the streets were filled with strutting elegant young men and coquetish women meeting, flirting and joking. There were also the streetlamps and streetcars and their lights reflecting off damp pavement, bracelets and smiles. Camus describes the trees, the paling stars and all "until the first cat slowly crossed the again deserted street" (jusqu'à ce que le premier chat traverse lentement la rue de nouveau déserte.) What great psychological horror story are we to make of that?

It the description of the beach scene, the burning sun and the death of the Arab are more emotionally charged, is it really because Meursault is being pursued by some evil Mother? (Just why do critics who insist that he is being so pursued, and identify the Mother as being Meursault's, i.e. Camus', never speak of the loving relationship between Dr. Rieux and his mother in La Peste? Or did someone else write that book?) The style that an artist chooses normally corresponds to the events that he is describing. Thus the beach scene is in a more electrifying style simply because the act that will lead to Meursault's execution is more emotionally, and dramatically, charged than his spending a quiet day on his balcony and then going down to a now empty street to buy bread and pasta.

Robbe-Grillet speaks of L'Etranger in Pour un nouveau roman because Camus' hero resembles his own "heroes" in Les Gommes and Le Voyeur, heroes that were inspired, at least in part, by Meursault. Even though the literary goals of the two authors have nothing in common, Meursault embodies much of what Robbe-Grillet feels the new hero should be: a single name, no real, detailed past history, no face or physical description, no clearly defined profession or character. In short, none of the standard literary tactics that allow us to identify with the hero and vicariously share in his trials and tribulations. Comparing Meursault to any hero of Balzac or Stendhal should suffice to convince all but those most incurably wedded to the new criticism that no serious links exist between the two schools of writing and that Camus must have had something else in mind when he wrote this book. In the same way, Robbe-Grillet's affinity for Camus' technique, not for his philosophy, came from his belief that Camus had created a "new" literary hero. He had not, of course; he had simply re-invented the hero of the conte philosophique. In any event, Camus' influence can best be seen by comparing Wallas (from Les Gommes) and Mathias (from Le voyeur) to Rastignac or Julien Sorel, a comparison that should convince most that Robbe-Grillet also had something other than the conventional psychological novel in mind. If the doubters need further proof of Robbe-Grillet's thinking, they should read what he wrote in La Jalousie.

Two of the protagonists, A … and Franck, are reading a novel that takes place in Africa. The narrator, who listens and comments to himself but does not speak in the novel, notes that they never talk about the qualities of the text. "On the other hand, they often reproach the heros themselves for certain acts, or certain character traits, as they would for mutual friends." (En revanche il leur arrive souvent de reprocher aux héros eux-mêmes certains actes, ou certains traits de caractère comme ils le feraient pour des amis communs.) The same is true for the critics' treatment of L'Etranger even though they and Meursault are not mutual friends. Some, Girard, for instance, will condemn Meursault for his "crime" even though it is more than obvious that Camus does not. Camus' sympathy, if not affinity, for the accused and against the judges is a constant theme in L'Homme révolté. This attitude may well make some of Camus' admirers very uncomfortable. Nonetheless, he did write that if one cannot prove one's own virtue, an impossible task, the prisons must be opened. That statement is a reflection of his soul, his thinking, and his position on the question of punishment. As such, it is the only opinion that critics should take into account when discussing his works. The critics are free to disagree with his beliefs, but they have no right to falsify or to ignore them.
The major problem with standard political, psychological and sociological interpretations of *L'Etranger* is that they are by literary people who are in the business of seeking, and finding, learned interpretations of literary works. In his novel of student unrest at the University of Nanterre, Robert Merle, who, like Camus, was born in Algeria, presents us with a non-literary person. And an Arab at that. The Arab, Abdelaziz, is a laborer, not a university student. As such, he is interested in mathematics, not literature, since a simple night-school certificate will allow him to get a better job, while studies in literature will not. His would-be helper, a French student, and therefore an intellectual, insists that he read *L'Etranger* and *L'Immoraliste*.

As Abdelaziz knows, and points out, despite all the talk about the "absurd," the only thing that is really absurd is the story itself. As both Camus and Abdelaziz knew, there is simply no possibility that a respectable, gainfully-employed European would ever have been arrested, much less tried, convicted and executed, for having killed an Arab armed with a knife. At least not in the Algeria of 1940. (Let us not forget the Arab prisoners' reaction at finding Meursault, a European, among them.) But since the critics do not live in that place and that period, they have chosen to ignore that simple fact. They should have started by wondering why Camus would base his novel on an impossible situation.

In the same way, the critics have agonized over why he had Meursault kill an Arab. Camus has even been accused of being anti-Arab, an accusation that he probably found too grotesque to bother to refute even though some then mistook his silence for an admission of guilt. He could have cited the articles he wrote attacking the government for its mistreatment of Arabs in pre-war Algeria. But he didn't. Nor did he bother to cite the difficulties he had had with press censors, and the Communist Party, which, for political reasons, backed the government's anti-Arab actions. (How many of the new critics remember that Dr. Rieux refused to cooperate with the journalist, Rambert, when the latter informed him that he could not, or would not, print the whole truth on the Arabs' condition in Algeria?)

Moreover, in a footnote to a discussion of Hitler's Germany and the savage destruction of Lidice, Camus wrote. "We should note that atrocities which could remind us of these excesses were committed in the colonies (India, 1857, Algeria, 1946 etc.) by European nations who obeyed the same irrational belief in racial superiority." (Il est frappant de noter que des atrocités qui peuvent rappeler ces excès ont été commises aux colonies [Indes, 1857, Algérie, 1945, etc.] par des nations européennes qui obéissaient au même préjugé irrational de supériorité raciale.) That statement alone should put to rest all charges of his alleged racism.

But, as some critics continue to look for "proof" of his hatred of Arabs, we are asked to note that there is no Arab culture, such as mosques and souks, in the book. This argument assumes that Camus should have wished to be a latter-day Pierre Loti but I can see no reason for such an assumption. We are also asked to consider the alleged attack on his mother as a motive for the killing of the Arab. If one dares ask the question, "Why, if he hated Arabs to that point, did he not then indulge in language that would cast them in an unfavorable light?", one will simply be ignored, as the student ignored Abdelaziz's objections. The question that should have been asked is not "why did he kill an Arab?", but "Why did he not kill a European?"

Sartre was the first one to note that the book is not really a novel since there is no development in the character of Meursault. (He does come to a certain self-knowledge in prison, but that he has changed is very debatable.) He comes to us pretty much a fullblown figure such as we would find in a story by Voltaire. From this, Sartre deduced, logically, that the story is rather a *conte philosophique* in the same way that Zadig and *Micromégas* are. This type of literary work does not have as its primary goal the simple telling of a story. Rather, it has a point to prove or at least to demonstrate. Why should Camus have defended himself against those who read the book as an expression of their own unconscious desires or racism? Did Voltaire ever explain what he meant in his *contes*? Of course not. He assumed enough intelligence on the part of the reader to be able to determine that without his further help.
In any examination of *L'Etranger*, one must start with the question, why did Camus write the book? Certainly not for money, since he had no reputation that would lead to serious sales. Just as certainly not to tell a story, since there is no development in Meursault's character or conduct that could lead to a real story. Certainly not, and for the above reasons, to arrive at a philosophical position as Sartre did in *La Nausée*. As with Voltaire, there must have been such a position already determined. Since the one common bond of any importance between this work and, say, *La Peste, Réflexions sur la guillotine, L'Homme révolté*, etc., is the question of the death penalty, let us consider that to be the real subject of the book and see if such a conclusion can be justified. (If we wish to drag his father into the story, let us also remember that his father, who was in favor of capital punishment, witnessed an execution and was sickened by it. As was, finally, Tarrou of *La Peste*. In chapter five of *L'Etranger*, Meursault thinks about his father who had been, in contrast to Camus' own father, obliged to witness an execution and had also been revolted by it. At the time, Meursault was disgusted by his father's reaction, but now he understands him. "How had I not seen that nothing was more important than an execution and that, all in all, it was the only truly interesting thing for a man." (Comment n'avais-je pas vu que rien n'était plus important qu'une exécution capitale et que, en somme, c'était la seule chose vraiment intéressante pour un homme.) Moreover, in *L'Homme révolté*, Camus wrote, "We will know nothing as long as we do not know if we have the right to kill this individual who stands before us or to accept that he be killed." (Nous ne saurons rien tant que nous ne saurons pas si nous avons le droit de tuer cet individu devant nous ou d'accepter qu'il soit tué.) It is obvious, at least to me, that these quotes justify my reading of the novel as a pamphlet against the death penalty.

But, since the majority of people, at any given time, are in favor of capital punishment, how can one write a book against it and make it seem a despicable and unacceptable punishment? The answer, I feel, is by setting up a straw man.

As I said, the question that should have been asked is why Meursault did not kill a European. The answer is, because the European would have to be a "real" person and the Arab would not. That is, since Arabs had no real rights, and often no real identity, in the Algeria of Camus' youth, certain weaknesses in his story would go unnoticed if only because other Europeans, not Arabs, would read the book. If this reasoning bothers you, or seems specious, answer the following questions. Why does the Arab have no name? Why does he not have a face or age or profession? Why has he no family, no friends? Who speaks for him at the trial? No one! He simply does not exist other than as a means to get Meursault condemned to the guillotine. Even in *Le Grand dadais*, by Poirot-Delpech, a brilliant novel sometimes compared to *L'Etranger*, the victim had a name, if only Freddy, and two relatives, if somewhat remote. Here, there is nothing. O. Zero.

Why? Because it forces the reader to concentrate on Meursault, the alleged murderer. It shows him at work, at play. It talks of his friends, his dead mother, his loves, his future both before and after the shooting. He has neighbors, good and bad. (Raymond, too, exists only to get Meursault into a position where he will kill a non-person.) In short, it gives us a "murderer" but no victim, and the reader, Camus hopes, will be properly horrified at his unjust conviction and death sentence. And no one will notice that the Arab doesn't exist because Camus wants it that way. A European "victim" would demand, if not equal time of the author, at least a semblance of existence. Even the most minimal, the lowliest European would have what the Arab does not: family, friends, face, character, social position. A European victim might well have gotten the reader's sympathy and that would have drawn attention away from Meursault and his plight. Camus could not take that chance. A *conte philosophique* must always be played out with a stacked deck.

In a sense, it was the same in *La Peste*, a parable of the Second World War, that has only victims and no guilty. In that book, the rats came on their own, without a leader. There was no evil dictator or his minions to send people to the death camps and the incinerators. In both books, then, there is no one to really hate, no one to blame, no one to castigate, except, of course, the system itself that causes both death by war and death by guillotine. How very tidy.
In *Le Grand dadais*, our hero, Alain, accidentally kills a contortionist who works in a strip-joint. Freddy, as I said, had a name, a job and at least two relatives who testified, falsely it would seem, that his death was an irreparable loss. Poirot-Delpech really doesn't spend any time detailing Freddy's life because it simply is not relevant to the story, even if his death is. It is the same for Camus' treatment, or rather, his non-treatment, of the Arab whose sole contribution to the book is his death. But at least, unlike the Arab, Freddy is there, he speaks and participates, albeit minimally, in the story. Like Meursault, Alain also is tried and convicted, but with a difference. Reflecting on the events that got him into prison, Alain says to himself, "Like all criminals, I deserved a spanking or the guillotine. But these two extreme punishments, the only ones that I could have understood, ran the risk of shocking public opinion." (Comme tous les criminels, je méritais la fessée ou la guillotine. Mais ces deux punitions extrêmes, les seules que je j'eusse comprises, risquaient de heurter l'opinion.) Instead, Alain got five years and Meursault the guillotine.

Where Poirot-Delpech is not really trying to prove a philosophical point and presents his characters honestly. Camus is, and, in a sense, cheats. After all, had Meursault gotten even an impossible five years in prison instead of the guillotine, can anyone seriously believe that this slim book would have had a second printing? As Judge Orthon put it in *La Peste*, "It's not the law that counts, it's the sentence." (Ce n'est pas la loi qui compte, c'est la condamnation.) And Cottard, a criminal, tells Rieux that the judge is public enemy number one.

There is much that is admirable in *L'Etranger*, but this subterfuge is not, because it fails to consider that there are at least two sides to the debate over the death penalty. But then, it didn't really matter since the central question was overlooked in the rush to analyze the hero's non-existent childhood and psyche.

**Criticism: Adele King (review date Winter 1995)**


[In the following review, King discusses Camus's literary legacy and the publication of *The First Man*.]

When Albert Camus died in a car crash in January 1960, the manuscript of part of a novel on which he had been working was found in his briefcase. Thirty-four years later his daughter Catherine Camus, the literary executor of her father's estate after the death of her mother Francine in 1979, has edited this uncompleted novel, *Le premier homme*, and allowed it to be published. It became a major publishing event of 1994 in France, with over 100,000 copies sold within the first few months following its release. There were articles, sometimes many pages in length, devoted to discussion of the text in all the major newspapers and weekly magazines.

Publication of *Le premier homme* is also an event for the scholarly community. The international Société des Etudes Camusiennes organized its annual meeting in May, only six weeks after the novel was published, as a discussion, "First Impressions of The First Man." Already in France there are Master's theses being written on the novel, which had previously been the subject of an unpublished thesis based on the manuscript. The interest in the general community and among scholars can be partly explained by the continuing reputation of Camus as one of the most widely read novelists of this century (*L'Etranger* is the best selling novel on Gallimard's list and has been for many years). Studies of Camus are numerous. There are also more specific reasons, both in terms of Camus's biography and in terms of politics, for the wide discussion of *Le premier homme* at this time.

Before he died, many felt that Camus’s inspiration had dried up. He had not published an original creative work since *L'exil et le royaume* in 1957. After winning the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1957, he had seemed
obsessed with the problems raised by the Algerian war of independence. He told Robert Gallimard, for example, that he could no longer write, but would work in the theater. His enemies on the left, and they were numerous following his famous quarrel with Sartre after the publication of *L'homme révolté* in 1952, used his lack of new work as another stick with which to attack him. Even many critics favorable to Camus wondered if he had the creative stamina to continue. Catherine Camus waited to allow publication of *Le premier homme* partly because she felt the style of this first draft might be used to confirm doubts about her father's artistic ability.

For years Camus's refusal to embrace the cause of Algerian independence was considered an act of treason by the French left. The Algerian rebellion was by far the major political event in France during the 1950s, until de Gaulle finally granted the colony independence in 1962. The attitude toward Algeria of Camus, who describes the pied-noir culture of his youth with considerable admiration and love in his earlier work, always aroused controversy in France. After Camus's death, for example, some even read *L'Etranger* as a "racist," anti-Arab novel. Catherine Camus waited until the political climate was less hostile toward her father. Undoubtedly as well, she was reluctant to go against the wishes of her mother, who knew that Camus himself would have been unwilling to let an unfinished work be printed. *Le premier homme*, in fact, is not even an unfinished novel, but merely a draft of some chapters, with notes for additional material to be added. Some of the autobiographical material, particularly references to Camus's love affairs, may also have influenced Francine Camus's initial decision.

There were also by the 1990s other reasons to allow publication. In the present political situation, France is trying to maintain contact with the government of Algeria, the successors of the FLN against which France fought, but now the group which France has supported in its decision to annul the elections that gave a majority to the violently anti-French Islamic fundamentalists. With this political situation in the headlines almost every day, Camus's thoughts on Algeria seem of contemporary relevance and not necessarily politically suspect.

Since Camus's death, many critics and scholars have looked for more texts. Scholarly interest in Camus has been intense. Six of the seven volumes in the Cahiers Albert Camus series are previously unpublished or uncollected writings by Camus. The unpublished early novel *La mort heureuse* was printed in the series in 1971. A collection of early, mostly unpublished stories appeared in 1973. Articles from *Combat* were collected. An early version of *Caligula* was published. Catherine herself became involved in editing the uncollected articles from *Algier-Républicain*.

Considerable work was needed to make this early draft available. Francine Camus had typed the handwritten manuscript, which contains many additions and marginal corrections and which is written in what seems to the reader looking at the sample pages included in this edition a handwriting almost impossible to decipher. In addition to the draft manuscript of thirteen chapters, *Le premier homme* includes loose notes for insertion found in the briefcase, and Camus's plans and general notes for the novel. Catherine also added correspondence between Camus and Louis Germain, his primary-school teacher and first important mentor in Algiers and the model for a central character in the draft chapters that exist.

*Le premier homme* is closely autobiographical, relating the childhood of a character modeled on Camus himself, though named Jacques Cormery. It was, however, intended as a novel, in fact the first work to which Camus presumably meant to give the label "roman." (*L'Etranger* and *La Chute* are called "récits"; *La Peste* is a "chronique.") In the existing draft, characters are occasionally called by their real names—an indication of how the writer had only begun to fictionalize his material. While Camus himself would have been very reluctant to let this work be published, many today will read it as much for its biographical interest as for its confirmation of Camus's ability as a writer.
Readers of Camus will initially be surprised by the wealth of detail, the capturing of a precise place, the realism of this work, in comparison with everything Camus wrote earlier. (Some of the notes, composed in the epigrammatic style of Camus's notebooks, are closer to what readers of Camus might expect than are the draft chapters themselves.) The Algeria of L'Etranger and La Peste is a Mediterranean country, but with little description to make it specifically North African. When Camus wrote descriptively, particularly in the early Noces, it was with a poetic intensity not suited to his fiction, in which the narrative voice is a principal organizing element. Another stylistic difference from the earlier work is the presence of a number of extended, page-long sentences, often beautifully written, a bit Proustian.

Le premier homme is divided into two sections: "Recherche du père" and "Le fils." Neither, however, is complete. The father for whom the hero searches died, as did Camus's own father, fighting in World War I for a country he had never seen before he was drafted. Jacques's search for some understanding of his father is rendered particularly difficult by the limited ability of his mother to tell him anything. She is illiterate, speaks little, suffers silently in a life of extreme poverty, supporting her children by doing housework, while dominated at home by her equally uncultured but tyrannical mother. As one commentator has noted, however, the very fact that the father chose to marry this woman should be of interest to the son, although he never mentions this.

Apart from a realistic description of the birth of the hero, in which his father is introduced as the new supervisor of a vineyard in Mondovi (Camus's actual birthplace), who arrives with his pregnant wife just prior to the birth of their second son, both sections of the novel are recounted in the third person but from the perspective of the hero. When he is forty, he visits his father's grave in France, only to realize that there is little he can learn about a man who died at the age of only twenty-nine and who, as a poor Algerian, left little trace. Some of those to whom Jacques turns are substitutes for his father: the schoolteacher based on Louis Germain, or the intellectual to whom the adult Cormery speaks and who is clearly based on the philosopher Jean Grenier, Camus's mentor from his lycée days.

In the childhood sections, which are the most complete, the sensual detail, and particularly the descriptions of the odors of poverty, are exceptionally vivid. The characters are to some extent familiar from earlier texts: the silent mother, the domineering grandmother, the deaf uncle. Interestingly, the older brother is almost never mentioned. The poverty of Cormery's childhood (and of Camus's) is more extreme than has usually been realized. While the essays in L'Envers et L'Endroit, Camus's first published work, give some indication of his cultural isolation at home, this becomes clear in Le premier homme's descriptions of Jacques's mother and grandmother attending school prize days with no understanding of the ceremony. Several French critics have commented on the vast difference between the childhood Sartre described in Les Mots and that of Camus. French literary discussion seems never to get beyond contrasting Sartre and Camus.

In the draft chapters relating the adult Cormery's search for his father, Camus sometimes appends marginal notes such as "make Jacques more of a monster," without indicating in what way the character is monstrous. He does comment, however, that he feels himself to be a monster. The bitter self-examination of La Chute has not been forgotten.

The title has already been a subject of much discussion. Is either father or son "the first man"? One explanation of the title is Catherine's: the first man is the Algerian, either European or Arab, the poor man without a past, whose life is completely forgotten on his death: "C'est tous ceux qui passent sur la terre sans apparemment laisser de trace mais qui quand même construisent ce monde dans lequel nous vivons." Like several other commentators, Catherine took pains to stress that, for Camus, both Arabs and pieds-noirs are of equal importance in an Algerian culture often at odds with that of the metropolis. There are indications that Camus considered both the Arabs and the pieds-noirs as new men, without roots in cultures of the past and sharing a life of poverty, but it is clear from this manuscript that he also considered the Arabs as fundamentally different from himself.
More often the "first man" seems to be Jacques Cormery (or Camus) himself, the son without a father to help him find his way in the world, to transmit a tradition. He describes himself as the "first inhabitant or the first conqueror." A similar theme that recurs is the dual world of Jacques, defined sometimes as the split between this hard, empty, traditionless Algeria and a Europe of measured spaces filled with centuries of culture; at other times the two worlds of Jacques are those of the family without books, where he must read the titles of silent films for his illiterate grandmother, and of the school and lyceé, where books are the sustenance of his imaginative life.

The chapter relating a conversation with the (unnamed) Grenier character, stylistically one of the least successful, is labeled by Camus in a marginal note: "To write and then to omit." The notation, illustrating how Camus planned to work through his autobiographical material, should make us wary of thinking that the more realistic and detailed style in Le premier homme was necessarily one that Camus intended to keep. In fact, some of the notes suggest what might have been a radical revision of the text: "Alternate chapters would give the voice of the mother. Comments about the same facts but with her vocabulary of 400 words." This possible organization sounds to me much closer to the earlier Camus, finding the tone for his fiction through the voice of an individual character.

Some draft material on the early history of the French colonization in Algeria, based on documentation of, for example, the number of deaths from disease among the first settlers, would presumably have been related to the search for a father who could hardly be known except as an example of this settler community. Other draft material, about terrorism in the 1950s, is not integrated into the story successfully in the existing manuscript. At one point Camus's marginal note suggests he was unsure whether or not to include one long passage about a terrorist attack.

Beyond the impressive description of his poor childhood, Camus was going to evoke a whole life close to his own, including (it appears from the general notes and plans) a passionate love affair, the discontent of a life in Paris, the impossibility of accepting terrorism in support of independence when it might hurt his family, and admiration for many Arabs who are contrasted to those fighting in the revolution. But it is perhaps impossible to speak about the themes of a work which is so incomplete. As it stands, Le premier homme is a tribute to Camus's mother (surely one of the few illiterate parents of any Western artist in this century), an impressive evocation of a childhood in Algiers, and a tantalizing glimpse of what Camus might have revealed of his adult life through a fictional form that he did not have time to finish.

**Criticism: Elizabeth Hawes (review date 2 October 1995)**


*[In the following review, Hawes discusses Camus's artistic and thematic concerns in The First Man.]*

Back in 1960, the sudden death of Albert Camus at the age of 46 was a tragic event for young intellectuals, like the breach of a promise, the end of then and the beginning of now. Memories of the day still remain—the photograph of the Facel Vega wrapped around a tree, the muddy briefcase in a field, the sense of personal loss, the unbearable Absurdity of it all. "Rarely have the nature of a man's work and the conditions of the historical moment so clearly demanded that a writer go on living," Jean-Paul Sartre mourned. "No modern writer that I can think of, except Camus, has aroused love," Susan Sontag wrote from America.

More than Sartre or Gide or even Malraux, Albert Camus had become the cultural hero of the postwar generation. From the early 1940s, when the young journalist from French Algeria raised a singular voice in the Resistance newspaper Combat, then published, in rapid succession, the novel The Stranger, the play Caligula and the essay The Myth of Sisyphus—his triptych of the Absurd—critics had spoken of le
phénomène Camus. Almost overnight, Camus had risen to a celebrated role as "the moral conscience of his times." Like Meursault and Sisyphus, he was l'homme engagé, l'homme sans autre avenir que lui-même, committed to finding meaning in the modern world. In the next decade, he produced The Plague and The Fall, the long essay The Rebel, plays, translations, short stories and political essays, an oeuvre that was crowned with the Nobel Prize for Literature for 1957. By that time, however, Camus was en panne, estranged from Sartre and his old literary crowd by their criticism of The Rebel, anguished over the explosion of war in Algeria, suffering from writer's block and his own success, as silent as if he were in exile. When he died, he left behind only the rough beginnings of a new work he had described as the novel of his maturity and entitled Le premier homme.

Last year, after prolonged deliberation, Camus's family decided to publish the manuscript he was working on at the time of his death; it created a literary sensation in France. This unfinished novel, now translated into English as The First Man, has resurrected the author as dramatically as a revisitation.

As early as 1951, Camus spoke in his journals of his plans for an epic novel on the model of War and Peace. It would be his éducation sentimentale, he said later, the story of his Algeria, recounted for mainland France. The First Man is the beginning of this historical saga, told through the lives of a poor family named Cormery, which unfolds between the birth of a son, Jacques, on the eve of World War I and his nostalgic return home in the violent days of the Front de Libération Nationale in the late 1950s. It is also an astonishing piece of autobiography, for in name, chronology and virtually every important aspect of his life, Jacques Cormery is Albert Camus transposed to the third person. Like Cormery (the family name of his paternal grandmother), Camus had a father who was mortally wounded in the battle of the Marne and buried in Saint-Brieuc in Brittany, a strong silent illiterate mother whom he adored, a near-mute uncle and a tyrannical grandmother who ruled the household; grew up in poverty in the Belcourt neighborhood of Algiers; and was saved by a primary school teacher who introduced him to books, proposed a scholarship to the lycée and "opened for me the door to everything I love in the world." Like the adult Cormery, who speaks of "the secret exultation" of leaving Paris for Africa ("with the satisfaction of one who has made good his escape and is laughing at the thought of the look on the guards' faces"), he always rejoiced in the physical pleasures of his land. And like Cormery, he too, after visiting his father's grave in his middle age, set out in quest of the man he never knew and found himself back in his childhood.

Although The First Man was meant to be a full portrait of his life and times—the author's notes preserved in the appendix include references to sports, politics, morality, terrorists, farmers, old friends, lovers, children, Tipasa, Paris, Provence—Camus was able to complete only the first third of that work, which describes his search for his father and, more expansively, his childhood. Dedicated to his mother, the Widow Camus "who will never be able to read this book," The First Man is dominated by this humble figure isolated by semi-deafness and illiteracy, who did not hear the words of the officer who came to announce her young husband's death in France, "who had no idea what history and geography might be." Camus, who had earlier spoken of putting at the center of a work "the admirable silence of a mother and the effort of a man to find some form of justice or love which could counterbalance this silence," writes with poignant detail and a perceptible ache about the fearful and submissive woman he so loved, of the hollow in her neck that "to him had the scent of a tenderness all too rare in his young life," of her life that "by dint of being deprived of hope, had become also a life without any sort of resentment," of the shame of feeling shame when he had to describe her as a domestique in his lycée application.

As a portrait of poverty, The First Man is lyric in its illuminations. The most humdrum details of Jacques's youth are revealing—the single pair of pants pressed nightly, the nails in his shoes to preserve the soles and to prevent him from playing soccer, the street games with apricot pits; they describe a life of bare necessities, "among things named with common nouns," a life in the present tense. "Remembrance of things past is just for the rich," Jacques observes; "in order to bear up well one must not remember too much, but rather stick close to the passing day, hour by hour, as his mother did." In the search for his own heritage, Jacques
confronts "the mystery of poverty that creates beings without names and without a past." Algeria is "the land of oblivion," he concludes, where men try to learn to live without roots, "where each one is the first man."

As a portrait of Algeria, The First Man is passionate and troubled. No one has written more evocatively of the North African landscape than Camus in his youthful essays, which brim with the joys, and freedom of the sun and the light, and, here, twenty years later, he luxuriates in recollections of swimming in the sea, hunting in the mountains, roaming the streets of the poor quarter where the houses smell of spices, the terraces of honeysuckle and jasmine. Algeria emerges as even more than physical sensations and childhood ways, as Camus describes the settling of the harsh and hostile land by waves of poor European immigrants; the primitive fraternity that exists between Frenchmen and Arabs—"We were made to understand each other. Fools and brutes like us, but with the same blood of men"; the menace in the air and "this soft unbearable burden on the heart" as the era of decolonization dawns. Camus, who had spoken out for colonial reforms and indigenous rights all his life, and consistently refused to justify terrorism in the name of revolution, still believed in the future of a multicultural Algeria, even as Arab bombs exploded under his mother's window. That was his dilemma in the last days of his life, the "night inside him," the "tangled hidden roots," and it called into question both his politics and his identity.

The First Man is Camus's own quest for identity. Like his father and Jacques Cormery and the European in Algeria, he is that eponymous first man, rootless, traditionless, creating his own history, threatened with anonymity and oblivion. "I am going to tell the story of an alien," the author reminded himself in his notes. This is the theme he first sounded in The Stranger, but here it becomes a personal saga that resonates with details—the shell fragment from his father's head that is kept in an old biscuit tin behind the towels, the elderly smell of his grandmother's flesh during one of their dreaded afternoon naps, the taste of the leather strap of the school satchel he chews during lessons. It is difficult to read this book as other than autobiography, because in its very nature as an unedited and unpolished first draft it has both a spontaneity and a transparency that are made even more obvious by the occasional slips into the first person, and the corrections and explanations included in the text. (In the French edition, the addition of facsimile manuscript pages, covered with Camus's small, tight, almost indecipherable script, adds a further sense of veracity to the work.) Camus's prose intensifies the sense of immediacy and purpose, for it moves in primal rhythms, magnificent surges of long sentences that seem like searches in themselves and consume whole pages before ending. If the short, blunt sentences of The Stranger reflected a world without connections or hope, the sweeping lyricism of The First Man speaks of something new.

Camus originally titled his novel Adam. Coming as it did several years after the confessional The Fall and at a time of personal decline and depression, it represented a new beginning for him. Even incomplete, it is the most ambitious and compassionate of his books. It is also an integral and important part of his whole oeuvre, both a continuation and an illumination of his thought. There is a story about his father's violent reaction to a public hanging that speaks to Camus's own strong opposition to the death penalty. There is a passage about "the secret of the light, of the warm poverty that had enabled him to survive and to overcome everything," that explains his humanism. "For all his life it would be kindness and love that made him cry, never pain or persecution, which on the contrary only reinforced his spirit and his resolution," Camus writes of Cormery, and thus of himself, in retrospection. In the last sentence of this last work, he also contemplates his own death—"he, like a solitary and ever-shining blade of a sword, was destined to be shattered with a single blow and forever"—and expresses "the blind hope" that he will grow old and die without rebellion.

Criticism: Stanley Hoffmann (review date Winter 1995–96)

[In the following review, Hoffmann provides critical analysis of The First Man. According to Hoffmann, "Rough and raw as it is, it is a splendid work of art, and it helps us to understand Camus—the man and his work—better and more profoundly."]

_The First Man_ is the final, unfinished work of Albert Camus. The manuscript—144 handwritten pages—was found in the car in which he died at the age of 46 on January 4, 1960. It was published in France only in 1994. One can see why Camus' widow hesitated to release it. It was almost impossible to decipher (as the reproductions of several pages show), devoid of commas, full of corrections and additions. Many words are missing and many remain illegible, many sentences are incomplete, several characters are given different names. And it is only a fragment of what was intended as a much bigger book, covering most of the life of the main character, Jacques Cormery, who is none other than Camus. The manuscript ends when he is 14, an adolescent who has just kissed his first girl.

According to Catherine Camus, the author's daughter, there was another reason why her mother, who died in 1979, had been reluctant to publish it. Camus' reputation had fallen dramatically—at least in the French intelligentsia, which he had never liked. (The public continued to buy his books, and high school students continued to study them.) French authors, after their death, often drop into a kind of purgatory from which they later emerge and move, finally, either to the paradise of the classics or to the hell of the forgotten. Gide is still in purgatory, and Malraux seems to keep him company there. Camus' purgatory felt very much like an antechamber of hell. He was denounced for his moralism, for his lack of understanding of politics, for his rejection of Algerian independence, for the amateurishness of his philosophical essays, for the grandiloquence of his plays, for the gray abstraction of _The Plague_.

The intelligentsia that decides on reputations had declared him the loser in the famous 1952 debate with Sartre over _The Rebel_, when Sartre denounced Camus as a _belle âme_ who refused to dirty his hands and whose moral attitudes barely concealed the bourgeois sin of anticommunism. Camus, defending his work, had replied that Sartre had never done more than place his directorial chair at _Les Temps Modernes_ in the direction of history. When the Algerian war broke out, Sartre, championing not only independence but the cleansing virtues of violence against the colonizers (in his famous, frantic preface to Frantz Fanon's _The Wretched of the Earth_), filled the long years of the war with his vociferous support of the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN). Camus condemned terrorism and torture on both sides and—I paraphrase a famous sentence of his, pronounced when he received the Nobel Prize in 1957—found it difficult to prefer the justice of the Arab rebels, who fought to free their people, to his mother, who could have fallen victim to guerrilla terror. He lapsed into silence.

Sartre's embrace of complete independence for Algeria even if it meant killing or expelling all Europeans appeared far more realistic than Camus' occasional endorsements of schemes aimed at keeping Algeria French, while granting equal rights to the Europeans and to the Arabs.

"In these circumstances," according to Catherine Camus, "to have published an unfinished manuscript might well have given ammunition to those who were saying that Camus was through as a writer. His friends and my mother decided not to run that risk." But "between 1980 and 1985, voices began to be heard saying that perhaps Camus had not been so wrong." The twin children of Camus decided to publish the manuscript even though he "would never have published [it] as it is"—because of its importance as an autobiographical document. They were right. Rough and raw as it is, it is a splendid work of art, and it helps us to understand Camus—the man and his work—better and more profoundly.

_The Poor Boy_

It is not the first time that Camus tells us about his childhood in Algiers—about the death of his French father at the battle of the Marne in 1914, when Albert was still a baby; about the terrible poverty in which he (and his slightly older brother) lived, brought up by a partly deaf, illiterate, silent, and overworked mother who
exhausted herself as a cleaning woman and by her stern, often brutal mother; about his adoration for this affectionate but somehow unreachable mother; about his love for the sun and the beaches of Algiers. We knew that, in an archetypical French way, his gifts had been noticed and nurtured by his teacher in primary school, and that thanks to him, he was able to continue to study in a lycée (where, later, the philosopher and writer Jean Grenier was going to encourage him again). But two things are distinctive about The First Man. One is the intensity of Camus' recollections and reflections, to which I will return. The other is the timing of this work and its purpose.

Camus, who had, in the 1930s, become, for a very brief period, a member of the Communist Party, and a lucid and sharply critical reporter on Algerian affairs (particularly on the plight of the Arabs), had moved—reluctantly—to metropolitan France, in order to get treatment for tuberculosis, just as the Second World War was engulfing Europe. He burst upon the literary scene in 1942, with the Myth of Sisyphus and The Stranger. After the liberation, as editor and star of the Resistance paper Combat, for which he wrote trenchant editorials—demanding purges against collaborationists and denouncing nationalism and any return to France's prewar political diseases—he became one of the most fashionable and celebrated intellectuals in Paris. Much of this giddy, golden period is described (and somewhat distorted) in Simone de Beauvoir's Mandarins.

But the poor boy from Algiers never felt at home in gray and rainy Paris or at ease among the sophisticates of the intelligentsia, with their clans, mutual excommunications, sarcasms, and settlements of accounts. And then his popularity declined in the 1950s. The Fall, published in 1956, marked the end of his era as a Parisian guru. This sardonic, dark, and brilliant tale, written in a style that was far different both from the lyrical vein of some of his early stories and of his essays, and from the more austere style of his philosophical writings and of The Plague, has been interpreted very differently by critics. Some, like Conor Cruise O'Brien recently, see it as an exercise in self-criticism in which Camus rejected "his own role of Camus le juste, and also his role as a contemporary Saint-Just," and denounced the hypocrisy of his own moralism.

I do not doubt that Camus, insofar as he had participated in the glitter and clatter of Parisian intellectual café life, had wanted to make fun of his part in it. But I do believe that his target was Sartre, and that J.B. Clamence, the lawyer who says "I" in The Fall, and who becomes a judge-penitent pursued by the memory of the woman whom he has failed to rescue after she had jumped into the Seine, was a fictional representation of Sartre, the writer who felt guilty about his bourgeois origins and his apolitical youth, and who beat his breast, so to speak, on the breasts of others—all those whom he denounced as guilty cowards or stinkers. (It would be fascinating to compare Clamence with Sartre's own fictional character Frantz in Sartre's play The Condemned of Altona.)

Having turned his back on the Paris scene, demoralized by the atrocities of the Algerian war, torn between the desire to speak out on the ethical and political issues that were plaguing his contemporaries and the fear of compromising his integrity as an artist if he crossed the line that separates concern from commitment, and elucidation from engagement, Camus expressed his dilemma in the sad and lovely story of the painter Jonah who, when he dies, leaves an unfinished painting, an empty canvas on which one can find one word scribbled, but it is not clear whether it is solitaire or solidaire. Camus now suffered from a writer's block, which lasted several years.

The First Man was Camus' attempt to overcome this block by going back to his origins and by trying to make sense of his whole life. For Camus, unlike for Sartre, l'absurde was not the human condition, but the gap, the discrepancy, between an often beautiful but indifferent nature and human desires and aspirations that can never be fulfilled because, as Caligula puts, it, "men die and are not happy."

Camus wanted to understand himself, to see where his desires and passions had come from and where they had led him—an exercise far removed from the highly complacent and narcissistic self-criticism (mixed, as
usual, with a denunciation of some of his bourgeois family members) in Sartre's *Words* but comparable to Proust's own gigantic quest for time past.

It is clear from the "notes and sketches" that accompany the text of *The First Man* that Camus would have been unsparking in his introspection of the adolescent and adult Camus, of his machismo, of his fickleness. Just as Sartre's attempt at a total "reconstruction" of Flaubert remains unfinished, Camus' effort to understand the person to whom he several times refers to as a "monster" was aborted. But the fragment he left is miraculously complete, and it has been very well translated by David Hapgood—not an easy task, since Camus' prose is often so (spontaneously, abundantly, intoxicatingly) poetic.

**The Son or the First Man**

It is divided into two parts. In the first, "Search for the Father," Camus tells the story of his father's arrival in the fall of 1913 in the hinterland of Bône, where he was going to manage a farm, and of his own birth during the night of this arrival. Then, abruptly, he takes us to Saint Brieuc in Brittany, where the father is buried. His son visits the grave in 1954 and, realizing that he is much older than his father was when he was killed, feels like an adult in front of a murdered child.

Attempts at finding out more about his father from his mother, or from settlers who had known him, bring out very little. Jacques only remembers his father's return in horror from having witnessed the execution of a murderer, an anecdote that Camus had elsewhere cited as the root of his own horror of capital punishment and that he links here to his father's violent death.

What Jacques discovers is the story of the French who settled in Algeria after the 1848 Revolution, attracted by the promise of land and work, which they did not have in metropolitan France. His father's family had come from Alsace after 1871, his mother's from Spain: poor devils uprooted by misery or persecution and driven to a land where they would disappear without leaving any trace, a "land of oblivion where everybody is the first man." Jacques, returning to Algeria from Saint Brieuc, feels that "he too was a member of the tribe," despite his attempt to escape from it.

The chapters about the missing father are interspersed with chapters about the games played by Jacques as a child and about the family in which he was brought up. The formidable grandmother who had had nine children, the mother who was hard of hearing, and her brother Etienne (also often called Ernest in the text), who was deaf and explosive, and whom his old mother treated with surprising gentleness because he was handsome: "it is our weakness for beauty" that "helps make the world bearable."

These chapters about Jacques as a child continue in the second part of the manuscript, "The Son or the First Man." They are the most moving and vivid. In one of his notes, he wrote: "Free oneself from any concern with art and form. Regain contact, without intermediary, thus innocence. To give up art here is to give up one's self. Renouncing the self, not through virtuousness. On the contrary, accept one's hell."

This is exactly what he accomplishes here. There is a constant, and constantly successful, effort to recapture the sensations, sounds, smells, and feelings of his childhood, which give his prose, full of long sentences that try to encompass a whole bygone world, a richness and lyrical precision he had never reached before. And it is made even more resonant by the fact that the man who thus brings the past back to a startlingly vibrant life at the same time reflects on it and on his feelings for it from the perspective of middle age, with the bitter wisdom of someone who had escaped from the past because he could not stand living in it any longer, yet felt forever after "exiled" from the miserable "kingdom" of his Algerian childhood.

Hence the peculiar lyricism of this rough draft, a lyricism both celebratory and desolate. Passion and compassion are fused in his evocation of those who brought him up, of his relation to them, of the relationship
between his mother and her brother, of his love for his mother and for M. Bernard his schoolteacher—in real life, M. Germain, to whom Camus wrote a lovely note after receiving the Nobel Prize, and who replied in a letter that seems to come straight from the annals of the Third Republic, full of affection and admiration for his pupil and of worry for the future of l'école laïque (they are published in an appendix). What could easily have been gloomy or misérabiliste is transfigured by the light of the Mediterranean, by the sun that made it all bearable, and that turned his condition into a "warm poverty that had enabled him to survive and to overcome everything."

**A Fortress without Drawbridges**

Indeed, *The First Man* is a kind of pious tribute to all those who live in poverty—not in what has sometimes been called, pompously, the culture of poverty, because the poor, as he shows, are deprived of culture. In a life entirely eaten up by the need to work so as to earn just enough money to keep going, there is no room for objects except the most indispensable, no room for art, no time for religion, no connection "to traditional values and stereotypes." "Poverty is a fortress without drawbridges."

When little Jacques escapes to the beach or uses up his shoes playing soccer, he gets whipped by his grandmother, he should have been working. "Poor people's memory is less nourished than that of the rich; it has fewer landmarks in space because they seldom leave the place where they live, and fewer reference points in time throughout lives that are gray and featureless…. Remembrance of things past is just for the rich. For the poor it only marks the faint traces on the path to death. And besides, in order to bear up well one must not remember too much."

When Jacques resents his uncle because Etienne kept his sister away from a man for whom she seemed to have some affection, he—or rather the writer—comments that "the poverty, the infirmities, the elemental need in which all his family lived … made it impossible to pass judgment on those who were its victims."

The heart of this book is the portrait of young Jacques, of Camus, as a child, and what it tells us about the experiences that shaped his values. Unlike most other works of Camus, it is not about ideas; here, we are soaked in sensations and feelings. What we find, above all, is this extraordinary bond to the silent mother, whom he describes with a heartbreaking tenderness, whom he never blames for allowing her mother to beat her boy, and whom he reveres for her life of endurance, her lack of resentment, her gentleness. When Camus writes about the child's "despairing love for something in his mother that did not belong or no longer belonged to the world and to the triviality of the days," or describes himself endlessly watching "her in the shadows with a lump in his throat, staring at her thin bent back, filled with an obscure anxiety in the presence of adversity he could not understand," the depth and immediately of his feeling leads to the purest form of art.

**His Ambivalence**

What Camus also tells us is the story of a child whom poverty condemns to repeated humiliations. He keeps a few pennies from the money that his grandmother had given him to buy groceries and pretends to have dropped them in the hole that serves as a toilet. When the old woman goes looking for them in it, he feels ashamed to have deprived his family of the coins, which he had wanted to use to go watch a soccer game. When he goes to the lycée and has to indicate his mother's profession on a form, he is ashamed of having to write "domestic." When he has to seek a summer job—so that he will be able to compensate his family for failing to earn any money while studying at the lycée—he discovers that he cannot get one if he does not lie about his intention to return to the lycée in the fall, and he suffers bitterly for having "to lie for the right to have no vacation, to work far from the summer sky and the sea he so loved."

What gives the book its tension and keeps it from ever slipping into sentimentality is the drama of Jacques' ambivalence. He is tied forever to his mother and to his milieu by "two or three favorite pictures that joined
him to them, made him one with them." But at the same time, the boy had a thirst for learning and a "hunger for discovery." School provided him both with an escape from his "destitute home" and with a "powerful poetry," which Camus describes minutely—the smell of the ink, the "varnished rulers and pen cases," the joy of finding out about the world in textbooks. If M. Bernard had not come pleading to Jacques' home, the grandmother would not have allowed him to go on to the lycée.

But as a result, Jacques was torn between two completely different universes. When he gained admittance to the lycée, "a child's immense anguish wrung his heart, as if he knew in advance that this success had just uprooted him from the warm and innocent world of the poor—a world closed upon itself like an island in the society—to be hurled into a strange world, one no longer his." The world he belonged to was stifling, the one he escaped to would turn out to be cruel and deceitful. He felt as if he had betrayed the world of the poor for a false glory, but also that he could not have stayed in it.

The intensity of Camus' feelings, the delicacy and beautiful aptness with which he renders them, make one realize that the reason why they had been either expressed obliquely or fleetingly or else transposed and "distanced" in his fiction and plays was because he struggled between a flood of passionate emotions and the drive to control and master them, a drive inculcated by the school, but also by the need not to let himself be engulfed by his love for his mother and by his empathy, his pity, for his family's condition.

Camus describes himself as a mixture of life-long attachments to those he loves and indifference, as a man who felt at ease only with "what was inevitable … everything in his life he had not been able to avoid, his illness, his vocation, fame or poverty … The heart, the heart above all is not free. It is inevitability and the recognition of the inevitable."

This fervent desire to escape from poverty and from his mother's "life of blind patience, without words, without plans," and to live as an artist indifferent to the world, he expressed in his first novel, A Happy Death, which was published only after his own death. But the world diverted Camus from his dream of indifference, and he felt that he needed forgiveness from his mother—"but you do not understand me and cannot read me": all she could do was "smile on me."

The Roots of His Thought

The First Man is both a familiar story—the story of emancipation through learning and of the mix of innocent pleasure and obscure guilt that is childhood—and a revelation of the roots of Camus' thought. It is not a book about politics, and those who, one more time, attack Camus for his views on Algeria are the victims of their own obsessions. The Algerian tragedy was going to be dealt with in a part of the book Camus never got to.

This does not mean that we do not find here some essential clues about his feelings for Algeria. When he deals with the past—the arrival of the colons, and the life of the pieds noirs at the time of his childhood, he expresses, again, mainly compassion for the settlers who came from many lands and disappeared after having lived and toiled without roots. He mentions the xenophobia of the workers, afraid of losing their jobs to the Spaniards, the Jews, or the Arabs, and fighting for "the privilege of servitude." There are few Arabs in this story: to young Jacques, they are companions. The real divide is the one that separates all those born in Algeria from those born in France, like Jacques' lycée friend Didier, whose fervent patriotism astonishes Jacques, for whom France is an abstraction (in one of his notes, Camus wrote that "what they did not like in him was the Algerian").

In the brief passage where the older Jacques, having returned to an Algeria torn by the war, reports both on his reactions and on the reactions of some of the settlers, Camus makes clear his revulsion against the FLN's violence, and he tells the story of a settler who decides to destroy his vineyards and move to France after having heard the préfet denounce the way the colons had treated the Arabs; but the farmer who reports this
story to Jacques says that the *colons* and the Arabs are "made to understand each other. Fools and brutes, like us, but with the same blood of men. We'll kill each other a little longer … And then we'll go back to living as men together."

Jacques himself, visiting his mother, hears a huge explosion in Algiers and protects an innocent Arab from the wrath of vengeful workers. We know now that the legacy of colonialism and the war itself destroyed that solidarity of Algerians, European and Arab, living on the same land and under the same sun that Camus dreamed about.

But it was always a mistake to read Camus as a political thinker or as a philosopher. He was haunted by the issues that *l'absurde* raised: suicide, murder, the impossibility of communicating fully even (or especially) with those one loves. But metaphysical questions and philosophical systems were not his domain. Insofar as public life was concerned, it was the ethical preconditions for political action that bothered him. He had no solutions to offer, only barriers he wanted to erect. He had one obsession, like Proudhon, with whom he shared enthusiasm for the artisan's work and hatred for work that is boring, work "so interminably monotonous that it made the days too long and, at the same time, life too short." He wanted fairness for human beings and, especially, for the poor.

This meant that politics had to be modest: grand salvationist schemes always led to more misery and oppression and deprived people of their right to their private lives; ideologies that subordinate means to ends and the present to a distant dubious future are evil; and the state is no more than a tool, not the culmination of history. What Camus taught was limits: do not do anything that adds to human misery, such as terror, torture, wanton violence.

On all these points, he clashed with Sartre, and this child of the poor resented especially Sartre's embrace of a proletariat he knew nothing about. Camus' rejection of Marxist and communist philosophies of history, his refusal to sanctify history, his advocacy of a kind of rebellion against servitude and injustice that says "we" and proclaims its solidarity with the downtrodden, his nausea at all forms of murder that add to the unhappiness and hasten the death that are our fare—all this comes directly from the childhood of a boy who had lost his father to the mindless massacre of Europe's Great War, who had experienced poverty and injustice but was singularly free of resentments and utterly devoid of hatred, for whom games, love, and learning, all the addictions of private life, took precedence over public affairs, who was entirely outside the ideological and class trenches of metropolitan France, and who sought solace in the light. When *The Rebel* was published, many scoffed at the fuzziness of that plea for both revolt and moderation, and especially of that hymn to *la pensée de midi* that comes at the end. *The First Man* shows where it all originated. "The nobility of the writer's occupation lies in resisting oppression, thus in accepting isolation."

**Rehabilitation**

Camus has, in recent years, regained much of his earlier prestige: the demise of Soviet totalitarianism, the fading of old ideologies, the advent of a kind of pragmatic centrum in France, the rediscovery of the virtues of liberalism (with its recognition of human rights, the limits it puts on state power, and the virtues it finds in rational discussion and compromise), the collapse of the FLN state and the tragedy of the independent Algeria, all of this has led to a rehabilitation of Camus. He finds himself now in the same pantheon as Raymond Aron (who liked him but saw him as an amateurish thinker).

However, this new fame may well rest on one more misreading, which would not have surprised the author of that elliptical and gruesome play, *Le malentendu* (a play that should be compared to Sartre's *No Exit*: for Camus, hell is not "the others," it is our inability to reach them).
France's new liberals tend to be close to America's neoconservatives. They worry more about sound finance than about social reforms and have very little to say about the poor. In their enthusiasm for the death of messianism, they have tended to bury the hope of a better life for the underprivileged with it. Camus would not be comfortable in their midst.

Indeed, Camus was above all an artist with a "very great vision" of art: "not because I see art to be above everything, but because it does not separate itself from anyone" (a sentence from one of the notes that has been dropped in the English translation). It is as an artist that he will survive—an artist whose view of life was far more complex, and often more somber, even despairing, than was suggested by the cartoon-like image of Camus as a kind of "Red Cross moralist" so fashionable in the 1960s. What saved him from despair and restored his bruised serenity was the memory of the Algerian sun and that bond beyond words to his mother.

When Jacques flew back from Saint Brieuc to Algiers, "he knew from the bottom of his heart that Saint Brieuc and all it represented had never been anything to him" and acknowledged "with a strange sort of pleasure that death would return him to his true homeland. With its immense oblivion, death would obliterate the memory of that alien [the French text says monstrueux] and ordinary man who had grown up, had built in poverty, without help or deliverance, on a fortunate shore in the light of the first mornings of the world, and then alone, without memories and without faith, had entered the world of the men of his time and its dreadful and exhausted history."

To those of us for whom Camus' voice, in the 1940s and 1950s, was always the voice of refined beauty, deep and humane wisdom, controlled passion, and noble art, the publication of The First Man is an invaluable gift.

**Criticism: V. C. Letemendia (essay date Spring 1997)**


[In the following essay, Letemendia explores Camus's early experiences with poverty, as revealed in The First Man, and his outrage over society's indifference toward the plight of the poor. According to Letemendia, Camus viewed poverty as "both a moral and political crime against humanity."]

**Albert Camus approached the understanding of poverty from the viewpoint of both an internal and an external witness. He had experienced poverty in his youth, as he describes in his autobiographical novel, Le premier homme, but acknowledged that education, financial security and fame had distanced him from the poor, and did not consider that his own experience gave him the authority to speak for other poor people. Unlike some on the French left, he saw freedom as equally essential to a fully human life as material well-being: the poor and working-class could not be denied basic liberties in the name of social justice, just as they could not be treated as an abstraction to be fitted into revolutionary theory. While Camus regarded himself as an outside witness to the devastating effects of poverty, he maintained that those who suffered silently must be given a context in which they could speak out with their own authentic voices.**

Albert Camus is famous not only for his works of fiction and theatre, but as an active member of the Resistance, as a commentator on the political problems of his age, and as the friend and later intellectual opponent of Jean-Paul Sartre and his circle. Camus's warnings about the destructive nature of fanaticism have lost no relevance in the last decades of the twentieth century, nor yet has his passion for individual freedom. His pained and angry denunciations of social injustice serve as a reminder that people still suffer from avoidable ills, despite the many political and social changes that have occurred since his untimely death in 1960. The publication in April 1994 of Le premier homme, Camus's incomplete semi-autobiographical novel, has awakened new interest in his life and work. The extant manuscript, a fraction of the planned novel, offers the first detailed account of his experience of a poor childhood in Algeria and the marks it left upon the man,
no longer poor or unknown, who looked back to recall it. This intimate record of Camus's early years is fascinating to read for both literary and autobiographical reasons, but it has also attracted fresh attention to a crucial though frequently neglected theme in his writings: his commentary on poverty.

Camus named poverty as one of the initial and most fundamental influences upon his awareness of the world, and once said that he had learned about freedom not from Marx, but from poverty. His approach to the understanding of poverty was compelling and remarkably contemporary. He saw it not as a single, uniformly lived condition that could be comprehended easily by any external observer, but as a condition that spanned a scale from tolerable discomfort to utter deprivation of the necessities of life. Each degree of poverty gave birth to a separate and specific experience of destitution. Because of this, poverty could not be externally measured or described only as a state of systematic political and social disadvantage. It assaulted its victims on an individual level, psychologically and morally, at its very worst curtailing human expression and communication, and destroying individual and collective dignity. In short, severe poverty threatened all that Camus found to be most precious about human existence.

Existence itself, he argued, brought forth a metaphysical form of suffering, arising from an acknowledgement of mortality and other inevitable, natural ills. Though still experience as an injustice, metaphysical suffering was an inherent aspect of the human condition. Preoccupied with the problem of how, in the absence of religious belief, we might discover values by which to live as individuals and as common members of humanity, Camus identified metaphysical suffering as consequent to a recognition of the absurd, and grounded in this suffering his definition of what he saw as both precious and changeless about individual human life. Yet he identified another form of suffering, inflicted by people upon each other, as neither inevitable nor natural. Poverty was one of these afflictions and as such, in the eyes of Camus, was both a moral and political crime against humanity. Outraged by the ignorance or indifference of society toward the fate of the poor, he found it unacceptable that they should remain condemned to suffer in silent misery from a condition that could be significantly alleviated, if not fully eradicated.

Although he did not consider himself to have suffered its worst ravages, Camus had tasted many of the bitter injustices of poverty during his childhood and youth. And while he could and did describe from the inside how poverty had affected him, he laid no personal claim to the stories of other poor people. These he described from the viewpoint of a keen and sympathetic witness, rather than an omniscient outsider, acknowledging the distance that now lay between himself and material deprivation, and respecting the exclusive nature of every poor person's experience. For Camus was quick to recognize that his past provided him only with a certain sensitivity towards the misery of others, not a firm knowledge. He was eager to speak, from his position of privilege, for the poor who had been denied a voice, but restrained himself with characteristic pudeur, or modesty, from mistaking his voice for theirs.

I. Camus as an External Witness to Poverty

Even Camus's earliest published efforts reveal his interest in observing and commenting upon social injustice, and poverty in particular. He was active with more than his pen: at university he participated in the activities of the Popular Front in Algeria, and before completing his studies he joined the Communist Party, not because he had been converted to Marxism by his reading of theory, but because of what he had witnessed and lived. In his words, "it seems to me that, more than ideas, life itself often leads to Communism…. I have such a strong desire to reduce the sum of unhappiness and bitterness which poisons mankind." With his friends on the left, he formed a co-operative political theatre group and a "people's university" to provide adult education for workers, and helped organize a Theatre du Travail in Algiers. Subsequently, as a reporter on the new, left-leaning Alger Républicain, he addressed himself to exposing the misery of some of the poorest members of his community, the Arabs and the indigenous Berber population of Kabylia.
Camus knew well that the Arabs suffered disproportionately when compared even to very poor European families such as his own, for he had long been able to observe their situation at first hand. Well acquainted with the Arab quarter of Algiers, which he had frequented since boyhood, he had gone to school with Arab children, had close contact with left-wing Moslem intellectuals through the Communist Party, openly supported the cause of Arab nationalists, and as a journalist gave sympathetic coverage to a number of political trials involving Arab defendants.

His disgust and indignation at the plight of the poor emerges most forcefully in his reports on famine-struck Kabyla. These articles, written in the first person, relay the statistics of poverty, search for the underlying economic, political, and demographic reasons for the famine, and describe the devastation wreaked upon at least half of the Kabyla population, driven to feed their families on grasses and roots until administrative handouts of grain arrive. Can anyone, he asks, have an easy conscience after seeing such suffering, about which almost nothing has been done? Perhaps it is impossible to convey the extremity of the misery, he writes,

but I know that on the return from a visit to the "tribe" of Tizi-Ouzou, I went up with a Kabyle friend into the heights which tower over the town. There we watched night fall. And at that hour when the shadow descending from the mountain over this splendid earth brings respite to the most hardened human heart, I knew all the same that there was no peace for those who, on the other side of the valley, were gathering together around a cake of bad barley. I knew also how sweet it would be to abandon oneself to an evening so amazing and magnificent, but that the misery whose fires glowed before us made the beauty of the world a forbidden thing. "Let's go down, shall we?" my companion said to me.

Just as his companion urged him, Camus urges his reader to go down into the valley. If you think it is an inevitable state of affairs, he writes, then say so; if you think it is an outrage, then act; if you do not believe that it is happening, come and take a look. For Camus, the most despicable thing to say is that the situation has something to do with the "Kabyle mentality," and that these people do not have the same needs as us, and can adapt to anything. Even the French President, if he were given only two hundred francs a month to live on, would get used to living under bridges, to dirt, and to crusts of bread found in dustbins, for "there is something stronger in a man's attachment to life than there is in all the miseries of the world." Camus did not hesitate to stress that the Kabylian situation originated in a far larger pattern of systematic political disadvantage imposed upon this population by the French government. He argued that temporary or partial solutions could not change the circumstances of the Kabyle, whose education, employment opportunities, political representation and general standard of living required urgent, fundamental reform.

If he had restricted himself to describing his own horror at the conditions he witnessed, and to decrying the ignorance and inhumanity which could permit such misery to continue, the articles would still remain a powerful indictment of colonial rule. Yet he went further, emphasizing above all that even though, to French eyes, these people might be mere Berbers enured to a life of hardship, the Kabyle could not go on being treated worse than animals. Their suffering was just as terrible for them as it would be for any European, and was actually far worse than the misery endured by Algeria's European poor. To borrow Camus' compelling phrase, one had to come down from the mountain to learn what was happening, and it was not enough merely to observe. Once you agreed that the suffering was utterly unacceptable, there was a large measure of hypocrisy in still doing nothing to remove it.

The Communist Party, which Camus had joined earlier, now appeared to be shifting away from its support for the Arab cause, associating itself instead with the pro-colonial Radical Socialist Party. Camus was expelled from the CP in 1937 when he openly objected to this association; he had anyway become increasingly disturbed by the CP's authoritarian tendencies. But he was very far from embracing bourgeois moral values and political policies, which he always considered inadequate to the task of eliminating social and economic
injustice. By the end of the war, in his editorial writing in the Resistance newspaper *Combat*, he demanded that people not become resigned to the return of the old pre-war bourgeois society. He had commented over-optimistically in 1944 that "social justice needs no complicated philosophy," and in the first open edition of *Combat* called for the destruction of trusts and other financial monopolies, so that a genuine popular working-class democracy might be built, the middle-class should hand over power to the workers, and accept instead the role of "witness to a greatness it could not create itself."

Bread was essential to survival, in Camus's view, but so also was a certain dignity and quality of life. It was not enough only to satisfy the immediate physical wants of underprivileged people when they were still systematically deprived of full participation in society and treated, as a consequence, without understanding or respect, particularly by certain left-wing intellectuals who claimed to understand their best interests. In his foreword to a novel by the working-class writer Louis Guilloux, Camus makes the point that most French writers who talk about the working-class come from comfortable or well-off backgrounds. Though he regards this as no stain on them, but as the luck of the draw, he nevertheless confesses, "I have always preferred that one should bear witness … after having had one's throat under the knife. Poverty, for example, leaves behind in people who have experienced it an intolerance which doesn't take well to someone who speaks of a certain kind of destitution without knowing what they're talking about." The proletariat, he observes, is often discussed as though it were a tribe with strange customs, in a way that would nauseate proletarians themselves if only they had the time to read these specialists' studies in order to be informed about the happy march of progress. Camus finds it hard to decide which is the most insulting in such sermons, the disgusting flattery or the open disdain, which he paraphrases in the following exchange: "proletarians would not cherish the small amount of freedom which they have at their disposal. Bread alone interests them and, without bread, what would they do with formal liberties? How vulgar they are!" And, for the working-class reaction: "What do you like best, man, the fellow who wants to take your bread away in the name of freedom, or the one who wants to take your freedom away to make sure you have your bread? Answer: 'Who should get spat on first?'" In contrast, writers born of the working-class know that "if one can lend a kind of nobility to poverty, the slavery which almost always accompanies it will never be justified," for they understand how excessive poverty impoverishes even the most intimate of passions: "Fifteen thousand francs a month, life in the workshop, and Tristan has nothing to say to Iseult any more. Love also is a luxury, there lies the condemnation."

Camus argued that the chasm between the outlook of the working-class and the left intelligentsia would deepen if the latter continued to accept the sacrifice of vital social freedoms in the pursuit of ultimate social justice. In his view, the liberal position, offering freedom without justice, would perpetuate the oppression of the many by the few who owned wealth, but bread without freedom was an insult to individual human dignity. The task ahead lay in finding an equilibrium between the two claims rather than in painting them as antagonistic, possibly irreconcilable forces, as was all too often done by both liberals and radicals: freedom and justice were opposite sides of the same coin existing in a creative balance, not an antagonism. For Camus, this balance could only be maintained by socialism, a socialism which preserved and cherished democratic liberties, most important of all freedom of expression. As he confessed in a letter to his friend, Roger Quilliot, "it is quite true that I would no longer have any fondness for living in a world from which what I will call the Socialist hope would have disappeared."

No revolution, whatever justice it might promise, could be bought at the expense of basic humanity: injustice in the name of some future human condition would betray the very people whom the revolution sought to liberate. In his play, *Les justes* and in *L'homme révolté*, Camus explores this painful lesson of history, searching for an alternative form of political action that could fight for social justice without devastating human life. The "scrupulous murderers" of *Les justes* acknowledge from the outset that they must be prepared to give their own lives in payment for their targeted acts of political violence, yet circumstances force them inevitably to confront a further question: can their revolution justify the taking of innocent life? The answer, for Camus, is clearly no: even in destruction there must be limits, for as the simplest of peasants could tell any
intellectual, to kill children is contrary to honor, and honor is not a luxury, but "the last of the poor's riches."

With *L'homme révolté*, Camus unfolds, as a tentative beginning, his view of an alternative politics. He proposes, in place of the revolutionary's messianic spirit, the attitude of the rebel, whose political action is limited always by a sense of the sacredness of human life, requiring a constant balance between relative freedom and relative justice. Camus offers the trade union movement as an example of rebellion translated into effective political action. Libertarian syndicalism, he argues, has long struggled against bourgeois oppression, and it is to this movement, rather than to Marx, that the proletariat owes its most basic victory, the reduction of a sixteen-hour working day to a forty-hour week. In such political action, as in the wise use of technology, he sees the opportunity to alleviate the misery of working-class life without increasing injustice and crushing freedom. The nature of a union collective, organized by and for the workers to address their own problems, can give the working-class an authentic political voice in its successful, as in its unsuccessful struggles.

Camus's short story, "Les muets," from *L'exil et le royaume*, describes one of these unsuccessful struggles. Set in an Algerian town, the tale concerns the aftermath of a failed strike at a cooper's workshop. After being forced back on the job out of the need to put food in their families' mouths, the workers express their bitterness by refusing to speak when addressed by their boss. The irony is obvious: rather than a sign of impotence, the curse of the oppressed, their silence has become a non-violent weapon, a last defense of outraged dignity. When they learn later that the boss's little daughter has been taken seriously ill, their silence becomes a painful one in the face of a common human tragedy. However barren their lives, the workers have not lost their compassion, then, but nor have they lost their sense of solidarity, demonstrated even toward the one Arab who works with them. Although they are simple men, they communicate through a language of mutual respect and show a delicacy of feeling toward one another that contrasts strongly with the insensitivity and awkwardness of the boss in his dealings with them. Their nobility in silent rebellion exemplifies, in Camus's terms, what it means to affirm one's companionship with all of humanity.

If Camus's hopes for a post-war working-class democracy went unfulfilled, his radical tone did not change, as may be observed in his somewhat neglected editorials for *L'Express* written in 1955–56. He frequently used the editorials to draw notice to specific instances of poverty and oppression that had been comfortably ignored or tolerated by the bourgeois establishment. One such small, overlooked tragedy noted by Camus is that of two roofers, still working at well over retirement age, who fell to their deaths while on the job. In another piece, Camus discusses a settlement made at the Renault company, without a strike, between workers and management. It was good that there was no strike, he says, if you know what a strike can do to a working-class family. And it is not true that an improvement in their standard of living would diffuse the fighting force of the workers, for it is often the poorest who are most resigned. But the main problem, as yet unresolved, he identifies as "that internal exile which separates millions of men from their own country" through miserable wages and suburban ghettos. If this injustice continues, Camus argues, the working-class will remain, "against its will, a state within a state." Reforms should not be despised, but nor should the end of reform be forgotten: "the re-integration of the working-class with all of its rights and the abolition of wage labour."

His review for *L'Express* of an inquiry into the condition of the Parisian working-class bluntly calls working-class misery the disgrace of this civilization, for which bourgeois society has only come up with one remedy: silence. To be poor in the presence of wealth, Camus adds, is an especially bitter fate: for all those who own luxury cars, there are women holding themselves back from leaving the job to go to the toilet, so as not to lose their three franc bonus. What the inquiry illustrates, in his words, is "a solitary world deprived of any immediate hope." He quotes a miner as saying poignantly, and with particular significance to one such as Camus himself, born under Mediterranean skies, "when our boys first go down the mine, they start to cry: they can't see the sun any more."
Another of Camus's editorials concerns a true-life example of working-class oppression remarkably close in flavor to "Les muets." He describes how two trade union members were condemned to do time in a correctional institution for having refused to shake the hand of their perfect, or local government administrator: "their reserve," he explains, "constituted an outrageous attitude, according to the judges. He who doesn't say a word insults." Yet refusing to shake hands, Camus suggests, is really a peaceful way of showing that one disapproves of something: "unable to dignify the social morality that had been outraged in this affair, [the workers] wanted at least to substitute for it a sort of cleanliness. Not to compromise oneself, wasn't that the rule of true nobility? And besides, what would our hand be, for those we love, if we gave it to the first comer?"

In Camus's opinion, then, the misery and humiliation of poverty, and of discrimination against the working class, remained ill-disguised cankers polluting society, and little had been done to remove them. His editorials point uncompromisingly at the conclusion that freedom alone could not end social injustice, and that bourgeois liberals, blinded either by their nature or by choice, would not come to recognize the misery of the working class or of the indigenous population in their colonies as an urgent, unacceptable tragedy. At the same time, the editorials consistently demand a shift in the position of the left toward a new emphasis on the importance of freedom. For if certain people on the left considered servitude an excusable path to justice, while others on the right continued to hide the realities of poverty and economic oppression under cloak of constitutional liberties, the struggle to shape a better society could not be won.

Camus saw the Communist left as condescending to the working class, offering social justice at the terrible price of liberty, and advocating revolutionary violence without considering, or without revealing, that the poor, who had no political voice, would have to pay for it most dearly. How ironic it was, indeed, that working-class consciousness should be so exalted by those who knew nothing about it, yet thought of themselves as most qualified to judge how the working class should pursue its struggles. Bourgeois liberals and Communist left were, it seemed, curiously united in their emphasis on some form of future social well-being, though their respective panaceas differed. But for Camus, who believed in no heavenly reward for suffering on earth and considered the future an unpredictable affair, to accept the ruin of a life lived today was criminal, whether that life were devastated in an urban slum or in a forced labor camp. Whoever saw fit to excuse or even to tolerate the exclusion of the greater part of society from full enjoyment of its benefits became themselves impoverished in human terms. The supreme arrogance of such an attitude could only warp any kind of politics that it might produce. For the politics of fighting poverty required, in his view, a fundamental recognition of a common human condition and a shared destiny. If poverty could attack its victims psychologically, the psychology of the fortunate could act equally as a barrier to understanding the world of the poor. So whatever social and economic policies might be adopted to tackle the problem of poverty, there had also to be a change of consciousness, both morally and politically, on the part of those more privileged members of society, or else the poor would still be condemned to internal exile in their own land.

As may be seen in the pained irony of his editorials for L'Express, Camus sought urgently to convince his readers that the occasional sense of pity or act of charity was an insufficient, even insulting, answer to such suffering. Political action had to be accompanied by individual moral integrity on the part of those involved, arising from a genuine realization that it was a crime to treat the poor as if they were a breed apart, and had no need of justice, freedom, and dignity. He demanded, in place of the insincerities and inhumanities of both Communist left and bourgeois politics, a socialism distinguished by its defense of human solidarity and communication, a socialism that would assure all members of society an equal freedom to cultivate their individuality.

Camus did not forget that as a successful writer he himself was no longer poor, and he worried that material comfort might exert a damaging influence upon his own moral integrity: he comments regretfully in a notebook entry, "it is in poverty that I have found and always will find the necessary conditions such that my guilt, if it exists, should at least not be shameful, and remains proud." He retained a strong sense of solidarity with the working class from which he had come: "French workers," he writes, "are the only people I feel good
around, that I want to get to know and to 'live.' They are like me.” Although, during the acrimonious debate in *Les temps modernes* following the publication of *L'homme révolté*, Sartre put forward the argument that Camus was now just as much a bourgeois as Francis Jeanson and himself, Camus could claim justifiably to have come from the working class and hence to possess a certain sensitivity toward it that could not easily be gained from reading books. His angry retort to his critics who had "never placed anything but their armchairs in the direction of history" surely stemmed in large part from his frustration at hearing the working class discussed by people who had no more than a theoretical grasp of its problems and declared their commitment to revolutionary change in writing only, from the safety of cafe terraces. The suffering of the poor he considered to be similarly misunderstood by existentialists: "according to [them], every man is responsible for who he is. This explains the complete disappearance of compassion from their universe of aggressive old men. And yet they pretend to fight against social injustice. So there do exist, then, people who aren't responsible for what they are; the poor man is innocent of his poverty." The innocence of the poor man Camus could certainly claim to know about from personal experience: if he was no longer innocent, living the life of a bourgeois intellectual, he had been touched by poverty, remembered its injustices, and identified passionately with those who still endured it.

**II. Camus's Experience of Poverty**

Throughout his career as a writer, Camus repeatedly turned back to his childhood and youth in Belcourt to retrieve and to explore artistically the internal experience of poverty. *Le premier homme* offers the most continuous and detailed of these explorations. In comparison to his commentary on working-class poverty in France or on the tragedy of Kabylia, it might seem at first glance that Camus had a nostalgic, even romantic, attitude toward his own poverty, mitigated as it was for him by the natural wealth of Algeria's climate and landscape. Poverty and the sun, he writes, were the twin sources of his artistic vision, poverty reminding him that not all is well under the sun and history, and the sun teaching him that history is not everything. In *Noces*, an early work, Camus celebrates the beauty of nature and youthful bodies, describing lyrically the sensual pleasures of sea and sun, and the direct, spontaneous attitude to life of the young working-class Algerians among whom he grew to manhood. But his lyricism is tempered by a sober warning: youth is short for those who are poor, and any idea of self-improvement, or of virtue, means little if one must enjoy existence so passionately, so swiftly. Without religious sense and without myths to disguise the brutality of their existence, these people have their own moral code, which he recalls in spare terms: "You don't let your mother down. You make sure your wife is treated respectfully in the street. You show consideration for a pregnant woman. You don't come two to one upon your enemy, because that's 'pulling a dirty move.' Anyone who fails to respect these basic rules is 'not a man,' and that's it."

In *Le premier homme*, Camus's lyricism is equally tempered by his description of the consequences of poverty: there is no change of heart regarding its crushing indignities, despite the recollected pleasures and moments of human tenderness in the novel. The internal experience of poverty is stripped naked, quite without romance or sentimentality, to reveal a universe closed in upon itself, clinging to its own particular values born not of religion or theory, but of simple hardship. Camus writes movingly about the terrible vulnerability of the poor European community from which he came, not just as it might be in the violent Algeria of the 1950s, but as it had been from its first tenuous and tortuous attempts to establish a livelihood in a strange land. *Le premier homme* thus illustrates with particular acuity why Camus might refuse to condone wholesale Arab nationalist violence against the French presence in Algeria: he sought to defend the poor Europeans, themselves in a sense silent victims of colonial rule, for they would be the ones to suffer helplessly if random terrorism became widespread, not the wealthy *colons* who could afford to protect themselves or to move elsewhere. His avowed intent in writing *Le premier homme* was precisely to "tear his poor family away from the destiny of poor people, which is to disappear from history without leaving a trace," and the title of the novel reflects a double meaning. Jacques Cormery, Camus's fictional counterpart, is the first man, having had to bring himself up alone, fatherless and poor, and navigate a new course far beyond the limited universe of his family. He came, however, from immigrant stock, people who had fled poverty and oppression in their
own countries; so in his family history, too, were "first men," uprooted often unwillingly from their European origins and driven to plant new roots in African soil.

Poverty, Camus remarks, is "a fortress without drawbridges"; and as Le premier homme unfolds, it becomes more and more remarkable that he himself managed to find a way out of the fortress. For his family were not just badly off but constantly on the edge of indigence, and without the intervention of a primary school teacher who recognized his promise, he would have disappeared into the workforce at the age of thirteen. Instead, as a scholarship student at the Lycée, he began to discover a whole world outside his own small one that would be forever closed to his family. The home of Jacques Cormery (Camus's fictive name) was a small world indeed, curtailed by lack of education born of scant opportunity, and by the grinding effects of a constant struggle to secure the minimum for survival. Jacques had never known his father: Henri Cormery died in France during the Great War before Jacques was two years old. He is described as a "hard man, bitter, who had worked all his life, had killed on command, had accepted everything that he could not avoid, but who, in some part of himself, refused to be tamed. In short, a poor man. Because poverty does not choose itself, but it can look after itself." And if Henri Cormery had left his family in poverty to fight for a land he had never even seen, how much less did his wife understand the cause that would eventually claim his life. Hampered by partial deafness, illiterate, and without the least sense of geography, she could not vaguely imagine what France might be like. She knew that her own family had fled Minorca because they were starving, and knew that it was an island, but she had no conception of what an island was because she had never seen one. She had no idea of history beyond that of her family, and the orders that came for her husband to join up were as mysterious to her as the written notice she received of his death: since neither she nor her mother, who lived with the family, could read, the very notice of death had to be read aloud to them. So it was useless for Jacques to try and talk at home about what he was studying because his family members had no points of reference in their own lives through which to give coherence to his discoveries: For them,

Latin, for example, was a word that had absolutely no meaning. That there might have been (apart from savage times, which they could, on the contrary, imagine) a time in which nobody spoke French, that civilizations (and the very word meant nothing to them) might have succeeded each other whose customs and language were different: these truths had not reached as far as them. Not picture, nor written word, nor spoken information, nor the superficial culture that comes from everyday conversation had reached them: In this house where there were no newspapers, until Jacques brought them in, no radio either, where there were only objects of immediate usefulness, where only family was received, a family one rarely left—and always to meet members of the same ignorant family—what Jacques brought back from school was impossible to assimilate, and the silence grew between him and his family.

The poverty of Jacques's family had other consequences difficult to imagine for someone from a more fortunate home. His own home, for example, was so naked of objects that things had no special names; and only in a richer house containing a multiplicity of vases, cups, statuettes and pictures did the young Cormery come to know that things can have proper names. The ability of poor people such as the Cormery family to recall past events was similarly affected. For, as Camus explains, the memory of the poor is

less nourished than that of rich people, it has fewer points of demarcation in space because they rarely leave the place in which they live, fewer landmarks also in the time taken up by a uniform, grey life. Of course, there is the memory of the heart that is said to be the most reliable, but the heart gets worn out by burdens and hard work; it forgets more quickly under the weight of tiredness. Past time is only discovered by rich people. For the poor, it marks only the vague traces of the road toward death. And after all, to be able to bear things well, it's better not to remember too much; you have to stick close to the days, hour by hour.
Proust's madeleine, Camus appears to suggest, is a luxury not enjoyed by poor households.

While the Cormerys could not understand the new intellectual wealth Jacques had gained at high school, it was just as difficult for him to explain his family's world to his classmates and teachers. The shocking poverty of his household was sometimes a source of outright embarrassment for a boy gradually becoming sensitive to the differences in background between himself and his peers. For example, he could quite acceptably tell the class, when asked at the beginning of the new term, that his father had been killed in the war. Yet when he came to fill out a form which required him to state his parents' professions, he was at a loss. At first he wrote, for his mother, "housewife," but Pierre, a schoolfriend, explained that this implied his mother had no profession at all and stayed at home to keep house. Jacques revealed that his mother looked after other peoples' houses; "Oh well, then,’ said Pierre, hesitating, 'I think you'd better put maid.’" Jacques was surprised, never having thought of his mother as someone who worked for other people, but as someone who worked for her own family. As he was about to write the word "maid," "he stopped and suddenly felt … ashamed, and the shame of having been ashamed." And he copied the word out boldly. On another occasion, he was asked that his parents sign a form, the sophisticated language of which he had to unravel for his mother and grandmother. His mother had learned from a neighbor how to write her name so that she could obtain her war-widow's pension, but she left early for work having forgotten to sign the form, and his grandmother could not write even her own name. So he faced further embarrassment before his teacher when he was asked whether anyone at home could not have signed it apart from his mother. He realized, from his teacher's surprise at his answer, that "his situation was less common than he had imagined until then." On prize-giving day, the Cormery women arrived embarrassingly early for the ceremony, "as the poor always are," Camus remarks, "having few social obligations and pleasures, and worrying about not being on time." For "those whose fate has served badly can't help, in some part of themselves, believing that they are responsible, and they feel that this general guilt should not be added to by small lapses."

Poverty, Jacques also discovered, tried his desire to be honest, as much as it did his pride. At the age of thirteen, he had to start earning to contribute to the household's meager income, even though he would only be able to work over the summer holidays. Knowing that the boy would not be hired by anyone just for such a short period, his grandmother falsely told his prospective employer that he had left school for good because his family was too poor for him to continue studying. Jacques was left to explain the lie on his dreaded last day of work before the new term; and his irate boss could not be made to realize that it was the Cormery's poverty that had required the lie in the first place. His financial contribution to the Cormery household nonetheless marked an important transition in his life: in their eyes, he was now a man.

Jacques was lucky to escape the drudgery of work during school-time: the rest of his family enjoyed no such luxury. There could never be a break, for such a thing would mean less to eat for everybody. The poor would only stop working in the case of an accident on the job when their sick-leave was paid by company insurance. Unemployment not covered by insurance was their worst nightmare. Camus explains this to be the reason why workingmen … who in their everyday lives were ever the most tolerant of men, were always xenophobes when it came to questions about work, accusing in succession the Spanish, the Jews, the Arabs, and finally the whole world of stealing their work away from them—a disconcerting attitude, certainly, for intellectuals theorizing about the proletariat, and at the same time extremely human and understandable. It wasn't for world domination or for the privileges of money and leisure that these unexpected nationalists got into disputes over other nationalities, but for the privilege of slavery. Work in this quarter was not a virtue but a necessity which, for the sake of survival, carried you on to death.

Death was a frequent visitor in Cormery's neighborhood, to be greeted without sentimentality or fuss: his grandmother, upon hearing that a person had died, would only say, "'Ah well, he won't fart any more,'" or in the case of someone closer to her, "'Poor fellow, he was still young,' even if the deceased had been of a dying
age for a long while. It was not a lack of awareness on her part. Because she had seen a lot of people die around her.... But precisely, death was as familiar to her as work or poverty; she did not think about it but lived it in some way." Meanwhile, with "the terrible wear and tear of poverty, it became hard to find a place for religion.... One was Catholic as one was French, and that entailed a certain number of rites ... baptism, first communion, the sacrament of marriage (if there were a marriage) and the last sacraments. Between these ceremonies, by their nature very far apart, one was busy with other things, and primarily with surviving."

The world Jacques Cormery so narrowly escaped was one of a daily struggle which could not for a moment be abandoned, whether to rest, to gain education or simply to contemplate the larger questions about human existence. There was no comfortable padding between these poor people and three grim facts: a brief youth, hard work, and an early death. Like victims of tuberculosis, they lived in the constant presence of their own mortality, unable to afford the relief of either romance or sentimentality. Nevertheless poverty, in all of its humiliating nakedness, nourished a kind of ethic, teaching the boy what it was "to be a man," and to carry on with as much pride and dignity as might be salvaged after the hours of drudgery. "It is ... among these humble or proud people," Camus states unreservedly, "that I have most surely touched that which seems to me to be the true meaning of life."

In spite of what he might have learned from his Belcourt years, Camus nowhere suggested that poverty was worth suffering because it was a condition that encourage virtue. On the contrary, at its worst it was an experience salutary for neither soul nor body. Poverty limited human intercourse with the world just as his mother's deafness restricted her to a lonely and silent universe. To be poor was to be entrapped in an unceasing cycle of work from birth to death, with the fear of unemployment and hunger hanging overhead like a sword of Damocles. Poverty shortened the memory, dampened the imagination, wore down friendships and loves, ate away at youthful vigor and promised no reward after death but the curt sympathy of a neighbor or family member. It permitted of no time for sickness, idleness, or self-development, and demanded of its victims the kind of solidarity and endurance required of an army under attack: one slip, and everyone would be exposed to suffering.

Poverty had given Camus his initial, personal experience of human solidarity, but he was clearly aware that such solidarity was not exclusive to the experience of the poor: he encountered it also sharing in the struggles of the Resistance movement under the Nazi occupation. His metaphorical use of the plague and its effects upon the citizens of Oran, in La peste is evidence of this awareness: his protagonist, Dr. Rieux, bears witness to both human solidarity and human weakness in the face of a desperate common plight. Never did Camus propose that everyone should suffer the deprivations and humiliations of poverty, or the misery and terror of an occupying totalitarian power in order to be acquainted at first hand with the true meaning of life. Rather, he was proposing that because such experiences strip our existence of its sheltering illusions, testing our moral fortitude as much as our capacity for compassion, they can remind us powerfully and directly of our shared human fate.

Through his literary art, Camus attempted to offer both the suffering and the solidarity to the imagination of his readers who might not or could not experience the world of poverty for themselves. His great achievement in Le premier homme lies exactly in his ability to portray what to many of them might as well be the landscape of some alien universe. Although he had escaped the barren and shuttered life of poverty, he had not forgotten even its most intimate details, nor its greatest injustices. His escape was not a source of self-congratulation for the adult looking back, but a sobering reflection: so many others were left behind, and it was for these people that he felt driven to speak. His experience, while not the desperate misery of the Kabyles, gave him a bitter taste of the extreme: to use his own phrase, it shortened his descent into the other side of the valley.

Poverty was an urgent political issue for Camus because it concerned those who did not suffer it as much as those who did: to tolerate its presence passively was to perpetuate actively a gross inhumanity. Though he
never elaborated a comprehensive and detailed social policy regarding poverty, he did indicate the direction that might be taken by government and society to relieve some of its most conspicuous hardships. He voiced the need for a socialism that would protect all members of society from political and economic injustice, while assuring them free expression as individuals. He demanded also an awakening of consciousness on the part of people who did not live under the burden of poverty, so that their political actions could be informed by genuine moral integrity, rather than theory or self-interest. Camus acknowledged that he himself had become distanced from the experience of poverty, not so much by an emotional gulf as by his material and intellectual circumstances. Still, he could at least bear witness with sympathy and honestly to its devastating effects, and employ his art with caution and respect to "say a little about eternal human suffering." The tragedy of the poor was that, unlike dumb animals, they knew very well that they were victims of injustice, but their lives were so draining, so monotonously absorbing, and so isolating that they might not be able to act to change them, let alone find the opportunity to speak out about their plight. Yet in the end, for Camus, all those who suffered mutely had to be encouraged to tell their story with their own authentic voices, no longer dismissed, organized, or condescended to by more fortunate outsiders, even such acutely sympathetic outsiders as he. And while these outsiders could not speak for the poor, Camus argued that it was their duty in human solidarity to provide a context in which the silence might finally be broken.

**Camus, Albert (Vol. 124): Further Reading**


Provides positive analysis of *The First Man*.


Explores the development of Meursault's subjectivity and alienation in *The Stranger*.


Examines the narrative voice and temporal structure in *The Stranger*.


Examines critical reception of *The Plague* and overlooked elements of narrative and linguistic ambiguity in the novel.


Discusses Camus's portrayal of North Africa in his novels and short stories.


Examines Camus's view of the Spanish Civil War as reflected in the plays *Révolte dans les Asturies* and *State of Siege*.

Explores critical debate surrounding Camus's opposition to capital punishment.


Provides critical discussion of Camus's late career and the publication of *The First Man*.


Offers an overview of Camus's literary career and critical reputation.


Provides positive evaluation of *The First Man*.


Explores the source of infidelity and guilt in "The Adulterous Woman."


Examines the ritual pattern of carnival "crowning" and "discrowning" in *The Fall*.

Additional coverage of Camus's life and career is contained in the following sources published by Gale: *Contemporary Authors*, Vols. 89-92; *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 72; *DISCovering Authors; DISCovering Authors: British; DISCovering Authors: Canadian; DISCovering Authors Modules: Dramatists, Most-Studied, and Novelists; Drama Criticism*, Vol. 2; *Major Twentieth Century Writers*, Vol. 1; *Short Story Criticism*, Vol. 9; and *World Literature Criticism*.

**Camus, Albert (Vol. 14): Introduction**

**Camus, Albert 1913–1960**

Camus, an Algerian-born novelist, dramatist, and essayist, had a profound influence on modern philosophy, particularly on existential thought. Camus's conception of the human condition is predicated upon the constants of evil and death. Rejecting religion for reason, Camus concluded that the universe is itself irrational. It was individual action and the power of the individual will that provided life with value and purpose for Camus. He received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957. (See also *CLC*, Vols. 1, 2, 4, 9, 11, and *Contemporary Authors*, Vols. 89-92.)
Camus, Albert (Vol. 14): Jean-Paul Sartre

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*,… Camus provided us with a precise commentary upon *The Stranger*. His hero was neither good nor bad, neither moral nor immoral. These categories do not apply to him. He belongs to a very particular species for which the author reserves the word "absurd." But in Camus's work this word takes on two very different meanings. The absurd is both a state of fact and the lucid awareness which certain people acquire of this state of fact. The "absurd" man is the man who does not hesitate to draw the inevitable conclusions from a fundamental absurdity. (pp. 108-09)

Primary absurdity manifests a cleavage, the cleavage between man's aspirations to unity and the insurmountable dualism of mind and nature, between man's drive toward the eternal and the finite character of his existence, between the "concern" which constitutes his very essence and the vanity of his efforts. Chance, death, the irreducible pluralism of life and of truth, the unintelligibility of the real—all these are extremes of the absurd.

These are not really very new themes, and Camus does not present them as such. They had been sounded as early as the seventeenth century by a certain kind of dry, plain, contemplative rationalism, which is typically French and they served as the commonplaces of classical pessimism. (p. 109)

By virtue of the cool style of *The Myth of Sisyphus* and the subject of his essays, Albert Camus takes his place in the great tradition of those French moralists whom Andler has rightly termed the precursors of Nietzsche.

As to the doubts raised by Camus about the scope of our reasoning powers, these are in the most recent tradition of French epistemology…. Camus shows off a bit by quoting passages from Jaspers, Heidegger and Kierkegaard, whom, by the way, he does not always seem to have quite understood. But his real masters are to be found elsewhere.

The turn of his reasoning, the clarity of his ideas, the cut of his expository style and a certain kind of solar, ceremonious, and sad somberness, all indicate a classic temperament, a man of the Mediterranean. His very method ("only through a balance of evidence and lyricism shall we attain a combination of emotion and lucidity.") recalls the old "passionate geometries" of Pascal and Rousseau and relate him, for example, not to a German phenomenologist or a Danish existentialist, but rather to Maurras, that other Mediterranean from whom, however, he differs in many respects.

But Camus would probably be willing to grant all this. To him, originality means pursuing one's ideas to the limit; it certainly does not mean making a collection of pessimistic maxims. The absurd, to be sure, resides neither in man nor in the world, if you consider each separately. But since man's dominant characteristic is "being-in-the-world," the absurd is, in the end, an inseparable part of the human condition. Thus, the absurd is not, to begin with, the object of a mere idea: it is revealed to us in a doleful illumination. "Getting up, tram, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, in the same routine" (*Sisyphus*), and then, suddenly, "the setting collapses," and we find ourselves in a state of hopeless lucidity.

If we are able to refuse the misleading aid of religion or of existential philosophies, we then possess certain basic, obvious facts: the world is chaos, a "divine equivalence born of anarchy"; tomorrow does not exist, since we all die. "In a universe suddenly deprived of light and illusions, man feels himself a stranger. This exile is irrevocable, since he has no memories of a lost homeland and no hope of a promised land." The reason is that man is not the world…. This explains, in part, the title of our novel; the stranger is man confronting the world. Camus might as well have chosen the title of one of George Gissing's works, *Born in Exile*. The stranger is also man among men. "There are days when … you find that the person you've loved has become a
stranger." The stranger is, finally, myself in relation to myself, that is, natural man in relation to mind: "The stranger who, at certain moments, confronts us in a mirror" (The Myth of Sisyphus).

But that is not all; there is a passion of the absurd. The absurd man will not commit suicide; he wants to live, without relinquishing any of his certainty, without a future, without hope, without illusion, and without resignation either. He stares at death with passionate attention and this fascination liberates him. He experiences the "divine irresponsibility" of the condemned man.

Since God does not exist and man dies, everything is permissible.... [The] absurd man, rebellious and irresponsible, has "nothing to justify." He is innocent, innocent as Somerset Maugham's savages before the arrival of the clergyman who teaches them Good and Evil, what is lawful and what is forbidden. (pp. 109-11)

And now we fully understand the title of Camus's novel. The stranger he wants to portray is precisely one of those terrible innocents who shock society by not accepting the rules of its game. He lives among outsiders, but to them, too, he is a stranger.... And we ourselves, who, on opening the book are not yet familiar with the feeling of the absurd, vainly try to judge him according to our usual standards. For us, too, he is a stranger....

[You] probably hoped that as you progressed your uneasiness would fade, that everything would be slowly clarified, would be given a reasonable justification and explained. Your hopes were disappointed. The Stranger is not an explanatory book. The absurd man does not explain; he describes. Nor is it a book which proves anything.

Camus is simply presenting something and is not concerned with a justification of what is fundamentally unjustifiable. (p. 111)

Camus does not require that attentive solicitude that writers who "have sacrificed their lives to art" demand of the reader, The Stranger is a leaf from his life. And since the most absurd life is that which is most sterile, his novel aims at being magnificently sterile. Art is an act of unnecessary generosity. We need not be over-disturbed by this; I find, hidden beneath Camus's paradoxes, some of Kant's wise observations on the "endless end" of the beautiful. Such, in any case, is The Stranger, a work detached from a life, unjustified and unjustifiable, sterile, momentary, already forsaken by its author, abandoned for other present things. And that is how we must accept it, as a brief communion between two men, the author and the reader, beyond reason, in the realm of the absurd.

This will give us some idea as to how we are to regard the hero of The Stranger. If Camus had wanted to write a novel with a purpose, he would have had no difficulty in showing a civil servant lording it over his family, and then suddenly struck with the intuition of the absurd, struggling against it for a while and finally resolving to live out the fundamental absurdity of his condition. The reader would have been convinced along with the character, and for the same reasons.

Or else, he might have related the life of one of those saints of the Absurd, so dear to his heart, of whom he speaks in The Myth of Sisyphus: Don Juan, the Actor, the Conqueror, the Creator. But he has not done so, and Meursault, the hero of The Stranger, remains ambiguous, even to the reader who is familiar with theories of the absurd. We are, of course, assured that he is absurd, and his dominant characteristic is a pitiless clarity. Besides, he is, in more ways than one, constructed so as to furnish a concerted illustration of the theories expounded in The Myth of Sisyphus. For example, in the latter work, Camus writes, "A man's virility lies more in what he keeps to himself than in what he says." And Meursault [is] an example of this virile silence, of this refusal to indulge in words.... (pp. 112-13)

[Meursault] has always lived according to Camus's standards. If there were a grace of absurdity, we would have to say that he has grace. He does not seem to pose himself any of the questions explored in The Myth of
Sisyphus…. The character thus retains a real opacity, even to the absurd-conscious observer. He is no Don Juan, no Don Quixote of the absurd; he often even seems like its Sancho Panza. He is there before us, he exists, and we can neither understand nor quite judge him. In a word, he is alive, and all that can justify him to us is his fictional density.

The Stranger is not, however, to be regarded as a completely gratuitous work. Camus distinguishes, as we have mentioned, between the notion and the feeling of the absurd. He says, in this connection, "Deep feelings, like great works, are always more meaningful than they are aware of being…. An intense feeling carries with it its own universe, magnificent or wretched, as the case may be" (The Myth of Sisyphus). And he adds, a bit further on, "The feeling of the absurd is not the same as the idea of the absurd. The idea is grounded in the feeling, that is all. It does not exhaust it." The Myth of Sisyphus might be said to aim at giving us this idea, and The Stranger at giving us the feeling. (p. 114)

Camus talks a great deal; in The Myth of Sisyphus he is even garrulous. And yet, he reveals his love of silence…. [In] The Stranger, he has attempted to be silent. But how is one to be silent with words? How is one to convey through concepts the unthinkable and disorderly succession of present instants? This problem involves resorting to a new technique.

What is this new technique? "It's Kafka written by Hemingway," I was told. I confess that I have found no trace of Kafka in it. Camus's views are entirely of this earth, and Kafka is the novelist of impossible transcendence; for him, the universe is full of signs that we cannot understand; there is a reverse side to the décor. For Camus, on the contrary, the tragedy of human existence lies in the absence of any transcendence…. (pp. 115-16)

He is not concerned, then, with so ordering words as to suggest an inhuman, undecipherable order; the inhuman is merely the disorderly, the mechanical. There is nothing ambiguous in his work, nothing disquieting, nothing hinted at. The Stranger gives us a succession of luminously clear views. If they bewilder us, it is only because of their number and the absence of any link between them. Camus likes bright mornings, clear evenings, and relentless afternoons. His favorite season is Algiers' eternal summer. Night has hardly any place in his universe.

When he does talk of it, it is in the following terms: "I awakened with stars about my face. Country noises reached my ears. My temples were soothed by odors of night, earth, and salt. The wonderful peace of that sleepy summer invaded me like a tide" (The Stranger). The man who wrote these lines is as far removed as possible from the anguish of a Kafka. He is very much at peace within disorder. Nature's obstinate blindness probably irritates him, but it comforts him as well. Its irrationality is only a negative thing. The absurd man is a humanist; he knows only the good things of this world.

The comparison with Hemingway seems more fruitful. The relationship between the two styles is obvious. Both men write in the same short sentences. Each sentence refuses to exploit the momentum accumulated by preceding ones. Each is a new beginning. Each is like a snapshot of a gesture or object. For each new gesture and word there is a new and corresponding sentence. Nevertheless, I am not quite satisfied. The existence of an "American" narrative technique has certainly been of help to Camus. I doubt whether it has, strictly speaking, influenced him. (p. 116)

I catch a glimpse of a poetic prose underneath, which is probably Camus's personal mode of expression. If The Stranger exhibits … visible traces of the American technique, it was deliberate on Camus's part. He has chosen from among all the instruments at his disposal the one which seemed to serve his purpose best. I doubt whether he will use it again in future works. (p. 117)
Camus’s story is analytic and humorous. Like all artists, he invents, because he pretends to be reconstituting raw experience and because he slyly eliminates all the significant links which are also part of the experience.

That is what Hume did when he stated that he could find nothing in experience but isolated impressions. That is what the American neo-realists still do when they deny the existence of any but external relations between phenomena. Contemporary philosophy has, however, established the fact that meanings are also part of the immediate data. But this would carry us too far afield. We shall simply indicate that the universe of the absurd man is the analytic world of the neo-realists. In literature, this method has proved its worth. It was Voltaire's method in L’Ingénu and Micromégas, and Swift's in Gulliver's Travels. For the eighteenth century also had its own outsiders, “noble savages,” usually, who, transported to a strange civilization, perceived facts before being able to grasp their meaning. The effect of this discrepancy was to arouse in the reader the feeling of the absurd. Camus seems to have this in mind on several occasions, particularly when he shows his hero reflecting on the reasons for his imprisonment. (p. 118)

Where Bergson saw an indestructible organization, [Camus] sees only a series of instants. It is the plurality of incommunicable moments that will finally account for the plurality of beings. What our author borrows from Hemingway is thus the discontinuity between the clipped phrases that imitate the discontinuity of time.

We are now in a better position to understand the form of his narrative. Each sentence is a present instant, but not an indecisive one that spreads like a stain to the following one. The sentence is sharp, distinct, and self-contained. It is separated by a void from the following one, just as Descartes's instant is separated from the one that follows it. The world is destroyed and reborn from sentence to sentence. When the word makes its appearance it is a creation ex nihilo. The sentences in The Stranger are islands. We bounce from sentence to sentence, from void to void. (pp. 118-19)

The sentences are not, of course, arranged in relation to each other; they are simply juxtaposed. In particular, all causal links are avoided lest they introduce the germ of an explanation and an order other than that of pure succession. (p. 119)

This is what enables Camus to think that in writing The Stranger he remains silent. His sentence does not belong to the universe of discourse. It has neither ramifications nor extensions nor internal structure. (p. 120)

[Can] we speak of Camus's novel as something whole? All the sentences of his book are equal to each other, just as all the absurd man's experiences are equal. Each one sets up for itself and sweeps the others into the void. But, as a result, no single one of them detaches itself from the background of the others, except for the rare moments in which the author, abandoning these principles, becomes poetic.

The very dialogues are integrated into the narrative. Dialogue is the moment of explanation, of meaning, and to give it a place of honor would be to admit that meanings exist. Camus irons out the dialogue, summarizes it. renders it frequently as indirect discourse. He denies it any typographic privileges, so that a spoken phrase seems like any other happening. It flashes for an instant and then disappears, like heat lightning. Thus, when you start reading the book you feel as if you were listening to a monotonous, nasal, Arab chant rather than reading a novel. You may think that the novel is going to be like one of those tunes of which Courteline remarked that “they disappear, never to return” and stop all of a sudden. But the work gradually organizes itself before the reader's eyes and reveals its solid substructure.

There is not a single unnecessary detail, not one that is not returned to later on and used in the argument. And when we close the book, we realize that it could not have had any other ending. In this world that has been stripped of its causality and presented as absurd, the smallest incident has weight. There is no single one which does not help to lead the hero to crime and capital punishment. The Stranger is a classical work, an orderly work, composed about the absurd and against the absurd. Is this quite what the author was aiming at? I
do not know. I am simply presenting the reader's opinion.

How are we to classify this clear, dry work, so carefully composed beneath its seeming disorder, so "human," so open, too, once you have the key? It cannot be called a récit, for a récit explains and co-ordinates as it narrates. It substitutes the order of causality for chronological sequence. Camus calls it a "novel." The novel, however, requires continuous duration, development and the manifest presence of the irreversibility of time. I would hesitate somewhat to use the term "novel" for this succession of inert present moments which allows us to see, from underneath, the mechanical economy of something deliberately staged. Or, if it is a novel, it is so in the sense that Zadig and Candide are novels. It might be regarded as a moralist's short novel, one with a discreet touch of satire and a series of ironic portraits (those of the pimp, the judge, the prosecuting attorney, etc.), a novel that, for all the influence of the German existentialists and the American novelists, remains, at bottom, very close to the tales of Voltaire. (pp. 120-21)


Camus, Albert (Vol. 14): Henri Peyre

The works of Camus, as they stand interrupted by fate, utter a pagan message which is to be set beside that of the great pagans of antiquity and that of some of the modern pagans to whom Christianity owes an immense debt of gratitude—for they have asked the right questions and constrained Christians to evolve ever more satisfactory answers to them. "Neo-paganism is the great spiritual phenomenon of our age"—thus wrote, in The Drama of Atheistic Humanism (1944), the eminent Jesuit thinker, Father Henri de Lubac, who deplores it, but courageously concedes that many noble souls, indeed many "blinded Christian souls" are attracted to the renovated paganism of today.

Instinct and doctrine blend in Camus's pagan assertions. His early series of essays, Noces (Nuptials), sings a paean to the wedding-feast of sky, sea, and the Algerian earth, supplemented by several equally rapturous prose canticles in honor of his "invincible summer" burning through the hours of distress and squalor in his youth. Their motto is a vehement denial of any longing for another life. Four pages before the volume closes, he propounds the conclusion: "The world is beautiful and, outside it, there is no salvation." The opening lines of the book are a disclaimer of all myths and intellectual structures erected to frustrate or to justify man's naïve desire for earthly happiness. "There is but one love in this world. To embrace a woman's body is also to retain, close to one, that strange joy which descends from the sky to the sea … I love this life with abandon and I want to speak of it freely; it fills me with pride at my human fate." Hic et nunc: here and now Camus, the young Pagan, like his three immediate predecessors in French literature, the Gide of Fruits of the Earth, Montherlant, and Giono, wants to savor the delights of life. The notion of hell appears, but as a pleasant joke, conceived by the imagination of most virtuous persons. Immortality, and any ultimate rewards promised to those who elect the Pascalian wager, are spurned. "I do not choose to believe," states the worshipper of the wind at Djemila, in Noces, "that death opens onto another life. To me it is a closed door." Those delusions are but an attempt to unburden man of the weight of his own life. And Camus prefers to carry his burden himself. (p. 66)

The name of Pascal has been invoked in connection with that of Camus, perhaps too lightly. A writer in the Christian monthly Esprit, Simone Fraisse, rightly argued, in March 1959, that much deeper affinities linked Camus to Lucretius. To the Latin poet, Epicurus was already a man in revolt, spurning the concept of
Providence, haughtily consenting to his role of Sisyphus: he did not deign to indict the gods, for they had no share in the evil of the world. They passively watched it. Camus read his own mood as a rebel, intoxicated with the absurd, in the "prodigious image of divine sanctuaries swollen with the accusing corpses of the plague" which closes Lucretius's sixth and last book. But he added to Lucretius's resigned pessimism the modern concept of men's solidarity. After writing in Noces that "there is no shame in being happy," he had a character in The Plague, Rambert, remark, when faced with the omnipresence of evil: "There is shame in being happy all alone."

Much wishful thinking has been lavished over The Fall. . . . [Readers] of misguided good-will, lured by the title, thought they could descry anticipatory signs of a Christian attitude in The Fall. Meursault [in The Stranger] was in a sense an innocent sentenced for a crime which he had committed but not willed, and could be viewed, as Camus owned ("paradoxically," he underlined) as "the only Christ that we deserve." To searchers for allusions, Meursault's last wish for a large crowd to witness his execution, "so that all be consummated" might even recall the "consummatum est" whispered by the crucified Christ in the nineteenth chapter of St. John. But the hero of The Fall is an embittered, sarcastic nihilist, a garrulous talker merging his own guilt in the guilt which he instills in all those whom he forces to listen to him. If anything, that baffling tale should be read as a satire of the self-indictment practised by Christians and atheistic Existentialists alike, by Dostoevsky's "buffoons" as Camus called them in his "Exil d'Hélène," and by the advocates of universal and unlimited responsibility. After Tarrou and Rieux [in The Plague], the mouthpieces of a lofty ethics which did without God so that nothing be ravished from man's prerogatives, those idealists dreaming of being saints without God and pure of all expectation of any reward, Clamence [in The Rebel] strikes us as a totally desperate and sneering cynic. The book, unlike The Plague, truly has "no exit." Clamence's hell is, as in Sartre's play, the judgment of men, the glaring presence of the others.

Camus is profoundly opposed to all Christianity stands for: first the notions of incarnation, of grace, of redemption, of repentance, and of collective guilt for some sin committed, unbeknown to us. In that sense, as Camus himself remarked . . . and as J. P. Sartre had shrewdly explained as early as February 1943 ("Explication de L'Etranger" in Les Cahiers du Sud) [see excerpt above], Camus stands at the opposite pole from Kafka, "the novelist of impossible transcendence": for Kafka, enigmatic signs appear to point to an inhuman and undecipherable order; for Camus, there is no transcendence whatever. The very notion of sin, he avers, is meaningless to him. (pp. 67-8)

But Camus's most original revolt is against hope. . . . Camus indicts hope as a form of resignation, robbing man of energies which he needs, in order to enrich a God who "hardly needs them." . . . (p. 68)

Camus's world is one of universal condemnation to death, as Pascal's world was. But to the stranger, to the unfortunate men of good will in Oran harassed by the plague, to his companions in the Resistance, to the unbelievers of today who spurn the use of those small screens which Camus declared he had seen in Italian museums, through which the scaffold was concealed from men sentenced to death, to the bitter characters sketched in The Fall and in Exile and the Kingdom, the issue seems to require an anti-Pascalian answer: what are the positive values which persist in this world of mortals sentenced to death? Such paganism or disbelief in Christian values is a novel phenomenon of the twentieth century. Camus noted it in a curious footnote to his article, "Portrait d'un élu," in Cahiers du Sud, April 1943: "Contemporary unbelief does not rest on science as it did toward the close of the last century. It denies both science and religion. It is no longer the skepticism of reason in the presence of miracle. It is a passionate unbelief." (p. 70)

Camus, Albert (Vol. 14): Donald Lazere

To appreciate Camus fully … it is necessary to encounter as an ensemble his novels, stories, plays, philosophical and lyrical essays, journalistic political criticism, speeches, interviews, and notebooks, as though they formed a single, multivolumed creation like Proust’s Remembrance of Things Past or Durrell’s Alexandria Quartet. (p. 4)

The reader is likely to get his first concrete indication of Camus's dialectical method from his unorthodox custom of making explicit cross-references between his fictitious works. (p. 5)

A second unifying technique is certain key images that Camus uses repeatedly, from his first to last writings, as titles and motifs: the stranger, the plague, the fall, the judge, the condemned man, the sun and sea, the two sides of the coin, exile and kingdom, lucidity and indifference, speech and silence, solitude and solidarity. His thematic associations with these images are usually fairly constant, so that they become a kind of shorthand for his continuing preoccupations. Sometimes, however, he works ironic variations on them or gives them multiple meanings, thereby creating tension between their appearances in different contexts. (pp. 5-6)

[Camus's] method was to fragment in each work one facet of his personality, one line of argument, one of several possible responses to a common condition such as the absurd, in such a way that only assembled in their totality would they reveal his full intention. This method enabled him to temper the intense emotionality that most readers associate with his writing with an equal measure of ironic detachment that he is not usually credited with. (p. 8)

L'Envers et l'endroit and Nuptials are concerned primarily with the necessity to detach oneself periodically from both legitimate social commitments and the flux of habitual social routine, with its illusions of immortality, stability, and self-importance, in order to establish an identity in solitary relation to the indifferent natural world and thereby to confront one's own mortality as a part of nature and to heighten appreciation of being alive. The sense of solitude and personal insignificance resulting from this dislocation of everyday routine in face of death, which is regarded as valuable in his first two books, regresses at the beginning of The Myth into a source of anxiety as one aspect of "the absurd," along with other aspects including the apparent nonexistence of God, the lack of unity, purpose, or rationale in the natural universe, and the frustrating restrictions of human understanding. Camus ends up accepting absurd alienation in The Myth, concluding that the insignificance and ephemerality of the individual's existence actually constitute its unique, irreplaceable value. He introduces the theme of metaphysical revolt in calling for the man of absurd awareness to rise above his overwhelming, lonely fate by bearing it defiantly rather than killing himself, to stave off death through prolonging and savoring every moment of life, and to combat the limitations of reason by maintaining constant lucidity.

The Stranger and The Misunderstanding dramatize more fully than The Myth that aspect of the absurd concerning the capricious twists of fate, while The Stranger and Caligula add to metaphysical absurdity and revolt the parallel dimension of revolt against the social absurdity of conventional morality and arbitrary legal authority, especially in the extreme form of capital punishment. The Stranger, like The Myth, asserts the primacy of individual, flesh-and-blood reality against any abstract notion that claims to supersede it. (pp. 9-10)

The absurd takes a political form in The Rebel and other writings after World War II about the capricious course of modern history, particularly in revolutions that have mis-carried and ended up reinstitutionalizing murder as a political policy in both bourgeois and communist states. A total commitment to nonviolent resistance expressed in Neither Victims nor Executioners and by Tarrou in The Plague is modified in The Rebel and The Just Assassins to a doctrine of "limited guilt" whereby the rebel recognizes that he may have to
kill in a just revolution or war, but only as a last resort and on the condition that he be willing to sacrifice his life in return so as to avert a cycle of revenge killings or the political legitimization of murder. (p. 10)

This thematic line is elaborated through Camus's underlying vision of life's ambiguity and its reflection in his literary style through his frequent use of parallelism, antithesis, paradox, and ironic reversal… In his world view the natural universe and man's fate are enigmatic, capriciously fluctuating forces, and our experiences are charged with many levels of possible meanings and implications that are sometimes complementary or parallel to one another, sometimes antithetical. His fascination with ambiguity shows in his titles … and in his frequent use of dualistic phrases like "solitary/solidary," "judge-penitent," "ambivalence" "equilibrium," "duplicity," and "equivocation." (pp. 10-11)

For Camus this pluralism pervading every area of life is sometimes a cause for anxiety … but it is also the source of a benign, Montaignian skepticism and tolerance, a distaste for absolutism, whether in politics, philosophy, morality, or aesthetics…. This pluralism provides, above all, an ennobling challenge to encompass and hold in dynamic balance the whole range of complex, self-contradictory possibilities that life offers. (p. 11)

Among Camus's array of balanced antitheses, the less complicated include unity and diversity …, pessimism and optimism, sensuality and intellectuality, and the life-giving and destructive sides of nature. Disillusioned recognition of life's limitations is offset by its intensification of the values remaining within those limitations…. (p. 12)

A more complex series of antitheses stems from possible alternative attitudes toward death. First there is terror in facing it, balanced by the pride of acknowledging it honestly: "I want to keep my lucidity to the last, and gaze upon my death with all the fullness of my jealousy and horror" [as Camus states in Lyrical and Critical Essays]. He also finds this lucidity toward death to be a means of intensifying life's joys, in the carpe diem tradition…. (p. 13)

[Camus's] attitudes toward death becomes subsumed in the first half of a larger antithesis in which the solitary egocentricity of Camus contemplating nature and natural death is balanced against his social conscience…. (p. 16)

Camus's theoretical writings about the literary artist's vocation incorporate the same balance between egocentricity and social responsibility…. He significantly modified the theory of art for art's sake … along much the same lines as André Malraux—to begin with, infusing it with a heterosexual sensibility in contrast to its previous frequent association with homosexuality. Furthermore, The Rebel and later expressions of literary theory develop his conviction that no artist, no matter how egocentric, can work in isolation…. (p. 18)

Finally, the writer must always draw from his time for material, and only the most effete author can remain uncommitted when faced with the urgency of our present crises. The challenge is to assimilate the present temper into works that are both significant socially and substantial aesthetically. (p. 19)

His most widely inclusive antithesis is that between romantic and classical values and stylistic traits, the reconciliation of which is a rare, admirable achievement in the twentieth century…. [In Camus's view, romantic and classical values] are not entirely antithetical; classicism, rather, encompasses romanticism, since the balancing of opposites itself is a central classical and neoclassical doctrine…. (pp. 19-20)

But the classical spirit is subject to abuses too. Camus's exhortations to emotional and intellectual intensity are in the tradition of the romantic movement's reaction against the rigidified neoclassicism of the late eighteenth century, a reaction that has been repeated in the twentieth century by French surrealism and existentialism, and later the American beat and hippie movements, against the atrophy of the classical virtue of decorum into
academic stuffiness or bourgeois insipidity and priggishness. Thus, if classicism can be seen as a controlled romanticism, controlled romanticism can also be seen, in an author like Camus, as a regenerated classicism.

A final way he combines the two traditions is to enclose his romantic subjects or heroes in a classical style and structure. Classical stylistic convention as well as ideology can be seen in his constant use of antithetical devices like parallelism, balanced sentences, chiasmus, and oxymoron. In contrast to romantic verbal effusion, involution, and rejection of set forms, his prose is typically concise and clear (aside from some lapses in *The Myth* and lyrical essays), his literary forms tightly, symmetrically structured. (pp. 20-1)

Camus blends still more antithetical attitudes into the paradoxes that mark almost every page of his writing. The paradoxes inherent in the absurd condition provide the dramatic reversals of *The Myth*: The absence of a God or transcendent meaning in life, which he begins by postulating as a justification for suicide, ends up making life *more* worth living; reason is incapable of making sense out of life, yet it is valuable insofar as it gives us a concept of what sense is and a rational articulation of its own limitations. The crucial shift in emphasis in his writing after *The Myth* from the phase of the absurd to that of rebellion pivots on a paradox that he expresses in the introduction to *The Rebel*: If I conclude that the value of my freedom and egocentric pleasure make my own life worth living, I must through simple empathy say the same about everyone else's life. Therefore, murder as well as suicide is proscribed, my freedom must be limited where it interferes with others', and in order to defend the principle of the value of life, freedom, and pleasure, I may have to sacrifice my own when others are threatened. Thus Camus in his personal dialectical development recapitulates the ambivalence from total irresponsibility to total responsibility that is central to existentialist thought from Dostoevsky to Sartre. (pp. 21-2)

Similarly, in his literary theory he transmutes the narcissism and political escapism or elitism usually identified with art for art's sake into a politically committed, democratic aesthetic....

Another form of paradox is the ironic reversal by which a line of action carried too far merges with its opposite or the condition against which it was intended to rebel. An excess in one's assertion of freedom destroys others' freedom and eventually his own, as in the case of Caligula. Rebellion against a murderous universe (Caligula) or society (Meursault) can make the rebel a competitor in murder. The romantic quest for apocalyptic transcendence of bourgeois banality can end in intellectual or physical self-annihilation that is equally banal. (p. 23)

A full recognition of the protean, unpredictable side of Camus's writing that emerges from these patterns of ambiguity, antithesis, ambivalence, paradox, and ironic reversal shows how far off the mark are those readers and critics who regard him as somber, monolithic, or unremittingly tendentious.... In fact, his flair for playing riddle games and for shifting roles was so strong that he must have come to feel misgivings about its tendency to undercut his more serious, straightforward intentions. (p. 24)

The monumental artistic plan and ideological comprehensiveness of Camus's total work approach a complete world system, a synthesis of metaphysics, ethics, history, political theory, social psychology, aesthetics, and semantics into a single, consistent viewpoint. Part of his fascination is the same as that of other philosophical or literary system builders.... And he is open to the same criticism, on philosophical if not on artistic grounds, that he sometimes oversimplifies or bends reality in trying to make everything fit his system. (pp. 24-5)

All of the foregoing indicates why he is a difficult author. It is not that he is prone toward obscure, scholarly allusions in the manner of T. S. Eliot, or toward the occultism and private fantasies of symbolist and surrealist poets, or even the rigorous formal philosophy of Sartre. It is, rather, that assimilating the magnitude, complexity, and kaleidoscopic dynamics of all his major works combined presents the reader with an aesthetic challenge.... (p. 25)
In the end, it is ironic that Camus, who has generally been underestimated by both Marxist and formalist critics—two schools that he considered to be at equally excessive poles in their exclusivity—actually provides an exemplary subject of study for the combination of aesthetic and political concerns valued by the former and for the literary complexity valued by the latter. (pp. 25-6)

Camus's aesthetic is closer to that of Coleridge, who is often cited as a forerunner of the New Critics; in contrast to the latter, though, for Coleridge as for Camus the internal dynamics of the literary work are not constrictingly divorced from the external world but are enriched all the more by being viewed as a microcosm of the artist's organically unified world view. Part of Camus's unique accomplishment in our time is that his stylistic and formal elaborateness is not an aesthete's affectation or attempt to flee reality into an artificial paradise but an integral extension of and key to his total vision of reality. (p. 26)

The most prominent motif unifying Camus's writing is the problem of judgment, to whose multiple forms he attributes the crucial spiritual and social ills of the twentieth century. He develops some aspects of this theme in expository order in the essays, while in the fiction and drama he reveals other aspects through a variety of literary techniques: images of the judge, jury, prosecuting and defense attorneys, witness, guilty verdict, prison, and death sentence run all through these works on the level of literal action and as metaphor, symbol, and allegory. His system here involves four parallel elements: metaphysical and human judgment and the rational and irrational forms they both take....

The imagery of rational metaphysical judgment derives from the Christian conception of God as the final judge, who omnisciently dictates standards of innocence and guilt and accordingly rewards or punishes men after death. Camus sees rational human judgment as society's appropriation of God's judicial powers. (p. 28)

Governmental absolutism reveals itself not only in war but in capital punishment, which Camus repeatedly attacks as legalized, rationalized murder. (p. 29)

In opposition to "rational" religious and social judgment, Camus expresses his themes of metaphysical absurdity and social nihilism in images of irrational judgment. Neither Camus nor any of his fictional heroes believes in God, an afterlife, or any rationale in the workings of the universe.... Death obliterates all of society's distinctions between innocence and guilt, and a premonition of his death exposes to a man the artificiality of society's rules, freeing him to rise above them and live any way he pleases.

If freedom from religious and social judgment is pushed to its extremes, however, it in turn becomes another form of judgment; unlimited freedom legitimizes nihilistic murder, by which man becomes the accomplice of the universe as capricious killer.... (pp. 29-30)

[Murderous] forms of metaphysical and human judgment figure centrally in Camus's fiction and drama as well as in the philosophical and journalistic essays. The novels, stories, plays, and earlier lyric essays also extend the theme of social judgment dramatically into more mundane areas—such as the everyday, arbitrary rituals of conventional morality, the officiousness of clergymen, judges, and bureaucrats, the petty vanity of individuals who need to give an air of importance to their banal daily routines or to consider themselves morally superior to their neighbors. (p. 30)

The complexity of the judgment theme can be confusing, and failure to distinguish between its multiple aspects has caused many readers and critics to miss the ironies and structural dynamics that Camus gets out of paralleling metaphysical and human, rational and irrational judgment. In The Fall preeminently, all four forms of judgment are closely intertwined in Clamence's fevered, devious discourse on guilt; here, and to nearly an equal degree in each of the other works, it is necessary to distinguish carefully which forms of judgment Camus is dealing with and on what literary levels they are functioning at different stages of the story. (p. 31)
Out of the values of *The Stranger* and *The Plague* Camus synthesized a humanitarian ethic for our time. From *The Stranger* he retained Meursault's simple, pagan sensuality free from illusions of immortality or a God to justify one's values, as well as his freedom from society's arbitrary laws and self-righteousness. However, Meursault's is "a still-negative truth," as Camus says in a 1955 foreword to *The Stranger* ...), because Meursault ultimately denies life's value and because he kills, albeit accidentally, without contrition. In *The Plague* Rieux and Tarrou make Meursault's negative truth positive. By battling against the plague—and, allegorically, against natural death and nihilism—Rieux attests to the value in every man's life that justifies fighting to stay its inevitable execution. Tarrou makes explicit Meursault's instinctive rebellion against social judgment in its everyday forms and especially in its most severe form, rational murder committed under the authorization of capital punishment or militant "Justice." In defending human happiness against any life-threatening force—metaphysical or human, irrational or rational—Rieux and Tarrou define the boundary of individual freedom at the point where it destroys one's own or another's life. (p. 43)

However, the theme of Camus's last novel, *The Fall*, is that most men today are, unfortunately, incapable of gaining this humanitarian salvation because they have been conditioned by centuries of Christianity to need a belief in the transcendent authority of God and further conditioned by recent decades of totalitarianism to need absolute social authority. (pp. 43-4)

Camus follows the ... general theme of men's flight from rebellion and freedom in several of the stories in his final work of fiction, *Exile and the Kingdom*. The multiple levels of the theme are most effectively embodied in "The Guest," which is primarily a dramatization of the French colonial intellectual's divided sympathies in the Algerian conflict but which also has a symbolic dimension in which Camus explores the idea of a humanitarian Christ who comes to free men from religious and social judgment.

Christian critics who have claimed to see indications of an impending conversion by Camus in *The Fall* and other late works have missed the irony in his use of Christian imagery against orthodox Christian doctrine. (pp. 48-9)

One of the central, and typically ambiguous, words throughout Camus's writing is "meaning." He uses the noun *le sens* and the verbs *signifier* and *vouloir dire* to refer both to a metaphysical purpose, justification, or scale of moral values in life and to epistemological "sense"—semantic signification and the rational unification and explanation of sense experience....

Camus divides the multiple aspects of the absurd that he enumerates in *The Myth* into what can be termed metaphysical and epistemological absurdities. The former include the brevity of life and inevitability of death, the indifference of the natural universe to human existence and of men to one another's existence, and the absence of a God and an afterlife that would give this life a transcendent purpose or universal system of moral values (although Camus approaches the existence of God more as an epistemological problem than as a metaphysical one; he does not deny God's existence but our ability to ascertain it rationally). Epistemological absurdity further entails the limitations of human understanding in general—the foundering of reason in logical dilemmas, the mind's failure to explain or unify experience totally, the frustration of our "nostalgia for unity, that appetite for the absolute ...".... (p. 52)

Camus summarizes all of these metaphysical and epistemological aspects of the absurd in the formulation "life has no meaning"; the central question of the book then becomes whether "refusing to grant a meaning to life necessarily leads to declaring that it is not worth living."... He assumes that it is the belief life has a meaning, in all of the above senses, that makes most men feel it is worth living. But, he asks, is the absence of metaphysical and epistemological meaning in fact equivalent to the absence of all value in life, or can values be found that make life worth living even under the conditions of absurd meaninglessness? His answer from the beginning is, "In truth, there is no necessary common measure between these judgments."... Indeed, he later concludes, "It was previously a question of finding out whether or not life had to have a meaning to be
lived. It now becomes clear, on the contrary, that it will be lived all the better if it has no meaning."… (pp. 52-3)

On the metaphysical level, he explains, the absense of God—or more precisely our absence of knowledge that there is a God—dictates existential freedom …; recognizing the brevity of life and denying an afterlife provide an imperative to savor every minute of this life; the lack of any preordained purpose or moral value system is an invitation to create one's own life style and to substitute "the quantity of experiences for the quality."… (p. 53)

On the epistemological level, reason is valuable within its limitations for two reasons. To begin with, its failure to explain and unify experience is not total…. And reason provides the source not only of a minimal sense of coherence but of another form of revolt, that of the human mind defying the mindlessness of the rest of the universe and grappling with its own limitations: "To a man devoid of blinkers, there is no finer sight than that of the intelligence at grips with a reality that transcends it."… To deny the value of reason altogether, through irrationalism, mysticism, or the religious-existentialist leap to faith in God, is to commit "philosophical suicide," the intellectual equivalent to literal suicide as a response to metaphysical absurdity. (pp. 53-4)

One more dimension of meaning and value remains to be integrated into Camus's overall pattern—that dealing with language and literature as communication. One of the set of paradoxes providing the transition from the period of the Stranger and The Myth to that of The Plague, "The Enigma," and The Rebel is that, although part of the absurd condition is man's solitude in the natural universe and in society, this very solitude can become a source of solidarity between men recognizing their common condition. In the later works Camus accordingly comes to emphasize the communicative function of language and literature along with their life-affirming and unifying functions. In The Myth language and literature are already forms of rebellion against total meaninglessness, and in The Rebel Camus defines all rebellion as communal. In The Stranger part of Meursault's "negative truth" is his minimal linguistic communication and compassion with the other characters—although he thinks of the latter primarily in terms of the fellowship of men condemned to death. In the subsequent works Camus moves toward a more life-oriented concept of compassion between men, which he expresses in the image of "dialogue," as opposed on one hand to the silence associated with accepting the absurd and on the other hand to the verbose monologues of those who use language to set themselves above others. To the metaphysical and social ills he has been concerned with previously are added those resulting from faulty communication. (pp. 67-8)

[The] communicative value of literature becomes obvious: "If he speaks, if he reasons, above all if he writes, immediately the brother reaches out his hand." "Even if the novel describes only nostalgia, despair, frustration, it still creates form and salvation"—salvation through compassion between men in their common nostalgia, despair, and frustration. Camus's entire development of the theme of meaning and value can be seen as culminating in his final ideal of the vocation of the writer, whose challenge is double: first, to strike a balance between negating false hopes of total metaphysical or epistemological meaning and affirming the validity and value in life's limited level of meaning; and second, to be "the artist [who] fashions himself in that ceaseless oscillation from himself to others," again striking a balance between that degree of solitude inherent in the absurd condition as well as in the artistic temperament, and that degree of solidarity attainable through literary creation. (p. 70)

Camus's essays on the social responsibility of artists and intellectuals are of special importance today because this subject has provoked increasingly intense debate in France and the United states since the time of his death and was a crucial point on which he was opposed to Sartre and subsequent revolutionary ideologists.…

[His] literary theory is most distinctive as a middle path between two opposite extremes prevalent in twentieth-century aesthetics. On the one hand, in Camus's analysis, nineteenth-century notions of pure art for
art's sake have led to ahistorical formalism and social isolation or dandyism in the artist, who by abdicating public responsibility leaves mass culture the exclusive realm of trivial entertainers and mass politics that of unscrupulous professionals. (p. 101)

On the other hand, he asserts, the realistic tradition has also had its excessive offshoots. Naturalism, as for example in Hemingway or the "tough" American detective that was an intellectual fad in France during the 1940's, claims to record life impassively, in its totality, without the artist interposing selection, arrangement, or judgment—an impossible claim to begin with, in Camus's view. It binds the writer, at least in theory, to an isolated historical moment and impersonal themes and style. Because these two extremes either totally ignore or accept the world as it is, neither serves rebellious art's purpose of "correcting creation."… (pp. 101-02)

If Camus had never written any fiction or drama he would still be likely to rank among the outstanding authors of the twentieth century solely as a literary essayist…. [The exemplary quality of his prose] is distilled in its purest, most autonomous form in the essays.

Because of their individual brevity and occasionality, the essays in L'Envers et l'endroit, Nuptials, and Summer are too often regarded as minor works, thematic corollaries to The Myth and The Rebel…. Artistically, however, both individually and as a collective unit, the lyrical essays often surpass the "major" essays and stand among his very finest works. Here Camus is most fully, comprehensively himself, in contrast to the ironic personae of his fictional narrators and to the single lines of formal argument that he isolates in The Myth, The Rebel, and the political journalism. The personal essay is the medium in which he is most at home—that is to say, in the world of immediate, concrete experience. Here he relaxes and speaks in his own voice of the actual settings and personal relationships of his life, the flesh-and-blood inspirations of the abstract themes of The Myth and The Rebel. Here too he reveals the compassion, the warmth of personality and zest for living, the amused affection for the details of everyday life that he subordinates in his fiction and plays—perhaps regrettably—to the creation of mythic settings and characters and crisis-pitched action. (pp. 117-18)

Dominating all else is his rhapsodic love affair with the Mediterranean sun, sea, and flower-covered landscape. He succeeds in elevating intensity of sense experience into a rationalist metaphysic and in exalting the communion of man with nature in overtly sexual imagery without ever lapsing into mysticism, pantheism, or the pathetic fallacy….

Thematically and stylistically, the individual lyrical essays—even the earliest ones in L'Envers et l'endroit—contain his most concise, integrated expressions of his ideal of keeping life's paradoxes and antithetical possibilities in balance…. (p. 118)

Structurally, the essays follow a typical pattern of a passage of straight narration or description that evokes a meditation that is in turn elaborated into a paradoxical metaphor or aphorism…. They are further characterized by a rise to poetic diction in the closing paragraphs…. (p. 120)

The lyrical essays have the expository form of tightly knotted prose poems, challenging the reader with complex extended figures of speech, obliquely expressed themes, elliptical jumps in narration and thought, and cryptic motifs that reveal their meaning bit by bit as they recur with variations from essay to essay—such as silence, indifference, black sun and dark flame, or the seaside cemetery near Algiers. (pp. 120-21)

As a journalist Camus was one of the few in the midcentury to produce a substantial body of daily and weekly articles of lasting literary value, only a small number of which have been translated into English. (p. 123)

His own journalistic ideals and practice exemplified what the periodical press can and should be: the application to daily events of a refined humanistic sensibility, long-range historical perspective, and a radical
It is important to note … that, while on international affairs his reasoning was becoming strained and his rhetoric hollow by the late fifties, on a domestic issue he could still, in 1957, write his most radically incisive political statement, "Reflections on the Guillotine."… [This essay] best epitomizes Camus's journalistic style, and indeed his entire art and thought. Here Camus marshals all his powers of novelistic and dramatic description and of straightforward journalistic exposition, heightened literarily by bristling irony, paradox, and aphorism and supported philosophically by his most maturely refined and concisely articulated metaphysical, political, and moral principles. The result is one of the most devastating polemics against capital punishment ever written. (pp. 126-27)

*The Myth of Sisyphus* is Camus's most difficult work, particularly in the first … sequence, "An Absurd Reasoning," which presents stylistic challenges similar to the lyrical essays—dense construction, digressive asides, elliptical jumps between sentences, cryptic aphorisms—and compounds them with a lengthily sustained, involved line of argument in a combination of philosophy and literary essay reminiscent of Kierkegaard or Nietzsche. The book is filled with nearly as many points of ambiguity as *The Stranger*, which would undoubtedly be a defect from a purely philosophical point of view but which makes it all the more engrossing as an aesthetic creation, embodying in its own structure the epistemological pluralism that comprises one aspect of the absurd. (p. 130)

[A] factor contributing to the book's emotional power is its dramatic techniques like the buildup of narrative tension and dynamic modulations in tone. Camus displays his flair for drama in the startling opening—"There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide" …—and in the way he systematically demolishes all the illusory values that sustain conventional life, then amid this seeming wasteland builds a new scale of values consistent with the absurd in which "everything resumes its place and the absurd world is reborn in all its splendor and diversity."… *The Myth* shares with the fiction and lyrical essays Camus's characteristic of rising in climactic paragraphs to a rhapsodic tone and intensely poetic diction…. (p. 131)

*The Myth*'s ambiguities begin with the central term itself, "the absurd," partly because Camus isn't entirely consistent in its usage, partly because he considers it essentially an indefinable, emotional quality, such as beauty.…

The book's expository structure also contributes to several ambiguities, some doubtlessly intentional, some probably not, that tend to mislead unwary readers. The shock opening leads one to expect a discourse on suicide in general, despite Camus's subsequent qualification that he is only dealing with suicide as a response to the absurd. (p. 132)

As his aesthetic theory has indicated, Camus's writing generally does not convey a highly developed sense of specific social or historical situation. Although in his reportage he did criticize the inequities of class society, in his fiction, drama, and literary and philosophical essays he purposely strove for universal truths even when he located them in recognizable social settings. The price he paid was a certain loss of fidelity to those specifics of existence that vary enormously between different social strata and historical moments. (p. 137)

Camus [maintains] the customary ambiguity of his titles in *L'Homme révolté*, which translates either as "Man in Revolt" or "The Revolted [or 'disgusted'] Man." The essay's artistic complexity is mainly contained in its monumental structure and a world view synthesizing metaphysics, political and literary history and theory. In lieu of his projected 1500-page "The System," it is the closest approximation to his *summa*, encompassing virtually all aspects of his formal thought and all the stages in the dialectical development of his themes. (p. 139)
Whatever the drawbacks of *The Rebel*'s massively symmetrical structure, it effectively underscores the theme of man's perpetual passion for unity, forming an organizational counterpart to the reflection of absurd pluralism in *The Myth*’s fragmented exposition.

The introduction is one of the key passages of his entire works, encapsulating the transition between the phase of the absurd and that of rebellion. Picking up from where *The Myth* leaves off, Camus moves from the problem of suicide to that of murder. Although he does not mention the titles of his earlier works, he implicitly contrasts the nihilistic implications of the absurd, those followed by Meursault and Caligula, with the affirmative implications in *The Myth*, whose line of argument, if followed accurately and to its end, rejects nihilistic suicide and now by extension rejects nihilistic murder as well: "To say that life is absurd, the conscience must be alive. How is it possible, without making remarkable concessions to one's desire for comfort, to preserve exclusively for oneself the benefits of such a process of reasoning? From the moment that life is recognized as good, it becomes good for all men."… (p. 141)

In the end, Camus's exhortations are only fully applicable to volunteer rebels, especially intellectuals, within the bourgeoisie—one of whom, as Sartre reminded him, Camus himself had become. Camus's political theory in general is most meaningful as a program for middle-class intellectuals and artists involving themselves and their distinctive sensibility in historical struggle. These men, however, are apt to play only a marginal political role at best. Camus recognized this and at times gives the impression in *The Rebel* that he is trying mainly to formulate an ethic of minimal nonviolence for himself while conceding, like Tarrou, that other men must go on murderously making history. In this light, *The Rebel* stops short of proposing a universal political program, which is undoubtedly a grave limitation. On the other hand, perhaps the reader can best do it justice by approaching it with the understanding that its title applies mainly to the intellectual *engagé* and perhaps even more specifically to Camus himself. (pp. 149-50)

Dualities pervade *The Stranger* in theme and structure…. [There are] the parallels between God's and society's judgment and between natural death and capital punishment. There is another important thematic parallel between the absurdity of nature or fate and that of society. (p. 160)

Society as Camus portrays it is as duplicitous, capricious, and lethal as fate, with one vital difference: fate makes no claim to rationality, while society does make one. (p. 161)

[Fate] ironically links incidents that would seem to have no logical connection (e.g., Meursault's behavior at his mother's funeral and his trial for murder), and a foresight of death, by reducing all actions to the same level of importance, creates an identity between the most disparate events. Instead of mystical doctrines in which all objects and events are identified with one another in their equal significance, Camus presents the reverse: all are identified in their equal *insignificance*….

Camus's observations on the duality of nature, society, fate, and the ironic identification that death effects between diverse events mold the novel into a highly symmetrical structure. (p. 163)

The most disputable issue in *The Stranger* is whether its final implication is really that "life isn't worth living." Meursault's meditation shortly before being executed, "From the moment one dies, how and when has no importance," can be regarded as the key to his whole character. Camus may be asking us to consider the startling hypothesis of a man who in the midst of life is as indifferent to his fate as he will be after death. (p. 166)

[It] is likely that Camus intended to leave open the possibility of at least two contradictory conclusions to make the book illustrate that "this world is nothing and this world is everything—there is the contradictory and tireless cry of every true artist." The only unequivocally affirmative theme is to be found, not explicitly in Meursault's narrative but in the novel's literary structure and in the author's having remained alive and
choosing to write that novel…. (p. 169)

Of all Camus’s works *The Stranger* is undoubtedly filled with the most paradoxes, both internally and in relation to his life and other works. The ending ironically reverses conventional notions of innocence and guilt. (pp. 169-70)

By conceiving a story and a novelistic structure that epitomize the pluralistic nature and internal contradictions of the absurd, by enriching the novel with multiple meanings and paradoxes on every level, Camus infused *The Stranger* with a distinctive vitality that makes this slim récit unique among his works and those of any other author. He was never again to attain its richness in any of his later works, although this is not to deny their own distinctive virtues or justification for being less complex. *The Stranger* is one of those rare, fertile inventions like *Hamlet, Moby Dick, The Brothers Karamazov, Ulysses, or The Great Gatsby* that even the greatest of writers are seldom fortunate enough to create more than once in a lifetime: a combination of will, in the author’s felicitous original conception, and of good fortune in the way this conception quickens and expands to take on a life of its own. All the elements coalesce to form a simple, yet infinitely intricate pattern, and the levels of meaning proliferate to produce an artistic organism that is as protean, enigmatic, and endlessly tantalizing as the human condition itself. (pp. 171-72)

In *The Plague* Camus audaciously synthesized the ultimate extension of [realism and symbolism] into an allegorical naturalism. He had previously demonstrated his native mastery of the metaphysical plane in fiction and drama, on which plane the plague allegorizes the absurd, natural death, the problem of evil…. He is an incisive social psychologist in his portrayal of a trapped community, a portrayal that reveals universal truths about any group of humans in crisis…. (p. 173)

To sum up *The Plague*’s strong points, it is on first reading as gripping and moving as anything in world literature. Only on subsequent, closer rereadings do its limitations become troublesome. Stylistically it lacks the enduring fascination of *The Stranger*’s verbal complexities and *The Fall*’s epigrammatic incisiveness…. The various symbolic levels and Rieux’s doctor-artist dual role are rather static techniques of structural ambiguity compared to the dynamic interaction between Parts One and Two of *The Stranger* or the innumerable possible interpretations of individual passages and of that novel as a whole. It should be remembered, however, that by the time of *The Plague* Camus has become committed to a more straightforward literature, having developed an antipathy toward the abuses of linguistic ambiguity that he expresses through Tarrou: "All our troubles spring from our failure to use plain, clean-cut language."… (pp. 175-76)

The philosophical dialogues between Rieux, Tarrou, Paneloux, and Rambert, although substantial thematically, tend to make stilted, bombastic fiction…. After the first reading, without the suspense and emotional involvement in the characters' fates, Rieux, Tarrou, Cottard, and Paneloux do not retain enough individual complexity or appeal to become much more than the abstract voices of philosophical positions…. (p. 176)

Furthermore, weak points in the book's elaborate symbolic system lead to problems in structure and interaction between characters. Camus situates his fictional Oran outside of a specific historical and political context. Consequently, he can only bring in politics through Tarrou’s flashback monologue, which, though one of the outstanding parts of the novel in itself, is dramatically and thematically an artificial interpolation. (p. 177)

Moreover, on the naturalistic level *The Plague* conveys little consciousness of social class in Oran. We do not see enough of the difference in the effects a plague—or a military occupation—would have on the rich and the poor. (p. 181)
A different critical perspective from that applicable to *The Stranger* and *The Plague* needs to be brought to bear on evaluating *The Fall*. To begin with, it contains fewer conventional novelistic elements. There is really only one character and not much of a plot; the technique derives almost exclusively from the resourceful use of first-person narrative point of view. (p. 183)

*The Fall* marks a culmination of nearly all of Camus's main themes: metaphysical and human judgment, dandyish egoism vs. altruism, monologue vs. dialogue, Europe vs. the Mediterranean and tropics, communist and Christian authoritarianism, an antireligious, secularized Christian ethic, and conflicting loyalties and fears between maternal and paternal forces. The fullest appreciation will result from recognizing its climactic significance in the overall pattern.

Although it is his least conventional novel in plot and characterization, it is all in all his most literary fictional work. In its genre it owes much to the tradition of spiritual autobiography and confessional literature…. (p. 184)

*The Fall* … marks a successful change of form for Camus to an overtly traditional literary style and allusiveness. He obviously did not choose this style, however, simply to show that he could master it. In the unsavory character of Clamence, who represents the humanistically educated, cultivated European, he is calling into question the whole cultural tradition of Western civilization. (p. 186)

Another extratextual dimension contributing to the complexity of *The Fall* is its elements of autobiography…. Clamence's occupation as a lawyer for noble causes is an obvious analogue for Camus's public image as humanitarian author, an image he bridled at and is satirizing here. (p. 188)

The main limitation in *The Fall* is not any weakness on its own terms, within which it is difficult to find fault, but a general one in Camus's fiction that becomes most acute here. There is a paucity throughout his work of long-term, gradually developed characterization and relationships between people in more or less normal life situations….

The dimension lacking in his fiction can be pointed up by comparing him to a master of characterization like Proust, the one twentieth-century French novelist who most clearly surpasses Camus in scope. (p. 194)

Camus did have a surprising capacity for dialectical reversals, and it is quite possible that he would have mastered the traditional techniques of interpersonal characterization and naturalistic, historically situated exposition in [*"The First Man,"* the novel he was writing at the time of his death]. (p. 197)

In the six stories of *Exile and the Kingdom* Camus is trying out new techniques: a relatively objective third-person narration in all of them but *"The Renegade,"* which is his only attempt at interior monologue; a light, urbane tone in the satire on upper-bohemian Paris social life in *"The Artist at Work"*; a feminine point of view in *"The Adulterous Woman"*; extensive stretches of detailed realistic narration and description with few symbolic overtones in the early parts of *"The Adulterous Woman"* and *"The Growing Stone"* and throughout *"The Silent Men."* He is also trying to fill some gaps in the subject matter of his previous works: sustained accounts of marital relationships in *"The Adulterous Woman"* and *"The Artist at Work"*; mundane central characters and workaday settings in *"The Adulterous Woman"* and *"The Silent Men"*; a Parisian locale in *"The Artist at Work"*; most strikingly, the less attractive side of the coin of Algeria's landscape and life—*"The Renegade"* takes place under inhumanly hot sunlight, *"The Adulterous Woman,"* *"The Silent Men,"* and *"The Guest"* in wintry cold. The stories are woven together thematically by various paradoxical mixtures of familiar antitheses: exile and kingdom, solitude and solidarity, freedom and servitude, silence and noise or speech. Each of the central characters suffers from divided loyalties, each is literally or figuratively a foreigner, isolated in the midst of society. (p. 199)
*Exile and the Kingdom*’s most striking technical feat is the style of the interior monologue in "The Renegade," much of which is unfortunately lost in translation…. The tortuously elongated sentences, ungrammatically linked without punctuation or by commas, are the antithesis of *The Stranger’s* curt, disparate sentence structure. Clamence’s verbose quasidialogue, verging toward the end of *The Fall* on delirium, is reduced here to a man without a tongue raving interminably to himself—the ultimate image of everything Camus has said about the perversion of language to isolate and enslave men. A litany of anguish is created by the rhythms of three, six and twelve-syllable syntactic units that suggest the French alexandrine poetic line, reinforced by internal near rhymes…. (p. 202)

"The Growing Stone" is the most obvious instance of the impression the whole book gives that Camus had not fully mastered the short-story form. "The Guest" is the only story that ranks with the three novels in successful cohesion of theme, structure, expository technique, characterization, and realistic and symbolic elements. "The Renegade" is perhaps equally well written but is emotionally unmoving, perhaps because its narrator is the only one of Camus's central characters who is totally unsympathetic. "The Adulterous Woman" is too obviously written around the tour de force ending; like "The Growing Stone," the realistic scene setting of its first half is somewhat listless and unnecessarily long. "The Artist at Work," on the other hand, is a moderately effective study in satirical realism up to the ending where, as in "The Growing Stone," the sudden shift to highly contrived symbolism disrupts the previous development and tone. "The Silent Men" is successful as far as it attempts to go but is too short for us to become fully absorbed in its characters or situation. It and "The Growing Stone" might have served better as points of departure for longer fictional works; in fact, "The Silent Men" may provide us with a hint of the direction Camus would have taken in the work based on his youth in Algiers that he projected in the 1958 preface to *L'Envers et l'endroit*. But the subjects of these and several of the other stories are also precisely those he had had the least success dealing with in depth: realistically portrayed working-class and colonial situations, marital relationships, the feminine viewpoint. Perhaps his very choice of the short-story medium, which is a constricted one to begin with and which by the 1950s was becoming even more obsolescent than the novel, was a tacit admission of his inability to treat these subjects with the fullness they require. (pp. 209-10)

In spite of his lifelong passion for the theater, Camus never attained full mastery as a playwright. All four of his plays make better reading than stage pieces, although each has its moments of theatrical power. *Caligula* and to a lesser degree *The Just Assassins* were successful in their original productions and revivals in France, but neither received as much acclaim as his adaptations of Faulkner’s *Requiem for a Nun* and Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed*…. (p. 211)

Camus was preoccupied with the challenge of finding a contemporary dramatic form equivalent to Greek tragedy…. (p. 211)

[It can readily be seen] that Camus is writing, not in the Shakespearean tradition we are attuned to, but in that of Racine and Corneille, who have never been popular in England or America, and of Greek tragedy, which we tend to regard more as a subject for literary study than as viable stagecraft.

Even when his theater is considered on its own terms, though, it has serious limitations. There is too much talk, too little action, too little modulation in pace and mood; the unrelenting stage of siege on the audience's emotions is overly demanding, more so in the theater than in a private reading that can be broken up at will. The characters are too often stiff, their dialogue pompous and stilted. Dialogue is not one of the strong points of his fiction, and his restriction to it here, with only the truncated narration and description that can be put into the characters' mouths, precludes the features that most enliven his fictional language: lyricism, ambiguities in diction and viewpoint, multiple levels of significance. Another of his general weaknesses, the portrayal of lovers, is preeminent in *State of Siege* and *The Just Assassins*. (pp. 212-13)
Caligula has with justice been widely recognized as the one play that ranks among his best works. Theatrically, it provides an acting tour de force in the title role…. It is the only play that fully achieves Camus's distinctive resonance and complex of meanings….

Caligula has the grandeur of a classical tragic hero. He is never simply a tyrant, never impelled by pragmatically self-advancing motives, mere lust for power or sadism. He is, rather, the disillusioned romantic hero of The Rebel, compelled to do evil out of nostalgia for an unrealizable good. (p. 213)

Caligula's assertion of egoistic freedom, then, is not self-serving so much as it is exemplary. His tragic flaw lies in not recognizing that “no one can save himself all alone and that one cannot be free at the expense of others.”… (p. 214)

The main weakness in Caligula as a stage piece is its pacing…. Nihilism is a difficult subject to dramatize without monotony: when you have wiped out all human values in the play's first ten minutes, where do you go from there? Rather than having Caligula start to pass death sentences in the first act, Camus might have better modulated the tone and built up suspense by restricting Caligula's actions at first to disrupting social and legal rituals, thereby allowing for more satirical social criticism, and only later having him escalate his caprices to killing.

The Misunderstanding is the play that most closely approximates Greek tragedy in its concentrated, inexorable movement toward a fatal resolution that the audience already knows…. It is also his most Sartrean work in portraying the subjective existences of a set of individuals at cross-purposes with one another as an aspect of the absurd…. Camus's darkest work, its considerable theatrical power lies in the sheer, stark anguish of human beings undone by the caprices of fate. This dramatic strength, however, is also a drawback; the sustained agony is perhaps too much to expect a modern audience to sit through for three full acts—although it must be granted that the same criticism can be directed at Oedipus Rex. In any case, the brief plot is somewhat padded out, and the play would probably work better on stage reduced to one act. (pp. 214-15)

In his 1957 preface Camus emphasized that State of Siege was in no sense an adaptation of The Plague; still, it is clearly a companion piece, a variation on many of the same themes. (p. 217)

In this kind of experiment it is nearly impossible to predict ahead of time whether the play is going to work on stage or not. In this case it emphatically did not. The various styles fail to work individually and disastrously fight against each other collectively….. Nevertheless, the play has its appealing points, mainly in the love-duty conflict and the political satire, and if he had lived to revise it, as he likely would have, by pruning out some of the cumbersome elements like the choruses and symbolic machinery he might have salvaged it….

[The Just Assassins] provides a striking contrast in its straightforwardly realistic structure and dialogue, controlled tone, and the sublety of its political thought. It is much the better play and one of Camus's most mature works, even though its theatrical effectiveness is limited by an excess of talk and deficiency of onstage action, the latter perhaps partly a conscious effort toward French neoclassical decorum. (p. 219)

After more than a decade, it is still difficult to talk about Camus's death without giving in to the temptation toward excessive poetic license. The unavoidable literary interpretation, that the fatal auto wreck seemed preordained as the ultimate dramatization of Camusian absurdity, tends to depersonalize the human body and mind that were crushed therein—as Camus would have been the first to point out. (p. 253)

Nevertheless, in spite of Camus's own early acknowledgment that a creative career usually ends not in definitive resolution but in "the death of the creator which closes his experience and the book of his genius," it remains an inconsolable outrage that a senseless accident should have cut short a life of such youthful vitality and an artistic and ideological creation of the utmost importance for our time while it was still in full
Camus, Albert (Vol. 14): Philip Mooney

For Albert Camus the struggle to achieve meaning in human life must always be an affirmation of the love that engendered it. This conviction is the key thematic in Camus' novel, *The Plague* and finds expression in the character Tarrou. Tarrou's is a quest for total meaning in life: "What interests me is learning how to become a saint." Tarrou is definite about the path he must follow to reach the peace assuring meaning to life. It is the "path of sympathy," the way of charity. "But you don't believe in God," his friend, Dr. Rieux charges. Tarrou's rejoinder is to the point: "Exactly! Can one be a saint without God?—that's the problem, in fact, the only problem, I'm up against today."…

Camus' ethic of fraternal charity bestowing meaning and securing sanctity in human living is, in reality, a theistic ethic—the Gospel law of charity…. Camus, in refusing the pseudo-God of an unkind Christianity is in reality opting for the true God of authentic Christianity and … his indorsement of fraternal charity as man's way to peace and meaning in life is radically, though unwittingly, a call for man to love the God who has identified himself with the least of his brethren. (p. 76)

From his earliest appearance in print, Camus was haunted with the notion that our world is a universe which has no place for us, in which our life makes no sense…. His early experience told Camus of man's isolation:

> In a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity. (p. 77)

The absurdity of death, reducing man's activity to a matter of indifference, becomes the basis of man's "inner freedom" from all restraints. (p. 78)

[However, there is a certainty] that there are values in life, even in the face of the absurd. Consequently, there are corresponding limits to the exercise of human freedom….

The limits to his freedom in man's rebellion against the absurd situation in life are set by the "value" revealed in the "movement of revolt."

> In the absurd experience, the tragedy is individual; with the movement of revolt it is conscious of being collective. It is the adventure of all. The first progress of a mind struck by this estrangement is to recognize that he shares this estranged condition with all men and that human reality in its totality suffers from this distance in the relation of oneself and the world. (p. 79)

This solidarity with all men is the *value*—so important for Camus—that is revealed by the movement of revolt and that forms the basis of his ethic of fraternal charity…. 
We have, then, the right to say that any revolt that claims the right to deny or destroy this solidarity loses simultaneously its right to be called revolt and in reality becomes an acquiescence in murder. In the same way, this solidarity, except in so far as religion is concerned, comes to life only on the level of revolt. And so the real drama of revolutionary thought is announced. In order to exist, man must rebel, but revolt must respect the limit it discovers in itself—a limit where minds meet and, in meeting, begin to exist.

(PP. 79-80)

Paradoxically, Camus' ethic of revolt implies the ethic of fraternal charity that came to be dominant in his later drama and fiction. (P. 80)

But the deeds of charity must flow from a kind heart. When Camus acknowledges in L'Envers et L'Endroit, "I am linked to the world by all my acts, to men by all my pity and gratitude," he is emphasizing the interior, the affective side of charity. It is the kindness that refuses to pass the absolute judgment that excludes man from the company of his fellows; it is the merciful kindness that, upon seeing a stranger, takes him to heart.

Two of Camus' most impressive characters were "strangers"—Meursault in The Stranger and Tarrou in The Plague, the former the stranger-victim of man's unkind judgment, the latter the stranger-saint with the kind heart…. Neither jury nor prosecutor had the resources in kindness of heart to reach the person of Meursault as he was in himself. Camus draws "the absurd contrast between what we know Meursault to be and what the court decides he is." (PP. 82-3)

In contrast with Meursault, Tarrou had experienced family affection…. Having known kindness, Tarrou had the power to show kindness. Furthermore, seeing a man sentenced to execution had worked upon his heart in such a way that he could never acquiesce in any man's being sent to his death and led him to "take, in every predicament, the victim's side," as he followed his "path of sympathy" to the end. (P. 83)

For Camus charity shows itself effectively as completely generous and all-embracing only because it springs from a kind heart, a merciful heart that will not judge the brother nor treat any man as a stranger, a sincere heart from which all selfishness has been purged. Tarrou had realized that man's "inhumanity to man" had come from unpurged hearts, "that each of us has the plague within him." For Tarrou purgation released the power of sympathy; it involved metanoia, the change of heart from "être solitaire" to "être solidaire," to invoke Camus's favorite catchwords. (P. 84)

What Camus has portrayed as the ultimate human quality throughout his writing is in essence the agape of the Gospels: "Agape will be able to minister openly and unreservedly to a neighbor, but only from an utterly selfless heart."…

Camus sharply diverges from the Christian position when he refuses to set the roots of neighborly love in any love for God. Camus' is the conviction that the charity wherein man finds his perfection as man is not consistent with belief in the Christian God…. (P. 87)

The scandal of indifference to a brother in need is overshadowed by an even greater scandal in Camus's eyes: "C'est toujours l'Eglise en tant que compromise par l'Inquisition et ses variants, passées et présentes, qui constitue la pierre d'achoppement de Camus devant le christianisme." ["It is always the Church as compromised by the Inquisition and its variants, past and present, that constitutes the stumbling-block of Camus before Christianity."] Camus is turned away by Christianity's being, in any way, a party to a judicial process that commits the supreme unkindness of turning a man out of society in rendering absolute judgment against him. Camus sees the court that condemned Meursault, with its Christian prosecutor and its Christian jury, as a modern counterpart to the Inquisition in its harshness. In the name of Christianity, this court severs
the last, weak tie to community that the unfortunate Meursault has with his fellow man… (p. 88)

[The scandal of the] unkind Christianity that Camus rejects is equally disavowed by Christ and His late vicar. The Christianity, then, that Camus dismisses is a pseudo-Christianity; the God he refuses a pseudo-God….

Camus has averred that "if a rebel blasphemes, it is in the hope of finding a new God." Camus' search for meaning, for some principle by which the happiness and misery of man can be explained is a quest for the good who is in reality the hidden God. (p. 89)


**Camus, Albert (Vol. 14): Philip Thody**

It was not until 1961, almost nineteen years after its first publication, that any critic suggested in print that Camus's *L'Etranger* could be read as a 'racialist' novel. (p. 61)

Camus himself insisted that he saw *L'Etranger* first and foremost as a book about a man who is a martyr to truth…. Throughout the novel, the reader is invited to sympathise with Meursault and see his cult of physical sensation—his delight at the crisp dryness of a hand-towel at midday, his love of swimming and making love, his appreciation of the sights and sounds of Algiers—as infinitely superior to the conventional values which are always being offered to him. Meursault, we feel, is right not to exchange the sun-drenched beaches of Algiers for the cold courtyards of Paris, right to prefer straightforward sensuality to Marie's sentimentalised idea of 'love', right to place the reality of this life higher than the hypothetical consolations of eternity, right to persist in his vision of the truth as he sees it even if this does lead him to the guillotine. How, then, can a novel with so attractive and honest a hero be seriously interpreted as embodying so unpleasant and life-denying an ideology as racialism? How, moreover, can so conscientious and self-conscious an artist as Camus have written a book which so contradicts the values which he officially defended in his lifetime? For he was not only the first French writer seriously to concern himself with the Algeria problem, campaigning as early as the 1930s in favour of equal treatment for Arab and European alike. He was, in 1945, virtually the only French journalist to warn of what was going to happen in Algeria if France did nothing to change its basically colonial status.

Once the book is isolated from Camus's life, however, the racialist undertones of *L'Etranger* becomes so easy to detect that one wonders why critics should have taken so long to point them out. The action of the book takes place in Algeria, sometime in the 1930s, at a period when there were some nine Arabs to each European. But only the Europeans have names: Meursault, Pérez, Masson, Sintès, Salamano, Cardona. The Arabs, in contrast, are a nameless, undifferentiated mass. When Marie comes to visit Meursault in prison, both she and the old woman—a European—who sits next to her are described with that attention to physical detail which is so agreeable a feature of the novel…. Camus either ignores the indigenous population of Algeria completely or treats it merely as a convenient backcloth against which the really interesting dramas, those involving Europeans, can be acted out.

Moreover, it can be argued that the Camus of *L'Etranger* does more than merely ignore the Arabs…. He tells a story in which the interests and point of view of the non-European characters are so totally sacrificed to the concerns of the 'whites' that one begins to wonder just exactly what his own subconscious attitude towards the two races was. For what actually happens in *L'Etranger*, when seen from the standpoint of the Arabs, is a peculiarly unpleasant example of both racialist and sexual exploitation. (pp. 61-2)
Camus wrote [the novel] at a time when he was working on *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, his essay on the absurd, and wished to illustrate the idea that 'a supernumerary employee in the post office is equal to a conqueror if they have the same degree of awareness'…. Meursault, at least in Camus's conception of him, is a man who has gone through the experience of the absurd before the novel begins. He has had the overwhelming sense of his own mortality and consequently become aware of the 'blood-stained mathematics which command our lives'…. He is therefore living out the rest of his life in that 'weariness mingled with surprise' … which characterises the 'absurd man', consciously refusing the consolations of religion or any other form of reconciliation with the world. He knows that he is going to die and this knowledge, as he tells the priest, has taken all meaning from such normally all-important experiences as the death of his mother or the love which other human beings have for him. Drying his hands on a crisp towel at midday is just as important as being promoted to a better job. Indeed, insofar as physical sensations are the only reality in an absurd and valueless world, such an activity is more important than the worship of the bitch goddess success which would be implied by accepting his boss's offer of a new job in Paris, and Meursault needs to make only one more discovery about life to become one of the heroes of the absurd celebrated in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. He needs to find out that 'no depth, no emotion, no passion and no sacrifice could give the same value in the eyes of the absurd man to a conscious life lasting for forty years and a full awareness extending over sixty'…. He does this when, lying in his prison cell thinking about the possibility of being reprieved, he feels his eyes tingle with delight at the thought of 'twenty years of life to come'….

But in order to bring his hero to this point of awareness, Camus has to have him sentenced to death…. Such an ending also has the advantage of enabling Camus, early in his career, to give vent to the hatred of capital punishment which dominates *La Peste*, *L'Homme révolté* and the *Réflexions sur la guillotine*, as well as to express his mistrust of a legal system in which it is often more the skill of his lawyer than his own guilt or innocence which decides whether someone accused of murder is executed or acquitted. Neither were these the only considerations which led Camus to organise the plot of *L'Etranger* around a murder trial and a legal execution. He always thought of himself primarily as an artist, and clearly derived great satisfaction from constructing a narrative in which, as in *L'Etranger*, the completely innocent experience of events in the first half of the novel is interpreted as overwhelming evidence of guilt in the second.

All the different and overlapping intentions that Camus had in mind when writing *L'Etranger* thus involve a novel in which the central character is sentenced to death. All Camus therefore had to find was a convenient anecdote. The story of Sintès, Meursault and the Arabs eminently satisfied this condition. It nevertheless involved—and this is the central plank upon which a 'racialist' interpretation of *L'Etranger* is based—the total subordination of Arab to European concerns. (pp. 63-4)

[It is argued, however, that] a 'racialist' reading of *L'Etranger* completely distorts the novel and prevents us from seeing it as the masterpiece of irony, lyricism, humour and tragedy that it is…. It is consequently yet another example of the way in which contemporary considerations can completely distort our understanding of a work of art by preventing us from seeing it either objectively or in relationship to its time or the terms in which the author originally conceived it. It is, moreover, totally unsound because it makes the very elementary mistake of failing to distinguish between the author of a book and the fictional character whom he invents to tell the story. (pp. 65-6)

[It] is Meursault who is the racialist, not Camus himself. Indeed, by presenting events to the reader through the eyes of a 'Poor White', Camus is himself condemning both Meursault and the male-dominated, colonialist society which he represents. It is not Camus but Meursault who tells the story in which Arabs figure only as small part players and in which the murder of an Arab deserves only the most superficial of passing comments. Camus, in contrast to his fictional creation, is actually using both the events of *L'Etranger* and Meursault's own attitude towards them in order to underline how prejudiced and unbalanced he finds the colonial system which existed in Algeria in the 1930s.
This could well be a fruitful and defensible way of reading *L'Etranger* if it were not for one thing: The comments which Camus himself made about Meursault's character. For it is very clear, from the entries he made in his Notebooks when the novel was published, from an interview which he gave in 1946 and from the preface he wrote in 1955, that he did not have this kind of critical attitude towards the narrator in *L'Etranger*. The character of Meursault, he noted in 1942, was based partly upon two other people—one a man, one a woman—and partly upon himself. But he did not suggest that he rejected those aspects of his own personality which had gone to form his fictional hero. When the Catholic critic André Rousseaux attacked the novel for presenting a character 'without humanity, without human value, and even … without any kind of human truth', Camus drafted a long letter of reply—which he never in fact sent—but in which he summed up the meaning of the book as being either that 'society needs people who weep at their mother's funeral' or that 'you are never executed for the crime you think'. But although he mentioned 'ten other possible' ways of looking at the book, [Camus] gave no indication that he saw either Meursault or the attitude he represented as defective or inadequate. In 1946 he went even further when he told Gaëtan Picon that 'men in Algeria live like my hero, in an absolutely simple manner', and implied that their attitude towards life was, in many respects, preferable to that of the average Northern European. But he again abstained from any unfavourable comment on Meursault, and carried his enthusiasm for the main character of *L'Etranger* even further in 1955 when he described him as being 'inspired by a passion which is profound because unspoken, the passion for the absolute and for truth' and said he was 'the only Christ whom we deserve'.

It is in many ways unfortunate that Camus made these remarks about *L'Etranger*. Had he not yielded to the pressure which literary journalists and enterprising scholars so frequently put upon French writers to say what they 'really intended to do' in their books, *L'Etranger* would be far less vulnerable to the type of criticism put forward in the first part of this article. For it is only when we follow out the implications of Camus's remarks and begin to look at it as a novel about moral values that its flaws and inconsistencies appear. So long as it is seen as the study of a man who is genuinely 'an outsider' in the sense of someone who lives in his own private world and is simply not at all interested in what anybody else thinks about him, *L'Etranger* is … invulnerable to criticism on moral grounds…. Indeed, the remarks which [Camus] made about the novel after 1943 nowadays have the curious and wholly unintentional effect of making it seem a much less satisfying and intriguing book than it is when we read it in isolation from its author's proclaimed intentions. For they also have the effect of underlining, by contrast, what a poor fool Meursault is in his relationship with Raymond and how insensitive he is in his attitude to Marie. (pp. 66-8)

To revisit Camus's *L'Etranger* is thus, for me, first of all to realise how unwise creative artists are when they yield to the temptation of telling us what the meaning of their works 'really is'…. [The] impression which a book makes on its readers can change with the passage of time. In the 1940s, when writers, critics and readers were obsessed with the idea of the absurdity of the world, *L'Etranger* seemed an almost perfect illustration not only of this absurdity but of a valid reply which men could make to it through their personal attitudes and private experience…. It was only when the happy pagans celebrated in the pages of *Noces* became the shock troops of the Organisation de l'Armée Secrète, a violently racist body devoted to keeping Algeria French at all costs, that critics inspired by an equal and opposite intolerance pointed out features of Camus's work which nobody had notice before. Henri Kréa, Pierre Nora and Conor Cruise O'Brien [who originally pointed out the racism in *L'Etranger*] thus gave an excellent illustration of how right Baudelaire was when he said that literary criticism should be 'partial, passionate and political'. (p. 68)


**Critical Essays: Camus, Albert (Vol. 2)**

Camus, Albert 1913–1960
A Nobel Prize-winning French existentialist novelist, essayist, and playwright, Camus is best known for *The Stranger*.

In *La Chute* [*The Fall*] Albert Camus renounces the paradoxical and arbitrary optimism of his preceding books, the hope born of despair to which *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* [*The Myth of Sisyphus*], *La Peste* [*The Plague*] and *L'Homme révolté* [*The Rebel*] testify. He does not deny his past attempts to tailor to man's measure the enormity that overwhelms him, but he relaxes for a moment, to catch his breath a bit, and mildly complain. Not so happy as to want to prove his happiness to himself in order to be less uncomfortable, Sisyphus, suffering and in despair, looks for a change of position so that his grief may be lulled to sleep or dismissed. Thus, *La Chute* came into being, the most beautiful book that Albert Camus has written since *Le Mythe de Sisyphes*. Since *L'Etranger* [*The Stranger*], too, the real subject of which was already the guilt of the innocent.


[Step] by step [Camus] became almost wholly a moralist, a definer and upholder of *formal* values.

Looking back on his work as a whole, one can see that even his fiction consists of short moral anecdotes. The extraordinary success of his first "récit" and most unqualified artistic success, *The Stranger*, surely rests not on the kind of powerfully sufficient image of life that is the imaginative artist's challenge and delight, but rather on an explicit idea of life. *The Stranger*, in itself Camus's one "nihilist" work of fiction (and succeeded by the antinihilistic *The Plague*), owes its great popularity to the fact that it speaks for widespread feelings of alienation from social cant. Vivid and acridly ironic as many details in the book are, the hero of *The Stranger* represents the bitterness of the early Camus rather than the bewildered and self-pitying clerk that Meursault is supposed to be. The beautiful last pages, in which the condemned man welcomes death as freedom, can only be read as Camus's own austere philosophical testament. The very titles of his books—*The Stranger, The Rebel, The Fall*—denote stages in one man's struggle for moral clarity, while the curt simplicity and tense balances of his style represent, in fact, that need to embody a position, to fix a value, which is typical of those for whom a moral, once defined, is a lesson to be followed. It is typical of Camus, who, I think, did not read English, that he was instinctively drawn to Emerson, the author of so many moral "gems" and epigrammatic conclusions about life, and that he was always quoting Emerson's admirer Nietzsche, whose writing is probably the most brilliant example of this genre that we have had in modern times.

The moralist is always one who tries to prescribe for life, for whom man has a destiny that he can put into words. The background of Camus's concern with this is significant: it is his awareness of death, of war, of the afflictions rained on our generation by totalitarianism…. All his life Camus felt himself surrounded by death—his death and that of a whole generation….

Albert Camus wrote like a condemned man. To me, it is this desperate emphasis on the value of life that is the key to his moral urgency….

I read these essays [*Resistance, Rebellion and Death*] with constant agreement and respect and yet with pity, for Camus's life was harder than even he thought it was. Camus thought that truth will live for man if only he defines it closely and truly enough. But truth is never something that man controls. And the very closeness with which Camus tried so hard to condense the truth is one of the most poignant things about his life. There was a fundamental distrust that he could not conquer, a space across which his imagination could not carry him. He hugged life close, as he hugged his style close. And so the felicity and brilliance of these essays remind one all too sadly of the world that has to be conquered with each sentence—but which, with each sentence accomplished, is as quickly lost.
I still think that the theme of revolt is what is most basic in Camus’ writings, infusing them with enduring and dramatic substance. Revolt is man's creative protest against an absurd world. It is both a statement about the nature of reality and an attitude towards it, stressing the individual over abstractions, nature over history and respect for a sense of limit.…. 

This idea of revolt was inspired in part by the classical tradition Camus was so fond of, with its emphasis on unity and the rhythms of nature. But, I believe, it owes more to his analysis of contemporary political realities, particularly revolutionary ideologies. He observed that modern revolutions invariably end by reinforcing the power of the state and justifying bloodshed. Revolutionaries begin by demanding justice, Camus noted, and end by establishing a police force…. 

Camus considered the two main forms of revolt to be political action and artistic creation, and some of his best writing deals with the relationship between the two. Both must correct creation by transforming it in light of imaginatively discerned ideals. Both must rise to the defense of human happiness and the preservation of life. In an age such as ours, when tyranny threatens on all sides, the artist cannot remain silent. And while it is difficult to maintain one's equilibrium on the narrow ridge between the ivory tower and the political arena, between solitude and solidarity, it is precisely there that "the creative attitude which reconciles aesthetic demands with the duty of brotherhood" is born and nourished. Camus envisaged a kind of cross pollination between art and politics that would make of both witnesses to man's freedom and dignity. 


[Albert Camus'] A Happy Death is not very good literature. Its author seems to have known that. While he lived, he preferred not to expose the book to the suffrage of the common reader, and we must assume that he did not much care for it himself. Within a year after he finished writing it, he completed another novel that he did publish and that has since come to be regarded as a modern classic. That book, The Stranger, is a unified, concentrated, finished work. In contrast, A Happy Death is an unlicked bear cub of a book. Some of its episodes are interesting, some of its ideas are promising. But the story does not have the energy that reveals itself to us as form and that marks a work of art as complete. For that reason, the novel's interesting episodes are mere wandering stars, and its promising ideas—never properly developed—are artistically and philosophically jejune. Of course the name of Albert Camus retorts a kind of glory on this sketchy novel—that is inevitable. But A Happy Death does not return the compliment. It is what it is, lumpish, ill-conceived, unfinished….

How was that wonder accomplished, that within a year after the slack and self-indulgent novel we are discussing, so unanswerable a work as The Stranger was composed—out of the same spiritual energies and on the basis of the same materials with which Camus fashioned A Happy Death? Put most simply, in that time Camus had learned the manners of art, what in varying contexts we call distance, objectivity, or transcendence, the attitude of disinterestedness that bespeaks the craftsman's love of the work rather than his need for therapy, comfort, or glory. In those terms The Stranger is indeed unanswerable because it is self-sufficient. On the whole it makes no excuses; on the whole it has no author. It expresses the necessary transformation of its creator's petty or noble preoccupations, their sublimation in a structure of meanings that apply to us as persons in proportion as they are themselves impersonal. The art of the present time cries me, me, me. It is related to the ethos of A Happy Death, and represents the moment before we attain to art.
A happy death is a death following a life lived intensely and without resignation, and a life lived guiltlessly. This was Camus's ideal. Admiring the people of Algiers, he once said he wanted to see if he could stand to exist armed solely with what he knew to be true. But unlike them he was not a real pagan, nor was he a believer.

So, on the basis of his own kind of tabula rasa—no Cartesian exercise, but rather an anguished and poetic outcry—Camus moved toward the writing of [The Stranger], the first panel of a fictional triptych completed by his brilliant and disillusioned [The Fall], with [The Plague] as allegorical and affirmative centerpiece.

The hitherto unpublished manuscript of [A Happy Death], written in his early twenties and before World War II, was an important milestone on Camus's way, and it is interesting to compare it with [The Stranger].

[A Happy Death] does not succeed as fiction. The characters are stick figures, the psychology is naive, and the scenes generally lack immediacy....

In [A Happy Death].... the tendency toward poetic prose that Sartre had discerned in [The Stranger] and which he thought was "probably Camus's personal mode of expression" unfortunately runs riot. And so we get (picked more or less at random from the text) many such phrases as "splendid harvest of happiness," "delicate and tender game of life" and "thrill of passion and desire."

Camus did not need to learn his lesson twice. Accordingly, for [The Fall] he also selected a (radically different) style that would suit his theme and simultaneously impose artistic discipline, again with apt success....

There are several drafts of [A Happy Death] extant, none of which Camus intended to publish. The grounds, then, on which it now appears are forthrightly stated on the first page of the French edition (Volume I of the projected [Cahiers Albert Camus]): "Simply because when one loves a writer or studies him in depth, one often wishes to know everything about him."...

In any event, Camus was of course loved, and he is certainly worth "studying in depth." As a philosophical novelist, he was not an especially able philosopher, nor did he possess remarkable narrative powers, yet he is assured some place among the French classics. An eminently attractive figure, he seems perhaps more typically than any other writer to have felt the shifting currents to which his generation was subjected. His prewar essays beautifully express a love of life for its own sake; the first two successful novels and the plays reflect a struggle to maintain ideals in the face of cataclysmic events; his last book is the consequence of a postwar humanistic European's very painful self-examination.

themes in Camus and are common to both his early heroes, so that the second name would have been equally appropriate in the first book. Both novels deal roughly with the same subject matter, drawn for the most part from Camus's life as a young man in his native Algeria, but they give it sharply different emphases.

The instinct that made Camus refrain from beginning his career as a novelist with La mort heureuse was quite sound. He would have been recognized at once as a born writer, since the book contains passages of great brilliance, but it would have produced only a muffled impact because, as M. Sarocchi freely admits in his commentary, it does not fully coalesce as a work of art, and the influence of certain immediate literary models is rather too obvious. L'Etranger … is not a complete success either, but its good features are sufficiently sustained and coherent to mark a new development in French literature. To compare the two books is to see how Camus, who was nothing if not a dogged exploiter of his own possibilities, moved on from being a man of talent to become a major writer with something original and permanent to say….

Mersault is … fleetingly aware of [a] theme that is implicit in Gide, Malraux, and Montherlant, but never clearly isolated by them: this is the Absurd, the gap or uncertain connection between the consciousness and all phenomena, whether pleasurable or unpleasurable.

When Mersault turns into Meursault, in L'Etranger, this feature becomes dominant, and the murder he commits (now displaced to the center of the book) is an Absurdist act, unconnected with anything so crudely collective as money and brought on by the blurring of the consciousness through the blinding beauty of the world at midday. Meursault's killing of the Arab poses the whole question of his relationship with society and leads into the marvelously satirical treatment of the functioning of the law. L'Etranger is one of the first modern books—perhaps the very first—in which the Absurdist awareness of the absence of any settled moral truth is worked into all the details of the story.


A Happy Death is not a finished piece, nor did Camus ever attempt to publish it. It is an awkward first attempt at fiction, the failure of which Camus knew only too well. At 23 Camus had written lyrical essays of great beauty, but he had not yet learned the discipline of the novelist; he could not step away from his work. A Happy Death is intensely personal: a canvas on which Camus tried to splash all that was precious to him—on which he tried to express, in one series of images, his whole existence….

A Happy Death must be accepted then for what it is. If one brings to it an understanding of the later Camus it is an invaluable piece of writing. Here we see more of Camus, the individual, than in any other writings but the lyrical essays, and we see dimensions which were muted even there.…

We remember Camus as "the conscience of his age," the tortured liberal humanist of The Rebel. But here we see, full-blown, the passionate artist and solitary who was constantly struggling against that societal conscience.


At the time of his death Camus had become more than a writer to his many readers; he was a moral conscience for thousands of young people in Europe and the United States, as he is still today. He was the model of a committed writer; he had been through everything to gain his ticket to modernity: the Communist party and his break with it, the encounter with Existentialism, a Nihilism that still permitted him to speak with
exaltation of the human lot, the dangerous life of the Resistance, a crusade for justice that seemed to lift him
above the battle of conflicting political ideologies…. From the experimentation in form and language that has
been one of the hallmarks of modern literature, Camus remained aloof, deliberately pursuing a kind of
classicism that takes us back, beyond the realistic novel of the nineteenth, to the récit, the short moralizing
tale, of the eighteenth century. More and more, toward the end, he began to feel uncomfortable with much of
the art of our time, and he even expressed condemnation of its artistic aims. His most explicit attack is in a
late essay, "Helen's Exile," which seems to me not to have been noticed enough by his commentators. Helen is
the ancient symbol of human beauty, and modern artists, in Camus' view, have exiled her from our midst to
pursue an art of tortured expressionism. Are we really incapable of those antique and sumptuous images of
beauty? Imprisoned in our gray northern cities, we relegate the feast of the senses to the southern sunlit
civilizations.

In retrospect, with all his work laid open before us, Camus quite clearly never gave up his North African
heritage; and for him that meant the heritage of the Mediterranean and the ancient Greeks. In temperament he
remained something of a provincial, a colon, an Algerian Frenchman. Even in politics, despite his radical
beginnings, there was a streak of conservatism in his nature—though this conservatism can be easily
misunderstood and was in fact deliberately misrepresented by his left-wing opponents.

William Barrett, in his Time of Need: Forms of Imagination in the Twentieth Century
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Camus saw as the "task" of his generation—or what we could call its survivor mission—that of "keeping the
world from destroying itself." But much of the force of this public vision derived from very personal
experiences in the Underground during World War II…. Camus' stand on survival emerged from [a] particular
way of applying his imagination—as evolved through his individual-psychological experience—to the
holocausts of his time….

Caligula is Camus' most vivid rendition of the absurd survivor, and one of the most important plays ever
written about the aberrations of the survivor state….

For Camus lucidity means not only clarity, consciousness, and truth, but (as suggested by its Latin roots) a
state of being luminous, fused with light, and thereby transcending the rote and prosaic without recourse to
false gods. Yet this lucidity and (in Camus' words) "the extra life it involves, depend not on man's will, but on
its contrary, which is death."…

The insurgent survivor is epitomized by Camus' two most celebrated heroes, the rebel and the plague
physician. Camus meant his rebel or insurgent survivor to be more radical than even a conventional
revolutionary because he is more fundamentally critical, subversive and formative. There is no revolution to
be, once and for all, achieved; there is permanence only in questioning and insurgency. The insurgent survivor
rebels, to be sure, against injustice, murder, and suffering; against victimization of any kind. But he also
rebels, Camus tells us, against the core of human existence, the fact of death. His "rejection of death," however, is his "desire for immortality and for clarity." What he rejects, in other words, is meaningless or
formless death; what he seeks through his rebellion is transcendence by means of ever-renewed human forms.
"If nothing lasts, then nothing is justified," he reasons, so that "To fight against death amounts to claiming that
life has a meaning, to fighting for order and for unity."

At bottom, then, the insurgent survivor is a form-seeker and a form-giver. His quest "to learn to live and to
die, in order to be a man, to refuse to be a god," goes a step beyond absurdity into form….
As a giver of forms the insurgent survivor must perforce become a healer…. [The] survivor's special knowledge of death, and simple formulation of duty to life, provide rebellious courage and healing power…. We gravitate naturally to the mocking and mocked antihero who, whether a mere figure of our impotence or a man thrust into greatness despite himself, evokes not our cosmic order (as a tragic hero does) but our cosmic disorder.

In this literature death and madness are respected; what is savagely mocked is the 'sanity' of everyday life which dissolves both the significance of death and of man's quest for immortality. The central point about mockery is that it confronts the phenomena involved, our situation and ourselves.


Camus, Albert (Vol. 32): Introduction

Albert Camus 1913–1960

Algerian-born French novelist, essayist, dramatist, short story writer, and journalist. In this volume commentary on Albert Camus is focused on his plays. See also Albert Camus Criticism (Volume 1), and Volumes 2, 4, 9, 11, 14, 124.

Camus is one of the most important literary figures of the twentieth century. In his highly varied career Camus consistently, often passionately, explored and presented his major theme: the belief that people can be happy in a world without meaning. Throughout his novels, plays, essays, and stories, Camus defended the dignity and decency of the individual and asserted that through purposeful action one can overcome the apparent nihilism of the world. His notion of an "absurd" universe is premised on the tension between life in an irrational universe and the human desire for rationality. Camus's position on this dilemma, demonstrated most clearly in his essay Le mythe de Sisyphe (1943; The Myth of Sisyphus), is that each person must first recognize that life is "absurd," that is, irrational and meaningless, and then rise above the absurdity. Although this world view has led Camus to be linked with the Existentialists, he himself rejected that classification. Well regarded for his style as well as his ideas, Camus is also praised as a fierce moralist whose faith in humankind did not waver. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1957.

Camus was born into poverty and finished school only by earning scholarships and working part-time jobs. At the Lycée d'Algiers he studied philosophy, but the tuberculosis Camus contracted before entering the university prevented him from pursuing a career as an academician. Instead, he became a journalist and immersed himself in the Algerian intellectual scene. His interest in the theater was already evident, for he helped found a theater group, adapted works for the stage, and collaborated on an original play. His first two books, L'envers et l'endroit (1937; The Wrong Side and the Right Side) and Noces (1938; Nuptials), are collections of lyrical essays detailing his early life of poverty and his travels through Europe. Also written at this time, but not published until much later, is Camus's first novel, La mort heureuse (1971; A Happy Death). This work, although less stylistically developed than his later works, touches on the themes of absurdity and self-realization which recur throughout Camus's writings. In 1942 he moved to Paris and became, along with Jean-Paul Sartre, an intellectual leader of the French Resistance.

Taken together, The Myth of Sisyphus and his novel L'étranger (1942; The Stranger) represent Camus's development of the concept of the absurd. Camus perceived the story of Sisyphus, who was doomed to push a rock up a hill only to see it continually roll back down, as a metaphor for the human condition. For Camus,
life, like Sisyphus's task, is senseless, but awareness of the absurdity can help humankind overcome its condition. Meursault, the protagonist of *The Stranger*, shoots an Arab for no apparent reason, but he is convicted not so much for killing the man as for refusing to conform to society's standards. Because he acts only on those few things he believes in, Meursault is alienated from the society that wants him to make a show of his contriteness. Approaching his execution, Meursault accepts life as an imperfect end in itself and, although he wants to live, he resolves to die happily and with dignity.

While writing these works Camus remained active in the theater, directing and adapting works by others as well as his own. Of his four original dramas, *Caligula* (1944) is often considered his most significant. It recounts the young Roman emperor's search for absolute individual freedom. The death of his sister/lover shocks him into an awareness of life's absurdity, and as a result he orders and participates in random rapes, murders, and humiliations that alienate him from those around him. Most scholars see *Caligula* as a parable warning that individual liberty must affirm, not destroy, the bonds of humanity. *Le malentendu* (1944; *The Misunderstanding*), the story of a man's murder by his sister and mother, is often considered Camus's attempt at a modern tragedy in the classical Greek style. *L'état de siège* (1948; *The State of Siege*) has been viewed as a satiric attack on totalitarianism and an allegory demonstrating the value of courageous human action. The plague that ravishes the town and brutalizes its citizens is stopped only when one character sacrifices his life for the woman he loves. Many scholars argue that the attack on ruthless governments reflects Camus's experience living under the Nazi occupation of France. *Les justes* (1950; *The Just Assassins*) portrays a revolutionary who refuses to throw a bomb because his intended victim is accompanied by a young nephew and niece. This work, many scholars assert, further emphasizes Camus's strong sense of humanity: the end does not justify the means if the cost is human lives.

Critical reception to Camus's plays is mixed. Most critics agree that the overriding concern with intellectual and philosophical issues in Camus's dramas makes them stiff, formal, and lifeless. Many also argue that the characters in these plays are too often merely representatives of specific ideologies. Camus is admired as a director and innovator and his plays are generally well regarded as texts, but the consensus among scholars is that Camus's work for the stage is inferior to his fiction.

*La peste* (1947; *The Plague*) is a novel which deals with Camus's theme of revolt. Complementing his concept of the absurd, Camus believed in the necessity of each person to "revolt" against the common fate of humanity by seeking personal freedom. Dr. Rieux, the protagonist of *The Plague*, narrates the story of several men in a plague-ridden city. The characters react in different ways, but eventually they unite in their battle against the plague. This emphasis on individual revolt is also the subject of the long essay *L'homme révolté* (1951; *The Rebel*). Examining the nature and history of revolution, Camus advances the theory that each individual must revolt against injustice by refusing to be part of it. Camus opposed mass revolutions because he believed they become nihilistic and their participants accept murder and oppression as necessary means to an end.

Camus's belief in the supremacy of the individual lies at the heart of one of the most publicized events in modern literature: Camus's break with his long-time compatriot, Jean-Paul Sartre. These two leading figures of the postwar French intellectual scene had similar literary philosophies, but their political differences led to a quarrel in the early 1950s which ended their friendship as well as their working relationship. Sartre saw the Soviet purges and labor camps of the 1940s as a stage in the Marxian dialectic process that would eventually bring about a just society. Camus, however, could not condone what he perceived to be the Communists' disregard for human rights. Played out in the international as well as Parisian press, the debate was popularly conceded to Sartre. The effect on Camus was disheartening and his fall into public scorn cast a long shadow over the remainder of his career.

In following years Camus suffered from bouts of depression and writer's block. His reputation was further damaged when he took a central stance on the issue of Arab uprisings in his native Algiers. Both the French government and the Arabs denounced him, and the furor extracted an additional toll on his emotional
well-being. His next novel, *La chute* (1956; *The Fall*), is a long, enigmatic monologue of a formerly self-satisfied lawyer who suffers from guilt and relentlessly confesses his sins in order to judge others and induce them to confess as well. Some scholars noted a new tone in this work and suggested that Camus had bleakly submitted to nihilism by asserting that every person shares the guilt for a violent and corrupt world. Many argued, however, that Camus's essential love and respect for humanity is a major element of the novel; they viewed his wish for a common confession as an attempt to reaffirm human solidarity.

When Camus published his first collection of short stories, *L'exil et le royaume* (1957; *The Exile and the Kingdom*), many critics detected a new vitality and optimism in his prose. The energy of the stories, each written in a different style, led many scholars to suggest that Camus had regained direction in his career and established himself as a master of short fiction with this collection. In the following years Camus worked around political quarrels, family troubles, and ill health to begin work on a new novel, *Le premier homme*. He worked diligently and with great hope for this text, but before it was completed he was killed in an automobile accident.

In spite of marked fluctuations in Camus's popularity—his rise to literary fame in the 1940s occurred as rapidly as his fall from popular appeal in the years preceding his death—his literary significance remains largely undisputed. His work has elicited an enormous amount of scholarly attention and, two decades after his death, he continues to be the subject of much serious study. A defender of political liberty and personal freedom, Camus endures not only as a significant contributor to contemporary literature, but also as a figure of hope and possibility.

**Camus, Albert (Vol. 32): Harold Clurman**

Consideration of ["Caligula and Three Other Plays"] by Albert Camus provokes a paradox. They are important without being good. Only one of them, it seems to me, really demands a stage production. This is "Caligula"—a play which marks a date in the French theatre. The significance of this play is related to Camus's position in literature today. Though he writes with both grace and a moving accent, his main contribution resides in his message. His work is a series of parables. He is a moralist: a man who seeks to extract a line of meaning and a principle of conduct from the turbulent contradictions of our times. His aim is to distill hope from the heart of despair….

Camus' work for the theatre, which begins with the somber fatalism of "The Misunderstanding" (1943) [also published as "Cross Purposes"], proceeds in "Caligula" (1945) to the dramatization of the flaw in an amoral revolt against the universal injustice of life and finally moves on to "The Just Assassins" (1949), dealing with the earliest Russian revolutionists. In the avowed morality play, "The State of Siege" (1948), evil is presented as a form of political dictatorship. The total impression these plays make, despite their defects as organic drama, is one of spiritual vigor and integrity. We hold Camus in high esteem because in his own way he represents "a moment in the conscience of mankind."


**Camus, Albert (Vol. 32): Henry Popkin**

So honest a man as Camus is obviously at a disadvantage in so dishonest an institution as the theater. His sincerity has become a legend, but it has prevented him from becoming a successful dramatist. The Nobel Committee commended his "clear-sighted earnestness," and Harold Clurman called him "a moment in the conscience of mankind." Obviously, this is not a man who can easily lend himself to the subterfuges of the stage, who can say of his playwriting, as Henry James did: "Oh, how it must not be too good and how very
bad it must be!" I can not think of a better application of the term "defect of his virtue"; Camus's strenuous virtue is the key to his plays and to his defective sense of the theater. Explicitly forswearing "psychology, ingenious plot-devices, and spicy situations," he requires that we take him in the full intensity of his earnestness or not at all.

Simple in plot, direct in argument, oratorically eloquent, his dramas are like few other modern plays.... Camus differs significantly from his many French contemporaries who have put ancient myths on the modern stage. The others have turned conventional myths—at least their antiquity has made them seem conventional—into instruments of iconoclasm. Obviously stimulated by French neo-classical drama, Cocteau, Giraudoux, and Sartre became the debunking inside-dopesters of ancient mythology; they made Oedipus into a young man on the make, Electra into a rather addled termagant, Zeus into a tyrant. They overturned or exposed the classical stories. But what Camus does is to begin with a sufficiently cynical legend—the history of Caligula or the murder of the prodigal son...—and to dramatize it as forthrightly as possible, with no tricks, no sneers, no "modernization."

Both circumstances and characters are very carefully selected to perform only what the play requires. Nothing is ever thrown in for good measure or for any incidental purpose. We never encounter in these plays the casual bystanders whom a Broadway dramatist might permit to wander in. What characters there are have strict requirements imposed upon them. Camus primarily demands that his protagonists possess freedom, the capacity for exercising free choice. He has to go far to find his free men. His preference sets Camus off from his contemporaries in the theater; some of this difference is implicit in the contrast Eric Bentley once drew between "Strindbergian" and "Ibsenite" actors. The Strindbergian actor is less restrained: "His emotions come right out of him with no interference whatsoever and fly like bullets at the enemy." But Ibsen, not Strindberg, is the father of modern drama, and, consequently, modern stage characters keep their neuroses in check—or at least in balance. Camus's characters tend to be Strindbergian. Some of Strindberg's unbalanced heroes earn their freedom at the expense of their sanity; one of Camus's heroes, Caligula, pays just this price for freedom. Criminal purposes inspire the principal motivation of The Misunderstanding and so liberate the characters from ordinary scruples. The protagonists of The Just Assassins are also on the far side of the law, revolutionaries who have put aside the usual inhibitions and are in the act of measuring their freedom. The most dynamic figure in State of Siege is, like Caligula, in possession of supreme political power and subject to no regulation by sanity. Camus's characters tear right into the issues, and they ignore small details. Just as Lear's "Pray you, undo this button," could not have occurred in Racine, it also would be an unlikely line in Camus. Everyone in these plays is ready for action—or, more often, for argument. Nothing may intervene to distract, irritate, or enchant us, to explain the characters or to provide context for the events. (pp. 499-500)

The language of these plays is lofty and pure. It reflects the complaint Camus once lodged against our time: "For the dialogue we have substituted the communique." The dramatist sets out to remedy this situation, but his dialogue tends to become, especially in The Just Assassins and State of Siege, a formal exchange of weighty remarks which too clearly expose the dramatist's designs on us. Hardly anyone else in the modern theater lectures us quite so directly.... The result has its merits as oratory and as dialectic, but it is deficient as drama.

The defect of Camus's plays bring to mind the virtues of his fiction, in which the method of narration always keeps up from colliding too abruptly with his themes and, above all, his ideas.... The danger of becoming a pamphleteer in fiction must have been clear to Camus and must have compelled him to use technique as a shield for his ideas. But, in his plays, collisions are head-on; except in Caligula, we miss the theater's equivalents for the sophisticated method of his fiction. (p. 503)

Kenneth Haigh, as the emperor Caligula, announces in the first few moments of the play ["Caligula"] … that he is going to be the first ruler ever to "use unlimited power in an unlimited way." He is going to kill whom he likes, ravish what wives he chooses, declare famines on the instant, turn himself into a golden-wigged Venus, try absolutely everything on his unfettered march toward the impossible. He learns, shortly before he plunges from a tower to the knives that finally await him, that when everything is possible, nothing is.

Has Albert Camus' play fallen into precisely the same trap, or is it the current performance that makes the evening seem like the four whirring wheels of a high-powered automobile racing immobile on ice?

Of promised power there is plenty….

Yet there is a treadmill under foot. One crime is really not more shocking than the last. When the first bloodied body has been carted away, or the first deliberately insane law handed down to the empire, we have grasped—to the full, apparently—the uttermost limits of one man's absolute freedom. The murder of Scipio's father does not distress us more than the slaughter of Cassius' sons; when they follow one another, scene by scene, the footfall is familiar, the measured tread monotonous.

In short, drama itself seems to observe the law that our moon-maddened hero must discover for himself. If there are no limits to what a character in a play may do, then the play itself is without intelligible boundaries—without a pattern that forms, without a forward movement that we can either desire or yearn for. The sky is open to us, but the sky has no shape.

The fact that the late Mr. Camus's play has been enormously successful in France, however, leads to other questions. Is there somewhere in the performance a secret, insistent, almost imperceptible reduction in size?… It is always possible that a play about absolutism has not been done absolutely enough—with the anvil stroke and the untroubled resonance of a monster utterly sure of himself….

But in precisely what way should we laugh when Caligula appears on a half-shell in corkscrew curls, when he paints a suppliant's fingernails and then his bald head, when a prissy old patrician purses his lips in a deadpan moue out front? The play means to touch the outrageous, the unspeakable, the ultimate defiance of all human value in these passages. But the light titters that spring up in the auditorium suggest that only a casual, rather flighty, cynicism has been arrived at, not the soul-destroying and mirthless laughter that might accompany sheer negation.

Between the impossibility of moving forward when there is no forward to move to, and a certain readiness of tone and style that thin out a satanically majestic experiment in living, "Caligula" continually stirs interest and then finds its temperature falling


Albert Camus' expression of "tragedy in modern dress" portrays men struggling with the emotional and psychological facts of alienation by means of man-made justice. Caligula (from the play of the same name, written in 1938, first performed in 1945), apprehending the alienation inherent in the human condition, exercises absolute power to match the absurdity of the world, inevitably to find the same terrible face of self-separation in his own mirror. Martha, Jan, and their mother, in _Le Malentendu_ (1944), murder and
misunderstand in a search for self-definition under "the injustice of sky and climate." The Plague divides the men and women of L'Etat de siège (1948) from their own dignity and, in the end, from their lives, by exercising a justice as logical and inhuman as Caligula's; and the terrorists of Les Justes (1949) attempt to redeem the myth of absolute justice with their lives, sacrificing the relative truths which alone are available to man. Those who seek self-identity fail to recognize the futility of such a task in an absurd universe. Those who deal in justice misunderstand the "pathos of distance" between mankind and the good. (p. 42)

Alternating between a desperate lyricism which is well known to readers of his nonpolitical essays (L'Envers et l'endroit, Noces, L'été) and the enigmatic parables of his widely known récits (L'Étranger, La Peste, La Chute), Camus' plays embody his thought in dramatic action at once tantalizing and obscure. Gabriel Marcel's judgment, that the theater of Camus fails as a dramatic presentation of his ideas, is frequently echoed, and not always, one must note, by critics who are primarily concerned with the possibilities of financial success. "The essential words," wrote Robert Kemp, theater critic for Le Monde, "are pronounced at moments when the drama, the brutal drama … absorbs the spectator's nervous energy. It is a fine art, no doubt, to mingle thus action and thought, not to separate them," but, he concludes, "the most meaningful words pass so quickly and remain so mysterious that they only brush our consciousness." Germaine Brée questions the strength of the concrete situation to carry the full weight of the thought. To date, the only major staging of Camus in America has elicited mixed comment, but the accusation of oratory mixed with soliloquy, theatricality with intellectualism, seems to predominate. (pp. 42-3)

The theater is for Camus [as he wrote in his L'Envers et l'endroit] a place where each spectator has "a rendez-vous with himself," where he can experience a self-definition occasioned by the soliloquies of "those large figures who cry out on the stage." (p. 43)

Plays, however, are not restricted to soliloquy alone. Camus, at various times actor, playwright, producer and adapter, was aware of this fact, meeting it with varying degrees of success. He experimented with group movement, contrast, divertissements in Caligula. He envisaged a striking red-and-black setting for Faulkner's world in his adaptation of Requiem for a Nun, and in an all-out effort, together with Barrault, to "make a myth intelligible to the audience of 1948" in L'Etat de siège, he offered "a spectacle whose avowed intention is to combine all forms of dramatic expression from the lyrical monologue to collective theatre, passing through pantomine, simple dialogue, farce and the chorus." The play, one should note, was Camus' least successful and one of his few creations to be criticized on artistic grounds. Visually superabundant, at times even noisy and hurried, L'Etat de siège with its simple allegory, in which the Plague evidently stands for bureaucracy and the collapse of human values in society, fails to offer enough for the mind. Camus' most successful plays have been Caligula and Les Justes, which, though widely different in presentation, share a common theme. The reason for the relative failure of Le Malentendu is a matter for speculation; it is the most tightly knit, classic of the plays. The language is beautiful, simple, and the moments of greatest intellectual intensity do not always occur during those instants of intense physical action which made Kemp regret a conflict between watching and understanding. One possible answer may lie in what appears to be the utter nihilism of the play. But the same accusation has been leveled against Caligula, which nevertheless had over 400 performances in Paris. (p. 44)

Caligula and Le Malentendu, which appear to Philip Thody to represent a world without values, where the absurd reduces all actions to equal insignificance, become, in the light of Camus' conception of drama, artistic testimonies to the essential alienation and grandeur of the human condition. Having relinquished at last "the illusion of another world" which sacrifices human values, the dramatist's thought can "spring forth in images … in myths … myths with no deeper meaning than that of human suffering and like it, endlessly fertile. Not the divine fable which amuses and blinds, but the face, the gesture and the terrestrial drama in which are embodied a difficult wisdom and a passion with no tomorrow." The enigma, divine for Aeschylus, is earthly for Camus. "The smile of Apollo" is transformed into the agony of the medieval crucifix and, in the modern world, the absurd joy of the suicidal Kirilov as he writes his false confession or the stony face of Martha as
she seeks liberty in the unwitting murder of her brother (Le Malentendu). (pp. 44-5)

Human alienation is intensified by those who live according to absolute, transcendent values which have no meaning in the world of Camus. Total peace, absolute justice, inexorable logic—all misunderstandings of the essential nature of man, which is eternally and pathetically distant from supreme ends. "An unpunished crime, the Greeks believed, infected the city," notes Camus. And he adds, "But condemned innocence, or crime punished too much, in the long run soils it no less." The modern tragedy stems from a misunderstanding, a fatal misunderstanding not of the divine ways of the gods, but of the finite, physical way of man. Camus' great ideal is la mesure, the familiar golden mean, in which man is both related to his natural environment, the earth, and to man and all that the concept man implies—mortality, responsibility, compassion. When the essential balance is disturbed, the scales jangle and dance in the frenzy which is modern history.

Caligula, the earliest of Camus' plays, tells of Rome's young emperor who, driven to despair by the realization of life's absurdity, asks for the moon and plays god with the destinies of his subjects. (pp. 45-6)

Caligula decides to make men "live in the truth" by eliminating contradiction and chance, by exercising his liberty absolutely. He becomes the embodiment of disinterested evil, and dissipates the meaning of life for his subjects by behaving with an inexorable, destructive logic which murders for an ideal—demonstrating life's utter meaningless. His logic is the more blinding because it is, in fact, irrefutable. Far from being a detestable villain, Caligula is the most pitiable character in the play. Most cursed because most clear-sighted, he puts men to death arbitrarily in order to make them understand what he has himself understood too well, "that it's not necessary to have done something in order to die."… (p. 46)

Caligula's passion for the impossible is stronger than the passion of those around him for life. Absolute liberty is always exercised at the expense of someone, he notes, and admits this is unfortunate. Absolute liberty is destructive of relative justice. Caligula is as outspoken as the Plague in L'Etat de siège and Clamence in La Chute. All three conceive a rigorously logical attitude before the problem of suffering in an apparently meaningless world. Though Caligula cannot be refuted in logical terms, the very fact that men cannot live every minute with absurdity finally rouses them to revolt. (pp. 46-7)

A sense of alienation underlies the actions of all four characters in Le Malentendu. The over-all "misunderstanding" which unites them is a common belief that a place exists where one can find total self-definition. (p. 48)

Martha and her mother are practiced murderers, but Jan complicates their impersonal routine by speaking openly to them in an attempt to force a recognition from their side…. The two women justify their habit of murder in much the same way that Caligula legitimates his limitless exercise of power: life is more cruel than they are. The identity which Jan seeks will be found in his function as victim, an ironic definition, certainly, but one which is central to all resolutions in the play. (p. 49)

Martha is perhaps right in her over-all view of the human condition, but she has not understood the lesson of her brother's death; victim and murderer are equally pitiable; and could they understand this, human justice would begin. The round of misunderstandings is endless as long as man in his essential state of alienation continues to add to the injustice already in the world.

L'Etat de siège allegorizes the plague as a specific injunction against modern bureaucracy and all forms of totalitarianism. As Camus distinctly states in his "Avertissement," this play is in no way meant to be an adaptation of his novel, La Peste.…. 

While lacking the dramatic and intellectual complexity of Camus' other plays, L'Etat de siège presents characters who strongly recall Camus' récits and strongly suggests several of his central themes in simplified
forms. (p. 50)

The Judge, Victoria's father, is a coward willing to turn against his own to save himself from disease. He reminds us of Clamence of *La Chute, le juge-pénitent*, without ironic self-awareness. Camus' dislike of judges is nowhere as strongly evident as in this play. But the judge is no more unjust than some of his intended victims. (p. 51)

Whereas Diego conquers his fear by a resurgence of his sense of human dignity, Victoria, who is the heroine of the play, is at no time afraid. She wants her life and her love and is willing to risk anything to retain these simple human values. When she dies, Diego realizes too late that his desire to help his fellow man has allowed her death to occur, and offers his life in exchange for hers. The bargain is accepted by the Plague, who has begun to lose his power, and Victoria triumphs in sorrow, vindicating the values which absolutes threaten, fleshly love and the transient beauties of the earth.

In *Les Justes* a small group of terrorists plans and carries out the assassination of the Grand-Duke Sergei Alexandrovitch in Moscow in 1905. Kaliayev, who throws the bomb and is arrested and hanged, and Dora, who makes the bomb, are the central characters…. Kaliayev and Dora are not monumental sacrifices to the terrible burden of free will. Instead, they are torn between a misconceived sense of duty toward absolute justice and an overwhelming pity for human life. Only one of the terrorists, Stepan, is single in his purpose. He wants the revolution to succeed, because he loves justice more than life. (pp. 51-2)

Only in the fourth act is Camus' total irony unveiled. Until his imprisonment, Kaliayev is still able to believe that dying for an ideal can justify it. A prisoner, Foka, enters his cell and in a friendly conversation it is revealed that Foka has killed three men in a drunken rage. When he learns that Kaliayev has killed a grand-duke, for which the penalty is hanging, he tries to leave suddenly. Kaliayev forces the revelation that Foka is the hangman, whose sentence is shortened by a year for each man he hangs. The line between victim and executioner grows thinner. Finally, the widow of the Grand-Duke comes to visit Kaliayev in prison, believing that only a murderer can understand her experience of despair and absurdity. Kaliayev refuses to ask God's forgiveness, as she entreats. As long as he is to die, he is not a murderer. Absolute justice, to which he offers his life, will exonerate him.

The final act shows Dora and the revolutionaries waiting to find out if Kaliayev has betrayed their ideal and repented or if he has, instead, died. Dora, in her anguish, begins to doubt the moral position of the just assassins. "If death is the only solution, we are on the wrong path. The right path leads to life, to the sunshine. One cannot always be cold."… Perhaps taking responsibility for all evil in the world is not a gesture of sacrifice, but one of pride, pride which will be punished. At last, she hears the painful account of Kaliayev's death—he has not betrayed their ideal. However, the report of his final horrible cry brings Dora to the brink of absurdity. Her only consolation is a decision to be the next one to throw a bomb. Exaltation and oblivion will fill the void left by the death of human values. (pp. 52-3)

In the theater of Camus characters search for self-identity through the pursuit of absolutes. They are portrayed as fatally failing to understand that self-identity is illusory and unattainable, that the static resolution they desire is a denial of the very nature of man, which is eternally separated from clarity and from justice. Weighing consciousness against oblivion, reason against submersion in life, responsibility against evasion, Camus' plays express a true humanism which maintains a precarious balance. Each excess increases the alienation of man from himself and the alienation of man from man. In a world where the criminal is no further from justice than his prosecutor, the only things worth striving for and preserving are those which recognize man's limitations. In a theater where each man has a rendezvous with himself, Camus creates a gesture at once supplicating and defiant before a world in which all men are guilty. (p. 53)
Camus, Albert (Vol. 32): Albert Sonnenfeld

Nowhere but in France, it seems, do men of letters whose greatest talent clearly lies in other genres devote so much of their creative energy to the theatre. The Golden Age of Corneille and Racine, kept alive by an ever-growing number of French repertory companies, stands constantly before the writer, challenging him to try to rival its inaccessible perfection.... Albert Camus' passion for the theatre was lifelong, from his participation in the Algerian Worker's Theatre in 1936 to his tragically short reign as director of a government sponsored avant-garde company in 1959. In the midst of the virtually unanimous acclaim accorded him as novelist and thinker during his last years, Camus continued to see himself primarily as a man of the theatre in search of new approaches to the technical problems of the stage. And in a brief program note written for his Paris production of Requiem for a Nun, he admitted that his greatest ambition was to create a form of tragedy indigenous to our age. In each of his own plays there is, as Germaine Brée has pointed out, a solitary hero marked for destruction by a fatality which he himself has created. This seems to be the stuff of which tragedy is made. It is now generally acknowledged, however, even by those whose unrestrained admiration for the man has often paralyzed their critical faculties (one reviewer wrote that "to read Camus is to want to shake his hand") that Camus did not realize his ambition.

The technical flaws in Camus' works for the stage are apparent to every reader or spectator. The Misunderstanding (Le Malentendu) is weakened by unconvincing dialogue. The characters speak in those polished aphorisms ("He has gone into the bitter house of eternal exile … neither in life nor in death is there any peace of homeland.") which look fine in print, in the novels of Gide, Malraux and Camus himself, but which sound strangely hollow in the theatre, where abstraction is the playwright's greatest enemy. Caligula … fails because of Camus' predilection for the theoretical, for misplaced lyricism and pretentious rhetoric. Nothing much happens on the stage during The Just Assassins (Les Justes); the characters pursue those endless philosophical debates, so gripping in the novels of Dostoyevsky but so deadly here and in Camus' stage adaptation of The Possessed. State of Siege (L'Etat de Siège), a dramatization of the myth of the plague, is his most ambitious and least successful play. Written for Jean-Louis Barrault, it contains a variety of dialogue ranging from lyrical to burlesque, stylized choreographic movements by the chorus, complicated lighting effects, and music by Arthur Honegger. (pp. 106-07)

In spite of his enviable achievements as adaptor and director, Camus ultimately failed as playwright because he consistently tried to force into the dramatic form themes and situations perfect for his prose narratives but totally alien to the stage. For Camus, as for so many French novelists before him, the theatre proved to be an irresistibly attractive but stubbornly hostile medium.

The author of The Stranger counted himself among those writers "whose works form a whole where each illuminates the other." Camus' two major novels, The Stranger and The Plague, are therefore each complemented by two plays and a book of essays treating essentially the same theme. A more forceful statement of his preoccupation with unity is the proud confession, in The Myth of Sisyphus, that "no artist has ever expressed more than a single theme in different guises." Exile or revolt are the themes that have most frequently been assigned to Camus' work; both are equally applicable since the central character in the novels, the four plays and even the essays has invariably been both an exile from the mass of humanity and a rebel against the meaningless pattern of life of that humanity. There is another theme which is far more important, however, because it leads not only to the core of Camus' philosophy but to his choice of literary techniques as well. Each of his novels and plays tells of an intellectual or spiritual metamorphosis. Without exception, his heroes, or the author himself in the case of the early poetic essays, undergo a series of experiences which lead, often abruptly, to an almost clairvoyant understanding of the human predicament, a subsequent inner
transformation, and perhaps a new course of action. (pp. 107-08)

In his very first book, *L'Envers et l'Endroit*, published in 1937, and as yet unavailable in English (the best translation for the elusive title would be "The Right and Wrong Side"), we find Camus already committed to the technique implicit in the basic theme of inner metamorphosis. "If I've walked a lot since this book, I haven't walked very far," he wrote in a preface to a recent edition. These lyrical essays, almost short stories really, are written in the first person and tell of the narrator's encounters with loneliness, frustration and death: an old woman, half paralyzed, is left to spend the evening alone when her family goes to the movies; an old man talks desperately to three young men in a café, afraid to stop because his audience might abandon him; a mother is too sick with fever to assuage the anguish of the young son spending the night in vigil at her bedside. Each of these visions of suffering leads the narrator further along the path toward understanding. The tone, while clearly sympathetic, remains objective.... It is a foreshadowing of Camus' basic narrative pattern that the narrator, after playing the role of observer in the two opening essays, turns to the monologue to analyze his own existence. His feeling of total estrangement during a visit to Prague forces him to examine his conscience and to realize that his present predicament is symptomatic of a more fundamental human condition. Experience has led to awareness, to understanding. The fog of indifference created by daily routine is dispelled: "Man is face to face with himself: I defy him to be happy." Again, a change in narrative tone, from objectivity to lyricism, provides the alternative to despair. In the brilliant light of the Italian sun, the narrator is reintroduced into the world of beauty and hope. He finds inscribed on the façade of a villa the motto which sums up all of Camus' work: *In magnificentia naturae resurgit spiritus*. This stylistic and thematic tension, between the naked and prosaic inner drama of man's conscience as he observes, and participates in, the meaninglessness of daily routine, and the world of the sun which only poetry can communicate to the readers, is at the heart of Camus' work. "For the absurd man," he wrote in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, "it's no longer a matter of explaining and deciding, but of experiencing and describing." (pp. 108-09)

The extremely thorny problems of stage technique posed by this emphasis on the inner awakening of a character troubled Camus throughout his career as dramatist. In *Révolte dans les Asturies*, a play written "collectively" by Camus and some friends for the Workers' Theatre in 1936, he is already experimenting with new approaches to point of view. "The spectator is to be the center of the spectacle," he wrote in the preface. "The play takes place in a square in Oviedo. The spectator must feel he is in Oviedo, not in front of it; everything goes on around him and he must be the center of the tragedy." In other words, the spectator is to see through the eyes of the miners during their unsuccessful uprising. He is to share fully in their emotional reactions as they are gradually defeated by the Legion, represented on stage by an enormous loud-speaker. This experiment, based largely on the theories of Antonin Artaud whose work exerted a profound influence on Camus' conception of the theatre, was a failure because, in Camus' own words, "it introduces action into a frame that is not suited to it: the theatre." This is an extremely revealing admission by Camus; though he dispensed with the experimental implications of Artaud's theories in his later plays, he continued to make the same mistake. (p. 111)

Reviewing the first performance of *Caligula* for *Le Monde* in 1945, the influential drama critic Robert Kemp wondered whether there were any characters in the play: "When I listen to *Caligula*, I can't stop thinking about Albert Camus.... I never wonder: What is Caligula going to do? What are Cherea and Scipio thinking of?—but: what does M. Camus want to say?" The characters of Camus' most successful play, written in 1938, are acting out his own inner drama. From self-satisfied complacency Caligula is shocked into awareness of the absurd, into a futile quest for the absolute and finally into the realization that absolute idealism is the twin of nihilism. In his preface for the American edition of his plays, Camus called *Caligula* a "tragedy of the intelligence."

As the curtain rises, a group of patricians is awaiting word of Caligula who has been absent for three days since the death of his beloved sister Drusilla. During this time Caligula's personality has undergone a complete transformation, for he has realized that death obviates all human values as well as life itself and that

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consequently nothing has meaning except death. The audience, however, does not see this change taking place…. Thus when Caligula finally appears on stage, pensive and distraught, the audience sees him as strangely aberrant and cannot understand that through suffering he has discovered what Camus sees as an absolute truth: the absurdity of life. Caligula's constant glances in the mirror and his dramatic gesture of erasing the image of his past self from the mirror lose their impact in the theatre. The dramatist is unable to make us realize that the reflection in the mirror is of the Caligula who existed before the curtain rose. (pp. 111-12)

The complacent patricians who believe in the validity of their social and religious institutions need, in Caligula's words, "a teacher who knows what he's talking about." And the Emperor's violent parodies of religion, justice and fate constitute his pedagogical method. "He forces everyone to think. Insecurity, that's what makes one think," Cherea says. But because theatrical time, as opposed to novelistic time, precludes the kind of leisurely realistic treatment of social institutions exemplified by Meursault's description of his mother's funeral, Caligula is forced to resort to such an extreme caricature of religion in the Venus scene, to cite but one example, that the audience cannot feel the relevance of this scene to its own institutions. We are too far removed from prosaic reality here to acknowledge the veracity of Caligula's, and Camus', discovery that our lives are governed by sham and pretense. (p. 112)

Camus' attitude toward Caligula is ambivalent. While he admires the Emperor for having reached that level of awareness which enables him to deny the gods (and by gods Camus means all abstract belief from table manners to justice), he despises him for denying man. The audience is supposed to share this attitude. At first, by his sharp caricatural treatment of the complacent patricians, Camus tries to force us to see these social parasites through Caligula's eyes and to accept the necessity for his unmasking of their hypocrisy. As his actions grow more excessive, our sympathy should shift to Caligula's friends, Scipio and Cherea, and to his mistress Caesonia who counsel moderation. But because we were never really convinced of the validity of Caligula's theory of the absurd and because the increasingly degenerate nature of his acts of violence is revealed indirectly, through the patricians' complaints against what has been transpiring off stage, we are not conscious of the gradual disintegration of Caligula's personality. We thought he was mad when he first came on the stage; what we hear about his capricious fondness for murder merely confirms our belief. (pp. 112-13)

The scenes best suited to the stage are those where Camus' preoccupation with the "tragedy of the intelligence" is least apparent. Caligula's abrupt changes of mood, from touching, almost childlike, humility to the most ruthless sadism, permit the actor to display his virtuosity. The Emperor's terrifying solitude as his assassins approach comes close to being "great theatre." He shatters the mirror when it reflects his own horrible image. And yet, though the symbolic link to the mirror of the opening scene is obvious, the impact of this dramatic gesture is attenuated because we never wholly understood the change that had taken place in Caligula. His last speeches, in which he admits his guilt but simultaneously proclaims his triumph at being one of the few in history to have grasped the finality of death and the absurdity of life, are beautifully written; but the audience is unable to accept Caligula's insight because it did not witness each step of his itinerary of self-discovery.

The plot of The Misunderstanding, the first play by Camus to be produced in Paris though it was written more than four years after Caligula, had already been delineated in the second half of The Stranger. Under the mattress of his prison bed, Meursault found part of an old newspaper clipping which told of a strange murder. A young man who had left his native village in Czechoslovakia to seek his fortune returned twenty-five years later to be reunited with his mother and sister who were inn-keepers there. When his mother failed to recognize him, the son, now a rich man, decided as a joke to take a room at her hotel. During the night his mother and sister bludgeoned him to death, took his money and threw his body in the river. (pp. 113-14)

In expanding this extremely slight plot into a three act tragedy, Camus found himself obliged to deëmphasize action and to turn instead to the inner drama of Jan, Martha and the mother (the victim and the two assassins)
as they proceed inexorably toward the violent dénouement. He uses two types of scenes to reveal his characters’ most secret thoughts: conflicts between characters (Jan trying to convince his wife Maria that he should go through with his game of disguise, Martha struggling to overcome her mother's tired yearning for religion and sentiment); and conflicts within a character conveyed largely through monologues (Jan resisting the temptation to disclose his identity, the mother hesitating at the moment of the crime). The dramatic efficacy of these subsurface tensions evaporates in the face of Camus' inability to create convincing human characters whose actions are motivated by something other than his own philosophical theories. The audience never understands, for example, the reasons for Jan's persistent refusal to reveal his identity to his mother and sister. "I came here to bring my fortune and, if I can, happiness," he explains to his wife who had urged him to let his heart speak, to say spontaneously "Here I am." Nowhere does Camus even supply Jan with a good reason for undertaking his game of anonymity in the first place. With each scene marking yet another opportunity missed, the audience in exasperation rejects the validity of Jan's inner struggle, realizing that he withholds his identity for a philosophical reason completely external to his own personality. He is the nameless stranger, modern man, who can gain his true identity only through a spontaneous manifestation of the kind of love which in this world is absent if not impossible. (pp. 114-15)

Equally perplexing are the reasons for Martha's career in murder. Early in the play she explains that she needs to rob only one more victim to be able to escape to a land where "the sun kills all questions." As in The Stranger, the sun is the real instigator of murder…. As for her personality, she is impervious to any warm human emotions, and it is difficult to see her obsessive need for sunlight as anything but Camus' own favorite symbolism. Nor can the audience fully understand Martha's coldly detached cruelty until she offers a philosophical explanation of her behavior at the end of the play. Unable to reach the land of the sun, just as Caligula was denied the moon, Martha sees her crime as a revolt against the absurdity of a "life that is more cruel than we are," a revolt which like Caligula's proves futile. This "absurd" is never conveyed to the spectator, however, if one excepts the continuing game of mistaken identity. (p. 115)

The Misunderstanding has been called the tragedy of lack of communication. Whereas Meursault was able to show his detachment from humanity by extended description and laconic indifferent conversation, a character in a play must talk and the characters in The Misunderstanding are incredibly prolix, though they talk at cross-purposes. This is aggravated by Camus' choice of such a flimsy, untheatrical plot. His failure to create an effective language of the theatre, however, is the main cause of defective characterization. The mother, supposedly a simple woman wavering between sympathy and cruelty, cannot act out her inner struggle in silence as in a novel…. The sudden intrusions of lyricism in Martha's speeches in praise of the sun ("No, I prefer to picture those other lands over which summer breaks in flame, where winter rains flood the cities, and where … things are what they are.") only serve to remove the dialogue even further from human dimensions. Only Maria, Jan's distraught uncomprehending wife, speaks in other than metaphysical terms, and this is possible because for her there is no inner drama. She is the personification of marital devotion; she never quite realizes what has been happening and is totally oblivious to the philosophical assumptions which led to the murder.

Unlike Caligula which had undeniable visual appeal, The Misunderstanding is almost totally devoid of stage action. To maintain spectator interest, Camus was forced to resort to an embarrassing amount of that kind of theatrical effect which is more appropriate to melodrama: the passport that Martha does not bother inspecting, the mother's arrival just after Jan had swallowed the drugged tea, Jan's decision to return to his wife at the very moment that the drug is taking effect. (p. 116)

The Plague, Camus' second and most ambitious novel, poses even more complex technical problems for State of Siege and The Just Assassins, the two plays which complement it to form, with the essay The Rebel, a tetralogy on the theme of revolt. The Stranger told of one person's encounter with the absurd and of his subsequent inner transformation; The Plague tells of a collective reaction to a collective problem. Now it is an entire city facing the absurd, and the isolation of individual inhabitants is but a fragmentary symptom of the
quarantine imposed on the city as a whole. In *The Stranger* the first-person narrative forced the reader to see with Meursault's eyes and to share in his reactions to experience; the use of the third-person in *The Plague* makes the objective "chronicle" of the suffering of the city of Oran possible. It is not the "author" who acts as chronicler, however, but Doctor Rieux, the central character, whose occupation requires travel throughout the plague-ridden city and makes him a privileged witness of the private dramas taking place in extremely diverse sectors of the population. The focus of the novel is therefore wide…. This broad range of action, with its emphasis on crowd scenes and frequent shifts in locale, will prove to be an insurmountable obstacle to Camus' attempt to adapt the myth of the plague to the limited spatial potential of the stage in *State of Siege*. Moreover, the plague is at its most insidious not at the dramatic moment of a victim's death but in its slow, almost imperceptible power to demoralize the still healthy population. The relaxed pace of narration needed to convey this gradual disintegration is possible only in the novel.

Though some critics have professed to see that amorphous entity the city of Oran as the real hero of *The Plague*, the central theme of revolt depends to a large extent on the inner drama of Dr. Rieux. "La Peste is a confession," Camus wrote in Sartre's review *Les Temps Modernes* when asked to explain his use of the third-person, "and everything is calculated to make this confession all the more complete since its form is indirect." Dr. Rieux, like Meursault, continually finds himself face to face with the absurd, here symbolized by the plague, and comes gradually to understand first his own and then the city's predicament. It is highly revealing of the consistency of Camus' novelistic art that the crucial scene in which Rieux achieves true awareness is one based primarily on point of view and change in tone. (p. 117)

*State of Siege* is not a direct adaptation of the novel but rather an attempt to recreate the myth of the plague as "total theatre," a synthesis of drama, ballet, mime and music. Camus' first task was to find a way to put the plague on stage that was both theatrically feasible and dramatically convincing. Obviously, the slow accumulation of physical details possible in the novel was out of the question; nor could the setting of the play shift rapidly enough to follow the spreading of the plague. Realizing that there was no possibility of conveying the plague's symbolic role as an impersonal and totally destructive force to the theatre audience, Camus decided to make the plague a character in his play. The universality of the symbol is lost when the plague, wearing the grey uniform of a Nazi officer, appears on stage to prescribe new codes of behavior to the citizens of the city of Cadiz in a four page inaugural address. The greatness of Camus' use of the myth of the plague in the novel lay precisely in the extraordinary variety of associations, religious, literary and historical, which it summoned up in the reader's mind. The theatre audience, however, forgets the myth of the plague entirely; on the stage there is a very sarcastic but not unlovable petty bureaucrat always accompanied by a secretary whose function is to keep up-to-date the list of the inhabitants of Cadiz.

Since *State of Siege* like *The Plague* tells of a whole city's reaction to enslavement by the enemy, Camus had to cope with the always difficult problem of putting crowd scenes on stage. His task was complicated by the fact that the crowd of citizens of Cadiz is not "part of the decor" but is in effect one of the central "characters" in the play. Camus unfortunately elected the most obvious solution to his problem when he created an enormous cast which included nameless voices, five messengers, beggars, gypsies, women of the town, men of the town and guards. As a result, the stage is cluttered, and the occasional choreographic movements by the crowd only partially attenuate the general impression of chaos. The silent, patient suffering of the widely dispersed population, so moving in the novel, is clearly impossible to realize in the theatre. (pp. 118-19)

The difference between novelistic time and dramatic time is the greatest stumbling block to Camus' adaptation of essentially novelistic conceptions to the exigencies of the stage. As the plague makes its presence felt throughout the city, scores of domestic and personal dramas of separation and physical anguish ensue. The novelist can take the time to make even the minor participants in the collective suffering seem like full-dimensional characters…. In the play, the tempo is of necessity to rapid for such development of minor characters. These tend to become dehumanized abstractions, speaking in the stock phrases of their particular occupation. (pp. 119-20)
The core of dramatic interest in *State of Siege* is the gradual emergence of Diego as a rebel. Continuing the pattern established in his earlier works, Camus sees the choice confronting his hero in the contrast between the prosaic and the poetic, between the absurd and nature, between the sea and the bureaucratic organization imposed on the city by the plague. Only a wind from the sea can rid the city of its enemy. Camus seems to lose all stylistic control when composing dialogue; the carefully restrained lyricism which makes his descriptions of nature so effective in his novels becomes a veritable flood of imagery in the plays…. It is Diego's love for the sea which leads him to rebel. He asks a boatman to take him to the ships lying at anchor outside the harbor of the quarantined city. Just as he is about to embark on this illegal trip outside the city limits, the Plague's secretary arrives on the scene to prevent his departure. Diego refuses to yield even under threat of punishment, and the secretary admits reluctantly: "... the machine has always shown a tendency to break down when a man conquers his fear and stands up to it. I won't say it stops completely. But it creaks, and sometimes it actually begins to fold up." Armed with the knowledge of the power of revolt, Diego tries to convince the citizens of Cadiz to follow him. Unlike Rieux who by his own exemplary action against the plague succeeded in winning the participation of others in his health brigades, Diego, whose revolt consisted of saying "no" to the plague, relies on words. (pp. 120-21)

Camus said of *The Just Assassins* that never before had he felt himself so little the author of his own play. He adhered closely to both the plot and the dialogue furnished by Boris Savinkov's *Souvenirs d'un terroriste*, and it was thanks to the severe limits imposed by his given material that he partially avoided his usual pitfall: excessive abstraction in the dialogue. Savinkov's memoirs of the 1905 revolution provided Camus with a specific historical context and a universally understandable ethical question: Are ideals corrupted when unworthy means are used to bring about their realization? The play is not predicated on the audience's *a priori* acceptance of Camus' personal notion of the absurd.

Yet, in spite of the relevance of the moral issue of "ends and means," the very issue which led Camus to break with Sartre, *The Just Assassins* seems verbose, if not boring. This may be due in part to the rather lifeless quality of the French translation of the dialogue in Savinkov's book. But there is another reason more consistent with Camus' repeated failures in adapting narrative material to the stage. The action never takes place on the stage; the characters only describe it and philosophize about it. (p. 121)

Camus probably realized that he was taking a chance in basing his entire play on a delicate moral problem. An essay would seem to be a more appropriate form, but the essay did not offer the dialectical situation that Camus needed to shock his audience into an awareness of the complexity of the ethical problem facing the revolutionary. In a play he could stage a series of debates between characters holding opposing views. These are absorbing at times because of the relevance of the subject under discussion, yet one wonders how much more effective these debates would be in a novel. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, for example, the danger of excessive theorizing in the lengthy discussions on evil between Ivan and Alyosha is avoided by Dostoyevsky's careful alternation of action and dialogue. And reading philosophy is certainly less painful than hearing it. Moreover, Dostoyevsky knew that the most secret torments of man are only partially revealed by what he says; the most significant inner drama takes place in silence, in the mind or soul. Camus the novelist was fully aware of this, and the "drama of the intelligence" of his narrator-heroes is not brought out in their usually laconic conversations with other characters but in their solitary meditations which only the reader witnesses. Just one of Camus' narrators, Clamence in his last novel *The Fall*, is garrulous; he talks to escape solitude and the inner drama that would inevitably ensue.

If Camus' failures have been emphasized here, it is only because his stature as novelist and moralist is so apparent as to need no further confirmation. His failure as dramatist can be defined by a simple truism: in the theatre silence is impossible. To write a good play, a dramatist must create effective dialogue; and this is precisely what Camus was unable to do because he continually transported novelistic techniques into the theatre. How ironic that what is perhaps his finest work for the stage should be the adaptation of someone else's novel. In spite of its disastrous Broadway run, *Requiem for a Nun* at times comes close to being the
modern tragedy that Camus so desperately wanted to write. "Faulkner," Camus wrote in his preface for the French translation of the novel, "had solved, in his own way and without being aware of it, a very difficult problem. How to make characters in modern dress speak a language which is contemporary enough to be spoken in our apartments and unusual enough to suggest tragic tone?" Thus it is that in the crucial scenes of *Requiem for a Nun*, those in which the main characters reveal their most secret thoughts, Camus retained almost all of Faulkner's dialogue. This constitutes his own admission of failure, and one can only speculate whether the *Don Juan* which Camus was writing at the time of his death would have marked the beginning of his career as a creator of modern tragedy. (pp. 122-23)


**Camus, Albert (Vol. 32): James H. Clancy**

*[The essay from which the following excerpt is taken originally appeared in Educational Theatre Journal, October 1961.]*

One of the most frequently noted aspects of the contemporary theatrical scene is the triumphant arrival of unintelligibility as a major feature of many highly regarded plays. Ionesco, in his *Bald Soprano*, indicates both by the irrelevancy of his play's title and by the repetitive no-sense of his dialogue that though his play may have meaning he is dedicated to the belief that that meaning shall not be achieved by intelligible devices. His meaning exists beneath the action and the dialogue and he faithfully, and successfully, shatters the normal, intelligible form of both so that the spectator is refused the possibility of deriving meaning by a rational or intelligible process. (p. 160)

The effect of such theatrical efforts was for some time, however, extremely tangential to the main line of theatre art and it is only recently that unintelligibility has come to be reckoned as a major force in modern drama. (p. 161)

Exciting and valuable as this foray into the unintelligible is, it is not this aspect of the modern theatre that demonstrates its greatest break with the past or its most striking contribution to a possible drama of the future. Such a contribution is rather to be seen in that branch of the modern theatre that may be said to concern itself with new ideas of purpose and refurbished accent on the human will.

This theatre, as might be expected of an art that aims at unintelligibility as well as meaning, is more complicated than the theatre of no-sense. Two major phases of it may be distinguished, however, and although any such arbitrary division is more useful than accurate, it is not amiss to consider the new theatre of ideas as being represented by the otherwise opposing points of view of such authors as Bertolt Brecht and Albert Camus. (p. 162)

Camus and Brecht participated (perhaps unconsciously) in a revolt against the late nineteenth century theatre of ideas not because it contained ideas (the basis of Ionesco's objection), but rather because the ideas it contained no longer seemed to be of central importance. As Brecht points out in the Introduction to his *Little Organum*, "everything had been emptied out of the contemporary theatre." It reflected "false images of the social scene on the stage (including those of naturalism so-called)." (p. 163)

A new idea of the world was necessary to complete the revolt against the naturalistic theatre of the last part of the nineteenth century, and a new theatre of ideas was necessary to express this revolt. The work of both Albert Camus and Bertolt Brecht is central to this new theatre of ideas.
The theatre of Camus, which more directly concerns itself with philosophical issues than does that of Brecht, illustrates one of the directions taken by the new theatre in a re-evaluation of man's relationship to the world. [A] quotation from Caligula … illustrates the basis from which this change was accomplished: "Men die and they are not happy." The fundamental assumption about the world is no longer, as with the naturalists, that it is material, measurable, predictable, but rather that it is unpredictable, lacks congruity, is, in a special sense, absurd.

The world of things (Sartre's en-soi) looms large in this new world, but man is no longer considered as a thing among things. The world of things is not man's world. The absurd is felt when man's desire that the world should be explicable is seen to be opposed by the fact that the world cannot be made explicable in human terms. Camus sees the absurd as a clash between the world's "irrationality and the desperate hunger for clarity which cries out in man's deepest soul. The absurd depends as much upon man as upon the world."

This is what Caligula understands. This is why he feels that the world is insupportable and that he needs "the moon, or happiness, or immortality; something foolish, but something that is not of this world."

But both the moon and happiness are out of his reach, as he considers them out of the reach of all men in a world where incomprehension, misery, and solitude are masters, and so, in this world where it is impossible to justify moral values, he turns to pure evil … in order to equal the gods, who only evidence themselves by their cruelty. (pp. 166-67)

Martha, in Cross-Purpose, has, like Caligula, dedicated herself to evil because of a world that is absurd in its cruelty, its isolation, its indifference. Her defiance, like Caligula's, is hopeless and non-fruitful. (p. 167)

[In the world of Caligula and Martha] evil is not measurable, man's nature not predictable. Evil is senseless, as is good. No moral values exist in a world that is absurd in its essence. Man exists among things, but he is not of these things, and he evidences his manhood by rebellion against a world that he can neither understand nor control.

The outlook, in Caligula and Cross-Purpose, is pessimistic as opposed to the implied optimism of the earlier theatre of ideas, but even if the vision is essentially more repugnant it is at the same time more engrossing and more personal. Camus is not presenting a world of "others," he is not dramatizing what happens to a group of people with a certain environment, a specific heredity. He is dramatizing his despair, his anguish. From the basic tenets of the play, Caligula's defeat is his, as it is ours, as it is everyman's. Camus, and his characters, and his audience, are all confronted by the same problem. If his play touches you at all, it is apt to touch you profoundly, for Camus and you have not so much observed the same phenomena as you have become engaged in the same activity. You and he are at the center of the play. What you have participated in may be a thesis play rather than a play of character, but it is intensely human because the thesis concerns you and not others.

The recognition of the absurdity of the world and man's need to rebel against it are not, however, the concluding notes of Camus' theatre. Many will maintain that his most effective work for the theatre was done when he did not advance his argument beyond these steps, but his plays are works of art and as such they followed his development as a man and reflect the increasing enrichment of his point of view.

The new conclusion that was to be expressed by Camus in the theatre in such plays as The Just is clearly formulated in his Letter to a German Friend, published in 1944. In this essay, Camus remonstrates with a Nazi for having drawn Caligula's conclusions from Caligula's premise. He blames the Nazi for adding to the injustice of the world that he sees around him. For Camus,

… man must affirm justice in order to struggle against eternal injustice, create happiness in order to protest against a universe of evil.
He remonstrates with the Nazi for having chosen injustice, for having, as did Caligula, thrown in his lot with the gods. As for himself, says Camus, "I have chosen justice, in order to remain faithful to the earth."

Five years after the publication of this "Letter," Camus presented the same problem dramatically in *The Just*. In this play, Kaliyev recognizes, as did Jan in *Cross-Purpose*, that one thing that must be reached for in a world of absurdity is happiness for others. "One cannot be happy," says Jan, "in exile." Kaliyev accepts becoming a criminal only in order that the world will finally "be covered with the innocent." For him there is no individual salvation, no happiness in solitude. For these reasons he is, unlike Caligula, "un meurtrier délicat," a scrupulous assassin. (pp. 167-69)

Camus' theatre gathers its force by replacing the outworn ideas of the naturalistic theatre by newer ideas based on a re-evaluation of the situation of man and the meaning of the universe. It is a theatre founded on the dark premise of no-sense, against which man, because he is man, is forced to revolt; a world of no-values, in which man must strive, no matter what the failure, to establish value; a tragic but human-centered world in which "revolt is justified by failure and purified in death." (p. 169)


**Camus, Albert (Vol. 32): F. C. St. Aubyn**

The critics have long since demonstrated that while Camus was not an existentialist, Sartrian or otherwise, there are nevertheless existential elements in his thought. I am not interested here in assessing how few or how many of his ideas are existential and certainly I have no intention of making of Camus an existentialist in the face of his own express statement to the contrary. Nor am I occupied by the unlikely problem of the possible influence of Sartre on Camus. I should like to show, however, how Sartre's ontology, which evolved simultaneously with the early writings of Camus, can be used to illuminate Camus's major literary works. (p. 124)

Obviously the various characters of Camus do not live and think in a static world or in the same emotional, geographical, chronological world. My point of departure is, therefore, the relationship between being-for-itself and the death of the other since it supplies us with the central idea necessary for a unifying interpretation. This is not to say that Camus's plays and novels can be reduced to a single concept. Such an oversimplification would deny Camus's literary output one of its most significant aspects, its evolution. Nevertheless when Camus speaks in his essay 'Réflexions sur la guillotine,' a determined and passionate plea for the abolition of capital punishment … we realize that the rupture of … solidarity by the death of the other provides the primary impetus for the action of most of Camus's works. An interpretation of the effects of the death of the other in the light of Sartre's remarks could give added meaning to these already meaningful works.

In *Caligula*, the first version of which was finished in 1938, we find the death of the other precipitating the whole action of the drama.…. As a result of the death of Drusilla, the emperor's sister and mistress, Caligula initiates his reign of the impossible which can only end in his own destruction. Early in the first act Caligula attempts to explain to his faithful servant Hélicon the meaning of this death for himself: 'Cette mort n'est rien, je te le jure; elle est seulement le signe d'une vérité qui me rend la lune nécessaire.' When Hélicon asks the emperor what this truth is, he replies: 'Les hommes meurent et ils ne sont pas heureux.' Death, then, is for Caligula the sign of a truth, the absurd truth of the human condition…. (pp. 124-25)

On another level, however, Camus's treatment of the death of the other in *Caligula* can be said to illustrate Sartre's ontology, especially when the enigmatic ending of the play is taken into consideration. Caligula must
first establish the universal guilt of all, that guilt of which Sartre treats when speaking of being-for-others. According to Caligula's implacable logic, 'On meurt parce qu'on est coupable. On est coupable parce qu'on est sujet de Caligula. Or, tout le monde est sujet de Caligula. Donc, tout le monde est coupable. D'où il ressort que tout le monde meurt.'… One is guilty simply because one is being-for-others. All are guilty because all are subject to the same being-for-others. For Sartre, death is the phenomenon of a personal life, that is, a life which does not begin again. All being-for-itself is subject to the same phenomenon of death; thus, since we are all subjects of Caligula, we are all guilty and we all must die. Caligula has forgotten for the moment that he too is being-for-itself. (pp. 125-26)

Once the guilt of others has been established, Caligula must realize the supreme desire of man, which is, according to Sartre, to be God. The fundamental project of human reality is to metamorphose itself into the ideal of a consciousness which would be the foundation of its own being-for-itself by the pure consciousness it would have of itself, that is, to metamorphose its being-for-itself into being-in-itself-for-itself. (p. 126)

The emperor later forces the Roman poets to improvise in one minute a poem on the subject of death…. The suffering young Scipion, who refuses both to help Caligula because he has had his father killed and to take part in the emperor's assassination because he understands him so well, easily wins the contest. Scipion departs, leaving Caligula alone with his loyal but uncomprehending mistress Caesonia. When Caligula realizes that to be logical to the end he must kill her also, he says: 'Quand je ne tue pas, je me sens seul. Les vivants êtes tous là, vous me faites sentir un vide sans mesure où je ne peux regarder. Je ne suis bien que parmi mes morts'…. Caligula's universe is empty because, according to Sartre, the look of the other steals his world from him, decentralizes the world which he is attempting to centralize. Only by eliminating the other's look can he refute the objectivity he is for the other. Only by reducing others to a thing, an object, a being-in-itself, only by killing them can Caligula deny others the limit which their being sets to his freedom. He is happy among his dead because the perfect isolation, the perfect solitude would be that of the being-for-itself which exists alone in a world of objects, of being-in-itself.

Why then does Caligula say: 'Mais tuer n'est pas la solution'? Because his efforts are reduced to treating the other as an instrument, because he can never touch the other except in his being as an object. Even if Caligula could abolish the other, he could not eliminate the fact of the other's having been…. The existence of death, Sartre maintains, alienates us wholly in our own life to the advantage of the other. To be dead is to be a prey for the living. Death is a triumph of the point of view of the other over the point of view we are towards ourselves. The unique characteristic of a dead life is that it is a life of which the other makes himself guardian. In this sense Caligula is an objective and opaque being which has been reduced to the single dimension of exteriority. In this capacity he will continue to pursue his history in the human world and in this sense he is indeed still alive. (pp. 126-28)

Again in Le Malentendu, written in 1942–1943 and staged the following year, the death of the other has taken place before the curtain rises. Already in the first scene the mother and daughter have begun to bear only with difficulty the guilt of the death of all the others they have murdered. If they have managed to avoid their guilt up to this point it is because they have successfully reduced the other to a thing in their own minds…. The mother is nevertheless aware that through murder she has ruptured the human solidarity against death and separated herself forever from all others. (p. 133)

The mother and daughter as we-subjects have a common goal, a collective rhythm as Sartre would call it. They are working together for the day when they can escape their dreary Moravia…. They are both searching for respite and release from their own guilt. They would both like to reduce themselves to being-in-itself, to a thing. The we-subject relationship remains however an experience of a psychological rather than an ontological order. It in no way corresponds to a real unification of the being-for-itself of the mother and daughter. The entrance of the old servant in the role of the third immediately transforms their relationship from we-subject to us-object. With the appearance of the third the mother and daughter are precipitated into
the world as us-objects, a transformation they experience in shame as a community alienation. The old servant is the witness to their guilt. (pp. 133-34)

Much like Caligula and Meursault, Martha is determined to leave the world unreconciled…. Her tragedy, as well as that of her mother, is that she finds in suicide exactly what she had been seeking, the peace of being-in-itself…. When Maria on her knees begs God to have pity on those who love and are separated, that is on a human group, it is the old servant who as the unrealizable third answers, the third who is on principle distinct from humanity and in whose eyes humanity is wholly object. The third is, according to Sartre, the one who is third in relation to all possible groups, the one who in no case can enter into community with any group. In Sartre's dialectic this concept is one with the idea of God. The old servant's resounding 'Non!', which closes the play, is the pitiless response of the third where the human condition is concerned. We are all condemned to death and, whether we seek it in suicide or find it in innocence, the result is beyond repair and inevitably the same for all. (p. 134)

Camus's *L'Etat de siège*, finished in 1948, seems, as Germaine Brée says, 'a little outside the main line of development of his work'. For me it is the most abstract and least compelling of his plays. The spectacle can nevertheless be said to illustrate Sartre's ontology in several ways. The action does not truly begin with the passing of the comet in the prologue but with the first death of the other from the plague, that of the actor. Up to this point the people of Cadiz have experienced only the psychological we-subject and are, as a matter of fact, experiencing it at the very moment when they are all united in witnessing the death of the third who is the actor. In the face of the Plague personified and the rupture of human solidarity against death they begin to experience the ontological us-object. (p. 136)

The citizens of Cadiz attempt to flee their community alienation as us-objects in the face of the Plague by insisting upon their own transcendence while reducing the other to an object by killing him. In so doing they are of course violating human solidarity…. It is finally Diego who, in substituting his own death for that of Victoria, in choosing his own death to save the liberty of the city, makes the right choice…. Thus it was Diego who in spite of his solitary experience as the other in love finally assured the human solidarity of the people of Cadiz through love.

Obviously the primary concern of a group of assassins would be the death of the other. So it is in *Les Justes*, which was produced in 1949. Kaliayev, chosen to throw the first bomb, knows that he will not hesitate before the humanity of the Grand Duke because he has reduced him to an abstraction, to a thing … But when the time comes Kaliayev fails because the Grand Duke is not alone, his wife and niece and nephew are unexpectedly with him. It is the look of the other, the look of the children which arrests his hand…. Kaliayev had not foreseen the children. He had not reduced them to being-in-itself in his mind as he had their uncle. (p. 137)

Certain similarities can be noted between the scenes in which the priest visits Meursault in his cell and the scene in which the Grand Duchess visits Kaliayev in his. Both come with a kind of pardon and forgiveness and both come with religion in their mind and heart. And both are refused. The Grand Duchess is as much with the others as the priest, but in a different way. As a member of the oppressing class she is the third and serves only to unite Kaliayev more strongly with his comrades, with the oppressed. In the closing scene Kaliayev's death is described. We know that, like Meursault, he refuses the ministrations of a priest. His girl friend is sure that he must have walked happily and calmly to the scaffold. Once again the plot has moved from the death of the other to the death of self. (p. 138)

[The major creative works of Camus] demonstrate an amazing consistency in their fundamental attitude towards the death of the other and the subsequent death of self. This obsession of Camus, the death of the other as a literary theme, must be carefully distinguished from the theme of the death of self which, again as a theme, uses a radically different perspective…. It would be difficult to maintain that Camus, as an artist, did
not think beyond his major characters. The treatment of the projection of the themes leaves the themes inviolable, open to as many interpretations as there are readers. The point of juncture between Camus's obsession and Sartre's ontology is found in the latter's ... remark: 'La mort de l'autre me constitue comme object irrémédiable, exactement comme ma propre mort.' In treating Camus's works in such a light, one is no longer treating the themes as literary themes but as philosophical projections which are as true for human beings as they are for characters in a novel or play. Since Sartre and Camus read and studied many of the same sources it is not surprising to find that Camus's creative works and Sartre's ontology are mutually illuminating. What is surprising is to observe that in this one instance at least Camus's works are even better illustrations of Sartre's existentialist phenomenology than the latter's own creative works. Certainly many of the ideas expressed in Sartre's philosophical treatise bring a new light to bear on Camus's works. The fact remains that Sartre is primarily a philosopher while Camus was essentially a moralist. As a moralist Camus wrote: 'Ni dans le coeur des individus ni dans les moeurs des sociétés, il n'y aura de paix durable tant que la mort ne sera pas mise hors la loi.' Camus was of course speaking literally of capital punishment. That death can never be put beyond the law from an existential viewpoint both Sartre and Camus, both the philosopher and the moralist, would agree. At this point excessive metaphysical anguish finds its corrective in the rigorous but compassionate ethics of the humanist who was Albert Camus. (pp. 140-41)


Camus, Albert (Vol. 32): D. M. Church

When *Le Malentendu* was first produced at the Théâtre des Mathurins in 1944, it was not a complete success, but neither was it a complete failure. (p. 33)

The play has primarily been treated by critics in the most obvious way: that is, as a symbolic representation of certain of Camus's philosophical ideas. The more or less allegorical nature of *Le Malentendu* has been frequently discussed. However, the problem of the expression of these ideas has often been neglected. This is an unfortunate situation because the play is essentially a work of art. The metaphysical ideas contained in it have been fully discussed in a much more direct manner in the author's essays. Any examination of these ideas would naturally be more appropriate in a criticism of these essays; and consequently, the treatment of this play, along with any of his other plays or novels, should deal primarily with the problem of artistic expression.

This problem is closely related to the creation of a modern form of tragedy that greatly preoccupied Camus.... Since we are dealing with an author who manifests a lifelong passion for the theatre, this problem becomes extremely important in relation to his works as a whole. And since he seems to imply that man's tragic condition is essentially the same in all ages and that only the artistic expression varies, it is logical to assume that the major interest of *Le Malentendu* for present and future literary critics should be its place in the development of the author's and the epoch's theories of modern tragedy.

First of all, in what sense is *Le Malentendu* tragic? We find many clear indications in a lecture on the future of tragedy that Camus delivered in Athens in 1955. Tragedy, for Camus, is essentially punishment without crime; it is the clash of two forces that are both in the right. The tragic hero rebels against a certain order or power, which in turn strikes down the hero because he has revolted.... *Le Malentendu*, then, fits into this general scheme of tragedy in the sense that the main characters, and especially Jan and Martha, are engaged in a fatal struggle with a legitimate order; that is, in an impossible fight to surpass their own particularly human limitations.
Reino Virtanen compares this play with the general folk legend from which it derives and the different literary treatments it gave rise to and points out significantly that 'Camus has understood what others failed fully to realize—in this story the tragic function belongs not to the victim but to the assassin'. This is not completely true, since Jan is also a tragic hero; but it is important to realize that Martha and her mother are tragic figures and that it is their downfall that really closes the play. (pp. 33-4)

There is room for a comparison of *Le Malentendu* with the classical Greek tragedies, centred more especially on the theme of recognition of the brother in the three extant Electra plays. In Camus's play the final recognition is achieved by means of a token—the passport—a means that Aristotle did not consider very strong. But recognition by this means is quite common in the Greek plays too. Much more important, however, is a comparison of the dramatic atmosphere which accompanies the recognition—or, in Camus's case, the lack of recognition…. It is … rewarding to make the comparison with Euripides' *Electra*; in this play the atmosphere of the recognition scenes is almost identical with the dramatic movement of *Le Malentendu*. As Friedrich Solmsen has put it:

[In the Euripides play] the whole pattern of this episode is a movement toward the desired event, then away again, then there is another turn which takes us closer and closer, almost infinitesimally close to what we expect in great suspense, and this is again followed by a movement away from this point…. There is always this arising of hopeful chances, words are spoken that might lead to the discovery; [there is] always the same picture of humanity, of men or women so intent on finding what they desire, striving and struggling so desperately for it, and [who] when they are face to face with their happiness [and] would only have to reach out and grasp it,… are blind.

These words could very easily have been written about *Le Malentendu*. In this attempt to create a modern tragedy Camus remains close to the traditions of the ancient Greek variety. (pp. 34-5)

[However, it] might in fact be doubtful whether *Le Malentendu* is a tragedy at all. It is perhaps rather a melodrama with philosophical overtones.

Whether or not the action of the play falls within the realm of tragedy, the basic problem of language still remains…. [One] of the major stylistic processes of the play is ambiguity and, with it, a certain bitter irony. Camus's intention was evidently to reconcile tragedy and modern language by giving simple everyday conversation tragic undertones within the context of the intrigue through double meaning. It would seem, however, that this process defeated its purpose by wearying the spectator. One soon grows tired of looking for a double meaning in practically every sentence that is uttered. The problem is further complicated by the fact that there are several different types of irony or ambiguity used in the play. These will be considered separately.

First, there is what we shall call the author's irony. This is a process that consists in putting into a character's mouth words that have a definite ironic ambiguity of which the character himself could not possibly be aware. (pp. 35-6)

A closely related process is that by which Camus expresses indirectly certain philosophical ideas. Here again he puts more meaning into the characters' words than they themselves are aware of. A very precise and down-to-earth statement in the context of character and situation can take on much more profundity when considered in the context of the metaphysical ideas that the author is trying to present…. What is involved … is not so much ambiguity as … two different levels of meaning on which [a] conversation can be interpreted. This technique has become much clearer and much more striking in the revision of the play. Roger Quilliot mildly reproaches Camus for the way his characters seem to vary in their symbolic function, causing our attention to jump back and forth from the characters as real people to their meaning in the philosophical
scheme of the play. In the 1958 version, the author has somewhat diminished this effect by eliminating many direct and conscious metaphysical statements from his characters' speeches. The new version is much simpler and thus more intense than the older. All the philosophical ideas of the first are implicit in the second, but in the latter Jan no longer steps out of character to express them. He remains a believable character, and the spectator draws out the deeper meanings in his simple, matter-of-fact speech. (pp. 37-8)

How does one explain such revision? Perhaps Camus decided that too many ambiguities would tend to bewilder the spectator. Perhaps he thought that, if he lessened them, those that remained would be more effective. Perhaps these constant allusions and double-meanings gave more lucidity and perspicacity to the characters than he wished them to have. Perhaps he decided that such a technique was too close to the _jeux d'esprit_ which he disliked in the works of such dramatists as Giraudoux. And perhaps it was a combination of several or all of these reasons that occasioned the omissions. Of course, there are still many ambiguous statements left in the revised version. But, for the most part, these fit well into the very nature and theme of the play, as the title itself suggests. They help to translate the basic theme of lack of communication between men. And more than that, they are useful and artistic in the wedding of symbolic meanings with the natural elements of a more or less realistic action. (p. 40)

Closely connected with the process of ambiguity and the use of an image to express a more profound idea than would normally appear on the surface is the problem of characterization. Camus is definitely not interested in presenting a complex psychological portrait of the people in his play. Although we would hesitate to call Jan, his mother, Martha and Maria symbols in the purest sense of the word, we cannot help but consider them as representative of certain attitudes in the context of the author's philosophical thought. A complete psychological analysis of the characters would destroy this function; if they are to carry across on the stage the message that Camus has in mind, they must be simple and, consequently, universal. (p. 41)

An essential element in the communication of the message in _Le Malentendu_ is the characterization of the old servant. He exists on a different level from the other characters, serving an almost entirely symbolic purpose. In the earlier versions he has an extremely small role, so small in fact that many people failed to understand his meaning and were greatly troubled by his appearance in the play. Camus was evidently aware of this misunderstanding, for he greatly augmented and, consequently, clarified the servant's role when he revised his play. At the beginning of Act I, scene ii, stage directions are added to show that the old man definitely sees Jan and Maria. He knows, then, all the time that Jan is not a lone traveller. Later …, when Jan hands Martha his passport, the 1958 version has the old man come in to distract Martha so that she will not read it…. This change evidently makes the action more believable, but it can also be interpreted on a deeper level. In Act II, scene viii, Camus has changed the directions to have the servant follow Martha and her mother into Jan's room. Then when Martha is searching her brother's pockets, he adds indications that the passport falls behind the bed, and the servant picks it up and carries it out without the two women noticing it…. But once again the revision has deeper significance. The author has made it very clear that the old man knows all along about the plot and is probably aware of Jan's identity before the murder. Such changes have evidently been made in order to emphasize and clarify the servant's symbolism; it is much more obvious in the 1958 version that he represents the indifferent world in which the characters find themselves.

After having discussed the various problems of ambiguity, symbolism and imagery, we shall return to the basic stylistic problem involved in _Le Malentendu_, that of the language of modern tragedy. The dominant style of _Le Malentendu_ is characterized by simplicity. Its bareness has reminded certain critics of the style of _L'Étranger_. The staccato rhythm and simplicity of the scene where Martha fills out the questionnaire concerning Jan's identity is but a slight exaggeration of the dominant tone of the play. In revising the text, Camus has taken pains to simplify the style still further. The simplicity and sobriety of the style sometimes seem inadequate to express the extreme emotions and profound meanings of the play. But, on the other hand, is this not a more natural method than the declamatory style of the traditional theatre? This is a difficult problem and one which, as we find in the unpublished Notebooks, continued to vex Camus. (pp. 43-4)
This does not mean, however, that the dry sobriety of tone is constant throughout the play. Camus makes subtle use of rhythm for variety. For the most part rather choppy or staccato, the cadence becomes slower and more complicated as the discussion moves to a deeper level. The most remarkable variety in the style comes during the few moments when Martha throws off restraint and expresses a sort of lyric élan…. In a strange poetry, mingled with desperation and greed, Martha's ardent speeches mark the highest points of the play. For all their bitterness and desperation, they are not entirely unlike some of the more lyrical passages in the essays of L'Envers et l'Endroit and Noces. Yet, at the same time, they are completely in character; in fact, they may have much to do with the fact that many consider Martha the strongest character in the play. In both the aesthetic and practical senses, they do much to emphasize and render more effective the general tone of the play.

We may now arrive at some conclusions about the principles that Camus develops in Le Malentendu concerning the problems of the modern tragedy…. A natural conversational tone, characterized by simplicity and even understatement, is used to bring the play closer to real life. But many ambiguities and ironic statements facilitate a deeper interpretation of the text. Psychologically simple characters, including one who exists almost entirely on the symbolic level, also help to bring out the universal tragic elements. A restrained but masterful use of images, as well as sparsely scattered lyrical passages, give tragic depth to the style. But one must admit that these processes have not been completely effective. The constant shifting from one level of meaning to another has a tendency to bewilder if not annoy the spectator. The constant double-meanings often seem artificial and even border on the precious. The characters, with the possible exception of Martha, have been so simplified that they do not seem to be properly motivated and, consequently, do not really live on the stage. Many of these problems were solved by the time that Camus adapted Faulkner's Requiem for a Nun, another important experiment in modern tragedy. Most important, he has discovered a vital principle inherent in the very nature of the theatre—'Rester vrai tout en jouant large'. It is obvious that Le Malentendu has an important place in the development of Camus's dramatic theories and in the general theatrical evolution of the age. Camus and his contemporaries learned much about the nature of modern tragedy from both the successes and failures of this experiment. (pp. 45-6)


Camus, Albert (Vol. 32): E. Freeman

Les Justes is the third and last of his original plays which Camus considered to be attempts at modern tragedy (that is to say, together with Le Malentendu and L'Etat de siège, but excluding Caligula), and is frequently regarded as one of his most successful pieces of writing for the theater. Many accounts of the play appear to be based on an implicit acceptance of its claim to be a modern tragedy. The heroic, exalted atmosphere and the astringent dialogue and structure are admired, and epithets such as "truly Cornelian aura" provide the final accolade. But just as in Corneille's theater the border line between tragedy and tragicomedy is frequently in dispute, so in Les Justes the author's moral ardor can be sensed to be in such an uneasy relationship with his artistic judgment that an objective critic is roused to examine the play's claim to being tragedy. Is it indeed this so much as a play in an inferior genre: melodrama? (p. 78)

An examination of Les Justes as a modern tragedy according to the classic formula will … depend to a large extent on the degree to which the tragic antagonists are equally "just."

The other two principal prerequisites of tragedy which Camus stressed [in a lecture given at Athens in 1955] are particularly relevant to the political and philosophical subject matter of Les Justes. The first is a classical Greek concept which has also been much appreciated by French tragedians, probably more than in any other Western European theater: the necessity of mesure in human conduct, or, to use the terms that echo
throughout Camus's works, the importance of observing "la limite qu'il ne faut pas dépasser"…. In Les Justes Camus is asking: What is the limit to the violence one can commit in the pursuit of just ends? To what extent is one justified in descending to the level of one's brutal and unscrupulous enemies if there is no other effective means of bringing about justice and democracy?…

The second characteristic of tragedy is more controversial and raises the whole question of tragedy as a cultural and philosophical phenomenon. According to Camus—and few would disagree with him here—great tragedy has flowered only twice, and briefly on each occasion: in Athens in the fifth century B.C. and in Western Europe during the late Renaissance. (p. 79)

Thus far, Camus is not very original, but where he does enter on new—and disputable—territory is in claiming that the climate is equally suitable for tragedy in the twentieth century…. The modern tragic hero will not be a later version of the Renaissance figures, taking on the same forces as Dr. Faustus. Those battles have been won: for Camus it is the liberators themselves, the spiritual descendants of Descartes and Robespierre, who have become the tyrants. The modern tragic hero, in short, will be pitted not against feudal, Christian ("rightwing") society, but against those who themselves defeated those forces in (predominantly Eastern) Europe in the first half of this century. Camus's theory of modern tragedy, at least as far as Les Justes and L'Etat de siège are concerned, is in fact irrevocably linked with his polemic against totalitarianism, particularly Stalinism, which dominated his art so considerably from 1945 onward.

Les Justes is crucial to this whole debate in so far as it is a conscious effort at creating tragedy along classic lines and is at the same time set in the home of dialectical materialism during the time of transition. In order to understand the exact nature of the tragic dilemma which Camus wished to portray in Les Justes, it is necessary to examine in some detail the sources and genesis of the play. We shall then be in a position to come to certain conclusions about the well-known difficulty of reconciling history, tragedy, and political commitment in general, and Camus's attempt to do so in particular.

One of the first references to Les Justes occurs in the second volume of Camus's Carnets, in an entry for the middle of June, 1947, where the working title "Kaliayev" is used. At this time Camus was preparing the subsection of L'Homme révolté entitled "Le Terrorisme individuel," and came across the historical figure of Kaliayev in Boris Savinkov's Souvenirs d'un terroriste. Camus saw in Kaliayev just what he needed for L'Homme révolté: a rebel with integrity, a man who, unlike the far better-known historical figures of Bakunin and Nechayev, refused to extend revolutionary action beyond certain limits, and who found a unique solution to the difficult ethical problem of tyrannicide…. The characters of Dora and Kaliayev ("Yanek") are clearly conceived from the outset, and a long sketch for their love scene in Act 3 is in fact the first working note for the play. This is important. Kaliayev is to be championed in L'Homme révolté as the ideal rebel, who must possess normal human emotions as a safeguard against the dehumanizing logic of Hegelian historicism. He must form a complete contrast with the terrifying robot visualized by Nechayev and Bakunin in the revolutionary catechism…. Camus was repelled by the inhuman extremism which characterized many of the anarcho-nihilists and bolshevists who, as he was to assert in L'Homme révolté, were the ancestors of the Stalinist tradition. Alternating with such entries are jottings for the play (as yet untitled) which show how Camus sought to emphasize the gulf between the ideal and the real terrorists of the day, and the consequent "déchirement" which this caused for Kaliayev and Dora…. (pp. 80-2)

From the fall of 1947 onward, Camus worked concurrently on Les Justes and L'Homme révolté, merging them completely in an article entitled "Les Meurtriers délicats," in which he extolled the historical terrorists who were in the process of becoming the protagonists of his play. In 1903 the Revolutionary Socialist Party formed a terrorist group known as the Organisation de Combat under the leadership of Azef and then of Savinkov. There followed a wave of assassinations constituting the second reign of terror, some twenty years after the first, which had resulted in the death of Alexander II in 1881…. Of royal personages the Grand Duke Sergei, uncle of Nicholas II, was the only victim; he was blown up by a bomb thrown by Kaliayev in
February, 1905, in exactly the same circumstances as those that make up the plot of Les Justes. At the very beginning of the article, Camus stresses the moral scrupulousness of the assassins…. (p. 83)

[On] his first attempt, Kaliayev checked himself as he was about to throw the bomb when he saw that the Grand Duke was accompanied by his wife, nephew, and niece. Historically, Kaliayev's action was approved by the whole group, even though it placed them at great peril…. This was consistent with their conduct generally…. Savinkov vetoed a bomb attack on Admiral Dubasov in a train because it might endanger innocent passengers. At another time, when escaping from prison, he agreed with his comrade that if necessary they would fire at the officers of the guard, but shoot themselves rather than fire at ordinary guardsmen. The essential attraction of these terrorists for Camus, therefore, was that they had a strict sense of a limit beyond which they would not extend violence.

Once this is known, it is possible to appreciate the importance of an original feature of Les Justes relative to the source material. Stepan Fedorov has no prototype in the Souvenirs and is quite foreign to the spirit of "Les Meurtriers délicats."…. Whereas Kaliayev, Dora, Annenkov, and Voinov were modeled with varying degrees of accuracy on historical figures (Dora being Dora Brilliant and Voinov being Voinovskiy), Stepan was not—at least as far as the Organisation de Combat was concerned. Significantly, although Kaliayev, Dora, and Annenkov were referred to in Camus's first notes by their Christian names, Stepan was known only by the descriptive names "le Tueur" and "le réaliste." He is thus a representative figure, standing for the ruthless "jacobin" spirit of the extremist revolutionary according to tradition. (pp. 83-4)

Camus was perfectly aware that he was fitting an a priori philosophical dialectic to a historical situation, and went so far as to assert: [the fact that the plot is basically authentic does not mean Les Justes is a historical play]…. He had done exactly the same thing with Caligula. The difference between the two plays—and in my opinion one of the reasons for the superiority of Caligula—is that Les Justes (like L'Etat de siège of the same period) is openly didactic, whereas Caligula is not…. This didacticism, this moral and philosophical commitment, has prevented Camus from interpreting the assassination of the Grand Duke Sergei with a degree of perspective sufficient to create an artistically coherent "modern tragedy." For despite Camus's attempt to prove that Le Justes is not a historical play—thereby claiming for it the universality which tragedy must have—and despite also the undoubted impression it gives of being a preconceived debate fitted to a convenient historical event (rather in the manner of Anouilh's Becket, for example), the fact remains that Les Justes is nevertheless modeled on historical circumstances with a fidelity that is against all the traditions of French tragedy. It is true that Camus has created Stepan to reinforce the absolutist-relativist antithesis, and in this respect Stepan serves the same function as Cherea in Caligula (although as the opposite term of the antithesis). It is true also that Camus has generalized and conceptualized the crucial issue of redemptive suicide. But, apart from this, Camus adheres as accurately as possible to the known facts of the assassination, particularly in the central debate over Kaliayev's refusal to kill the children. This fidelity to the facts vitiates the whole aspiration of the play to the status of tragedy.

A play that is based on the premise that there is a limit beyond which human action must not pass can be tragic only to the extent that it portrays a protagonist who, perhaps through some form of hubris (but not essentially), loses sufficient control of himself to move from mesure to démesure. In Les Justes there is some confusion as to what constitutes the limit separating the two concepts. That is to say, in the terms of Camus's political philosophy, what is the point at which justifiable and reasonably ethical revolutionary activity becomes unjustifiable brutal terrorism, aiming at quick results, ostensibly because of concern for the oppressed, but in truth, according to Camus, motivated by hatred of the oppressor and little more? Is it murder, or is it only certain kinds of murder? In Les Justes there are two limits. The first, which is intensely personal to the author, is the total sanctity of life. Camus's early note for the play suggests that all murder constitutes a limit…. To all intents and purposes the assassins have already gone beyond this limit at the outset of the play by having firmly resolved to assassinate the Grand Duke. It is clear from the importance which Camus attached to the idea of redemptive suicide that the tragic action in the play is the assassination
itself, which is only the consummation of the movement of tragic involvement which began for Kaliayev, Dora, and the others the day they compromised the purity of their ideals by finally resorting to terrorism. As is shown most acutely in Kaliayev and Dora, they are living in a hell on earth, that irrevocable state of damnation which was for Dostoevsky "the suffering of being unable to love." In the theater, however, the play, as tragedy at this level, is compromised for those who do not grasp Camus's premise—that the characters, having arrogated to themselves the power of life and death in any circumstances whatsoever, have already fallen into a metaphysical limbo. The point is all the more easily lost in the theater for any spectator who is not a total pacifist, since the assassination of a supposed tyrant does not automatically inspire revulsion and metaphysical anguish.

The real limit in the play at the obvious dramatic level is an extension and refinement of the first—the killing of children. Camus has now moved from the absolute position of a Tarrou (all execution is wrong) to a relative position (some executions are wrong) which turns Les Justes into an ostensibly more accessible political play about the ends versus the means. Once one accepts that this is the real limit in the play between mesure and démesure, the play loses its tragic appeal. Having to assassinate a man who, if not outrageously tyrannical himself, is a leading representative of an inhuman and despotic system, and succeeding in doing it without exceeding a crucial ethical limit (the distinction between a culpable adult and an innocent child) makes Kaliayev not a tragic figure in any dramatic sense, but rather the exemplary hero of a didactic melodrama exactly as defined by Camus. Not only exemplary, but lucky, since Fate sees to it, just as in the historic circumstances, that he is not faced a second time with the dilemma of deciding whether or not to kill the children. One feels that Anouilh or Sartre, each for different reasons, would not have allowed Kaliayev to escape so lightly.

Out of respect for the essential facts of the historical incident, Camus has not weighted circumstances heavily enough against Kaliayev for his ideals—his sense of limits—to be strained to breaking point. Kaliayev is allowed to be what Camus obviously believed him to be in real life: the ideal rebel, the perfect anti-Stalinist before the letter. He is too humble, too scrupulous, too flawless to be tragic in the accepted dramatic sense. (pp. 86-9)

Stepan is in fact the crux of Camus's dilemma in Les Justes, a dilemma that originated in Camus's attempt to do three things at once: (1) create a modern tragedy in accordance with a number of basic aesthetic principles; (2) make a statement about a twentieth-century disease of the political mind; and (3) remain reasonably faithful to the historic circumstances of 1905 (although Camus stressed that he was not writing a historical play, evidently he was not prepared to alter the details sufficiently to make Kaliayev a tragic hero in a truly classic and dramatic sense). The fundamental weakness of Les Justes as an attempt at modern tragedy is that there are two structural antagonisms, both potentially tragic but, as handled by Camus, pulling against each other and dissipating the tension. First, there is the play about 1905: Kaliayev and friends versus the established forces of czarist Russia. In Hebbel's terms, an individual representing a new order challenges the old order: he is crushed, but not without making his mark. Nine playwrights out of ten, basing an attempt at modern tragedy on the assassination of the Grand Duke Sergei in 1905, would have structured their play on this conflict. Camus, however, is the one playwright in ten who, anachronistically, saw this historic event as the occasion for a statement about Stalinism and political expediency in general. He thus created a rival antagonism: Kaliayev the idealist, the creator, the poet versus Stepan the realist, the destroyer, the killer.

But this back-dated vision of Stalinism is not the order of the day; it is not the force that crushes Kaliayev. In strict dramatic terms it is an intrusion, a propaganda digression revealing the extent to which Camus's political obsessions of 1946–1948 impaired his artistic judgment. Our conclusion then must be that the pretensions of Les Justes to modern tragedy are vitiated by the fact that the play contains two parallel, antithetical structures which overlap but never coincide: Kaliayev versus czarism, and Kaliayev versus ur-Stanlinism. The first is tragic but not dramatic; the second, dramatic but not tragic. The two could have coincided only if Camus had had sufficient courage to discard the strict historic framework of the assassination. (pp. 89-90)
As it is, *Les Justes* is "tragic" only in a loose, philosophical sense (in so far as the assassination of the Grand Duke, like all execution, however well reasoned, is physically and spiritually degrading); but in strict dramatic terms *Les Justes* is scarcely more tragic than the *Oresteia* would have been if Orestes had drawn the line after exacting his just vengeance on Aegisthus and decided to spare Clytemnestra. For Aeschylus, it was evil to kill one's mother, but in certain circumstances—such as at the command of Apollo—it was inevitable, and tragic. For Camus, it is evil to kill children. And so children are not killed. Camus would not have their blood on Kaliayev's hands any more than Nahum Tate in the eighteenth century would have Lear's aberration culminate in the death of Cordelia. Thus for three acts Camus points his play in the right direction for a genuinely dramatic and tragic consummation, builds up to a potentially tragic climax—and then commits what can best be compared to coitus interruptus. The last two acts are an anticlimax in every way. At the end of the play Kaliayev inspires in us a warm glow, which may have much to do with moral approbation, but which has none of that combination of pity, terror, and aesthetic pleasure which is the quintessence of tragic emotion.

It is tempting to talk of a failure of the imagination on Camus's part, but it is in fact all too easy to misunderstand his purpose in *Les Justes*. If he did not contemplate making any radical alteration to the facts of the 1905 assassination, it was because the plot he dug out of Savinksy was already richly suggestive for his all-important antitotalitarian polemics of the years immediately following 1945—and that was enough for him. Ironically, it is conceivable that if Camus had backed up his claim that he was not writing a historical play with greater conviction, and had brought Kaliayev, under pressure, to commit the atrocity I have proposed (which would have made it a much more Sartrean sort of play), he might, by implication, have made his point about Stalinism with greater effect, and at the same time achieved that synthesis of drama, tragedy, and ethics which eluded him throughout his life. (p. 91)


**Camus, Albert (Vol. 32): E. Freeman**

It was shortly after seeing a performance of *Les Possédés* during its provincial tour that Camus was killed. Those close to him believe that at this time he was just emerging from his long and difficult period of sterility and reappraisal—he is known to have been working hard on a novel, *Le Premier Homme*, for example. As far as the theatre is concerned, he confided to Germaine Brée in 1959 that he was toying with the idea of a play linking Don Juan-Sganarelle and Faust-Mephistopheles which he regarded as 'two aspects of the same dichotomy'. But it seems certain that no fragment of this or any other late work for the theatre by Camus exists.... Whether, once the Algerian War was over, and with his own theatre to work in amid the very different theatrical atmosphere of the 1960s, Camus would have gone on to produce a quantity of work of any significance makes interesting speculation, but is in the last resort doubtful. And so what finally is to be our assessment of the Camus whose last completely original work for the theatre was performed in 1949? Few critics, and even fewer theatre people, now believe that Camus's plays will enjoy the viability which seems assured for the work of dramatists such as Shaw, O'Casey, Pirandello, Brecht and Anouilh, although this stature appeared within Camus's grasp after the success of *Les Justes*. Two questions must be asked: to what extent has Camus succeeded in creating the modern tragedy with which he was obsessed throughout his career, and how successful is his work as theatre, independently of whether it constitutes a convincing form of modern tragedy?

In answer to the first question, it seems to me that Camus does not make a really effective dramatic exploitation of the advantages which his political and philosophical theories would appear to give him.... A predilection for the tragic theme of a conflict between a powerful individual (e.g. Antigone) and an invincible order, or representative of order (e.g. Creon), and a passionate concern for the importance of not transcending limits, more or less equating to the classical horror of *hubris*—overweening pride or *dèmesure*—these would
appear to leave Camus just as richly endowed in dramatic theory as Corneille and Racine. And so they do. But Camus's practice is not really a logical extension in dramatic terms of his theory. His theatre has the absurd as its premise, and this fact has far greater dramatic significance than the actions which result from it on the stage. Even if one agrees with Guicharnaud that Camus's plays, like those of Sartre, are 'crammed with action or the expectation of action', the fact remains that his tragedy is one of situation. It is metaphysical not psychological, and as John Cruickshank has observed, does not present 'flawed' heroes in the Elizabethan sense. Camus was convinced—strangely so in an experienced man of the theatre who revered Sophocles and Shakespeare—that metaphysics and psychology were incompatible in tragedy; and for him psychology in fact was anathema in any guise in any sort of play.

Unfortunately this conception of metaphysical tragedy has resulted in an excessively abstract form of expression. One of the best examples of this is Camus's handling of the mask, a favourite theatrical device of French dramatists since the Renaissance…. The mask, the instrument of inscrutability, the totally impenetrable screen around the personality, and cause of doubt, misunderstanding and murder, is the perfect metaphor of the absurd. In *Le Malentendu*, the blackest of his plays, Camus implies that this is the natural order of the world. (pp. 148-50)

[A] vision of a world in which 'no one is ever recognized' dominates all four plays. It should be noted that in each one Camus makes a very sparing literal use of the mask—some form of disguise or game of pretence. Caligula disguises himself as Venus; Kaliayev (off stage) as a street-hawker; Jan assumes the name of Karl Hasek; and Diego wears 'le masque des médecins de la peste'. There is, however, a considerable disparity between the brief and functional uses of the mask at a literal level and its application at the metaphorical level to stress the impossibility of communication, understanding and love between human beings. It is not just in *Le Malentendu* that Camus presents a despairing picture of a world in which the normal persona of human beings is the mask of tragedy. Once the mask is in place, it stays on. Only once does Camus manage effectively to exteriorize the transformation which has befallen the wearer, and that is in the powerful Act I curtain to *Caligula*. (p. 151)

An awareness of Camus's idea of how the fact of the absurd can affect the human personality is … essential for an understanding of the structure of his plays. Every main character from the first, Pèpe, to the last, Stavroguine, has become literally and metaphorically *figé*, fixed, blocked in time. In this respect—and coincidentally and not at all as a result of any 'influence'—Camus is perhaps more fundamentally Pirandellian than the scores of French dramatists who have made such ostentatious use of the Italian's more superficial plotting and characterization techniques since 1923. The trouble is that he hardly ever succeeds in rendering the mask/absurd metaphor concrete on the stage. The skill with which Anouilh, Giraudoux and Sartre manipulate *personae* is lacking in Camus, if not actually repugnant to him. One feels that Camus's commitment to his thesis—that alienation imposes masks of deception and insensitivity upon the real self—was too sincere. He was not dispassionate enough to use this classic device in a way which might legitimately please and intrigue in the theatre. Criticism after criticism of Camus's theatre offers the opinion that it is 'too intellectual', too obviously the work of a desiccated manipulator of ideas. On the contrary, the converse might just as easily be argued. Camus is indeed an intellectual dramatist in the sense that he believed the theatre ought to be a serious and non-commercial affair, a medium for important statements about the human condition, but hardly an intellectual in the matter of form. He does not possess the ability to stand back from his theme and present it objectively by means of illusion, perspective, juxtaposition of details in the classic manner of French dramatists since the seventeenth century. It is significant that two of Camus's plays which are considered to be among the most successful, *Requiem pour une nonne* and *Les Possédés*, are adaptations which retain most of the 'popular' elements of the original novels: physical violence, mystery, dramatic irony, flashbacks. Camus could not avoid the action which is a key feature of the scenarios provided by Faulkner and Dostoevsky, although he did, as we have seen, create a very different atmosphere in each case. I doubt whether, if he had lived to begin a new cycle of plays in the 1960s. Camus would have learned the lesson of these successes, namely that his ideal modern tragedy need not be static, totally verbal and...
interior. For Camus's abhorrence of technical virtuosity, psychological theatre and the well-made play stem from an intellectual disdain on his part which made him equate popular and 'theatrical' elements with inferior theatre. (pp. 153-54)

[Camus defined Caligula] as a 'tragedy of the intelligence' but made repeated attempts in the successive versions to make the play more human by modifying and developing the characters of Hélicon and Scipion for example, and making the character of Caligula more sympathetic. And yet, as Albert Sonnenfeld has argued in a detailed discussion of Camus's 'failure' as a dramatist [see above], it is very difficult for the audience to establish contact on any sort of human level with the hero. The problem is … that of communicating to an audience the real experience of the absurd, one of the effects of which is the impossibility of communicating anything to anyone. The task is feasible à la rigueur in the novel or cinema, but not in the theatre, as Martin Esslin has argued, unless the dramatist adopts a radically 'anti-cartesian' approach to dialogue, characterization and dramatic structure. Although … Camus appeared to be on the verge of a breakthrough with the character of 'le Vieux', the problem is one which he did not make any consistent attempt to solve. The highly experimental (and brilliantly successful) prose style of L'Étranger has no counterpart in the plays. Split asunder by this gulf between form and theme, Camus's theatre constitutes one of the greatest paradoxes of the transitional decade 1940–50. (pp. 155-56)

The time has now come to make a résumé of the main aspects of Camus's dramatic style, making allowance for the difficulty of synthesizing the work of such a highly personal artist who never repeated the exact theme and form of any work, either in the theatre or in any other medium.

Taking theme first, all of Camus's original plays and most of those he adapted or translated are based in some measure on the premiss that our human condition is absurd. Violence and repression are common features. The inevitability of death is a source of unparalleled anguish (Caligula), as is the arrogation of the power of life and death over other people (Les Justes, Requiem pour une nonne). Even when enjoying social and material success, man is haunted by an eternal quest for some physical or metaphysical goal, the exact nature of which is not always clear to him (Le Malentendu). Chance frequently takes what seems to be almost a malevolent course, thwarting all attempts to achieve happiness (Le Malentendu) or arbitrarily destroying that which already exists (Caligula). The protagonists are generally alienated from their physical background and from those human beings one would expect to be closest to them (Le Malentendu, Un Cas intéressant). The fact of the absurd can strike not merely individuals but whole sections of society. Civilized society is then split asunder in a conflict characterized by cowardice and treachery, and nihilistic collaboration with the absurd (L'État de siège, Révolte dans les Asturies, Les Possédés).

All of Camus's plays are based on conflict. The manifestations of the absurd constitute one of the terms—the general condition or existing order, against which the heroes of Camus's plays react, or rebel. The heroes, the antithetical term, are animated by a sense of 'revolt'. In Le Mythe de Sisyphe revolt designated a state of spiritual tension based on a lucid scrutiny of the absurd, and culminated in a curious form of stoic happiness. But in the theatre Camus handles revolt in a much more moralistic manner. Revolt must be creative and relative, not destructive and absolute (revolution). It must be based on a recognition of values, a 'qualitative' ethic, that is to say a scale of ethical priorities involving the totality of mankind. The rebel may not therefore combat the absurd with all the means at his disposal, and must be prepared for the anguish of making value judgments about other people, whose claims to life are no less great than his own. At all times the rebel must be aware of a limit, beyond which he must not pass, on pain of redeeming transgression with his own life. And yet the absurd presents a terrifying paradox. It is in itself a total experience: life is never the same again. People of intelligence and sensitivity are tempted to make a total reaction, since the 'logic' of the absurd in the mind of whoever fully experiences it requires that the whole basis of society be transformed and an awareness of the absurd be universalized. (pp. 156-57)
The form that Camus's plays take is conditioned by these linked themes of the absurd and revolt. At its most profound level of interpretation Camus's theatre is metaphysical tragedy in which a basically noble and sensitive individual is pitted against an invincible and inscrutable order. It is characterized by a state of tension which is frequently independent of what happens during the course of the play. As a representation of human action on the other hand, Camus's theatre is strictly speaking not tragedy in any recognized formal sense so much as melodrama according to his own definition: a simplistic presentation of right and wrong. This explains the heroic and Romantic aura of much of his characterization. Theme dominates form: what the play is saying is more important than the way in which it says it. Camus has no time for theatrical games. He has something to say and he gets on with it. His characteristic plot is therfore linear, situated on the brink of a crisis, and is developed in a straightforward and chronological manner. (p. 157)

In characterization, too, Camus shows the same tendency to stress general rather than particular features. This explains the inescapable impression of rigidity that many of Camus's characters make. Rather than individuals they represent types of social and philosophical positions: revolt (Diego, Pépe, Kaliayev), 'revolution' (Stepan, Caligula, Martha), cynical nihilism (Nada, Skouratov, Hélicon), proletarian indifference (Foka), vile bourgeoisie (the judge, the grocer, the chemist), the eternal feminine (Dora, Maria, Caesonia, Victoria, Pilar), the young idealist making his first contact with reality (Scipion, Voinov), the mature relativist (Cherea, Annenkov) … the list could continue until every character in Camus's theatre is categorized.

Camus's dialogue is consistent with this philosophical conception of character and setting. He regarded language as the main problem in modern tragedy, and sought to create a stylized, neutral idiom which would nevertheless be recognizable as the language of the twentieth century and yet at the same time sufficiently 'distanced' and elevated to create what he considered to be the proper aura of tragedy. With the exception of his immature apprentice-piece, Révolte dans les Asturies, his dialogue is polished, correct, even literary. In his search for modern tragedy Camus had no time for naturalism, and, much though he was affected by Hemingway and Faulkner in the novel, one feels he would have wished to derive nothing at all from their fellow American Arthur Miller in the theatre. (pp. 158-59)

Camus thus tried to harmonize all the elements of form to accord with his metaphysical and somewhat abstract themes. The universal and symbolic implications of his plays are stressed at the expense of the historical and concrete. With their elevated and unified tone, purity of language, minimization of physical detail, and concentration upon theme to the exclusion of superfluous humour, anecdote and scenic ingenuity, Camus's plays are thus much more authentically classical in form than those of his contemporaries. And yet there is always something lacking too. That vital spark of human warmth, of truly theatrical tension when a dramatist who is the complete master of his effects grips his audience exactly as he wishes through his characters, glows sporadically in Le Malentendu and Les Justes and perhaps comes near to being sustained only in Caligula. Despite the fact that, given the right production in the right place, these three plays can and occasionally do work well (and even L'État de siège appears to have had its moments in German translation), it remains true that in the last resort Camus's theatre reads far better than it acts. Thus by the standards the author set himself it is unsatisfactory, not to say a failure. (p. 160)

Incommunicable metaphysics, disparity of form and theme, faulty theatrical judgement, philosophical complexity and abstraction, cloying didacticism and failure to develop a sufficiently personal and artistically appropriate language to bear the weight of the play: these are the principal criticisms of Camus's theatre. Yet it would be quite wrong to regard it as a total failure. (p. 163)

The real merit of Camus's theatre lies in the sphere of theme rather than form, in so far as it is possible to separate the success of one from the failure of the other. Camus's theatre constitutes the most sincere attempt in its genre to create philosophical theatre mirroring the metaphysical anguish of our age. At the same time it combats the nihilism to which such speculation can lead, and in this respect the author follows clearly in the tradition of the great French moralists. Camus's theatre is unequalled for the probity and passion with which it
defended human values during a decade in France when they had never been more fragile. (p. 164)


**Critical Essays: Camus, Albert (Vol. 4)**

_Camus, Albert 1913–1960_

Camus was an Algerian-born French novelist, dramatist, and existentialist essayist. His "philosophy of the absurd," developed in _The Stranger_, a novel, and _The Myth of Sisyphus_, essays, became a point of reference for an entire generation during the forties and fifties.

Modern literature is oversupplied with madmen of genius. No wonder, then, that when an immensely gifted writer, whose talents certainly fall short of genius, arises who boldly assumes the responsibilities of sanity, he should be acclaimed beyond his purely literary merits.

I mean, of course, Albert Camus…. Being a contemporary, he had to traffic in the madmen's themes: suicide, affectlessness, guilt, absolute terror. But he does so with such an air of reasonableness, _mesure_, effortlessness, gracious impersonality, as to place him apart from the others. Starting from the premises of a popular nihilism, he moves the reader—solely by the power of his own tranquil voice and tone—to humanist and humanitarian conclusions in no way entailed by his premises. This illogical leaping of the abyss of nihilism is the gift for which readers are grateful to Camus. This is why he evoked feelings of real affection on the part of his readers. Kafka arouses pity and terror, Joyce admiration, Proust and Gide respect, but no modern writer that I can think of, except Camus, has aroused love. His death in 1960 was felt as a personal loss by the whole literate world.

Whenever Camus is spoken of there is a mingling of personal, moral, and literary judgment. No discussion of Camus fails to include, or at least suggest, a tribute to his goodness and attractiveness as a man. To write about Camus is thus to consider what occurs between the image of a writer and his work, which is tantamount to the relation between morality and literature. For it is not only that Camus himself is always thrusting the moral problem upon his readers. (All his stories, plays, and novels relate the career of a responsible sentiment, or the absence of it.) It is because his work, solely as a literary accomplishment, is not major enough to bear the weight of admiration that readers want to give it. One _wants_ Camus to be a truly great writer, not just a very good one. But he is not. It might be useful here to compare Camus with George Orwell and James Baldwin, two other husbandly writers who essay to combine the role of artist with civic conscience. Both Orwell and Baldwin are better writers in their essays than they are in their fiction. This disparity is not to be found in Camus, a far more important writer. But what is true is that Camus' art is always in the service of certain intellectual conceptions which are more fully stated in the essays. Camus' fiction is illustrative, philosophical. It is not so much about its characters—Meursault, Caligula, Jan, Clamence, Dr. Rieux—as it is about the problems of innocence and guilt, responsibility and nihilistic indifference. The three novels, the stories, and the plays have a thin, somewhat skeletal quality which makes them a good deal less than absolutely first-rate, judged by the standards of art. Unlike Kafka, whose most illustrative and symbolic fictions are at the same time autonomous acts of the imagination, Camus' fiction continually betrays its source in an intellectual concern.

What of Camus' essays, political articles, addresses, literary criticism, journalism? It is extremely distinguished work. But was Camus a thinker of importance? The answer is no. Sartre, however distasteful certain of his political sympathies are to his English-speaking andience, brings a powerful and original mind to philosophical, psychological, and literary analysis. Camus, however attractive his political sympathies, does
not. The celebrated philosophical essays (The Myth of Sisyphus, The Rebel) are the work of an extraordinarily talented and literate epigone. The same is true of Camus as a historian of ideas and as a literary critic. Camus is at his best when he disburdens himself of the baggage of existentialist culture (Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Heidegger, Kafka) and speaks in his own person. This happens in the great essay against capital punishment, "Reflections on the Guillotine," and in the casual writings, like the essay-portraits of Algiers, Oran, and other Mediterranean places.

Neither art nor thought of the highest quality is to be found in Camus. What accounts for the extraordinary appeal of his work is beauty of another order, moral beauty, a quality unsought by most 20th century writers. Other writers have been more engaged, more moralistic. But none have appeared more beautiful, more convincing in their profession of moral interest. Unfortunately, moral beauty in art—like physical beauty in a person—is extremely perishable. It is nowhere so durable as artistic or intellectual beauty. Moral beauty has a tendency to decay very rapidly into sententiousness or untimeliness. This happens with special frequency to the writer, like Camus, who appeals directly to a generation's image of what is exemplary in a man in a given historical situation. Unless he possesses extraordinary reserves of artistic originality, his work is likely to seem suddenly denuded after his death….

Camus is the writer who for a whole literate generation was the heroic figure of a man living in a state of permanent spiritual revolution. But he is also the man who advocated that paradox: a civilized nihilism, an absolute revolt that acknowledges limits—and converted the paradox into a recipe for good citizenship. What intricate goodness, after all!


Throughout [Camus'] career he remained an artist who was also an intellectual, rather than an intellectual, like Sartre, who used the arts for polemical and theoretical ends. Although he did his university work in philosophy—his thesis was on Plotinus—he was never a professional, or even a particularly natural philosopher; he was a moralist who managed to make a persuasive system out of his novelist's preoccupation with conduct. The Rebel may be a remarkably probing and sustained intellectual performance for a man of letters, but it is also, for such a difficult, abstruse work, curiously beautiful. The man of letters triumphed over the philosopher, not only in the lucid rhetoric of the close, but in the texture itself of the book. What gives it that sombre, unexpected beauty is something beyond mere style as artifice; it is the quality that forms and controls style: an unwavering sense of justice, a tense humility….

One of his greatest strengths as a thinker was that he demonstrated from the inside just how hopeless the liberal humanist position has become. It is not simply that modern industrial states are too vast and highly organized for the creed to be effective, or even meaningful. It is rather that they are organized in such a way that they exert on all beliefs an intolerable pressure which forces them into totalitarianism. Both the nineteenth century's nihilism and its revolutionary utopianism produced their separate brands of totalitarianism—of the right and the left, Hitler's and Stalin's. Against them, liberal humanism was too vaguely loving, hopelessly enlightened and full of optimistic intentions to be a viable alternative.

What Camus set in its place was not a philosophy but a personal stance that assumed nothing, expected nothing and was critical of everything. His early concept of the Absurd was, I suppose, a secularized sense of tragedy, an analysis of the way a meaningless death gratuitously calls in question a life without meaning, or a life amounting, at best, to no more than that death. 'Nothing, nothing had the least importance, and I know quite well why… From the dark horizon of my future', says Meursault the Outsider, 'a sort of slow, persistent breeze had been blowing towards me, all my life long, from the years that were to come.'…
[By] cutting the roots to his childhood [as Camus did], a writer not only cuts off much confusion and mess and darkness, he also runs the risk of cutting himself off from the sources of real feeling. Camus avoided this by giving himself with extraordinary generosity to the present. He did so without drama or self-pity, without preconceptions, regrets or illusions, with great intelligence and modesty, and by creating a style which was lucid, unfailingly objective, yet humane, tentative and lonely. He was courageous without making claims; he had, above all, no conceit. Simply by recognizing the present impossibility of systematized morality he emerged as the one genuine imaginative moralist of our time.


For Camus, the greatness of man, that which releases him from absurdity, lies in his 'consciousness' and his power of rebellion—a rebellion which Camus calls 'metaphysical'. It is a rebellion, not so much against the terms in which existence is given, as against the submissiveness, the unthinking acceptance, which allows those terms to determine human reality. This Sisyphean theme is the basis of Camus' novel, The Plague, which could be said to be an extended working out, in a modern setting, of the old myth….

'To leave all justice to God', says Camus in The Rebel, 'is to sanctify injustice', and that is why 'it is better to die on one's feet than live on one's knees'.

In the work of Camus, then, we see the human rebellion hurling itself against a meaningless universe and claiming for itself the power to justify happiness. The rebellion is not an individual act of Promethean defiance, but a work of human compassion, and it neither seeks nor requires any absolute to vindicate it. In the words of Colin Smith, 'Rebellion has its own meaning as the final action of which man is capable when everything else dissolves into irrationality and death.' The meaning is in the rebellion itself: it is not in the results of rebellion, which may be nothing but failure and which in any case can never create permanent values….

The obvious difference between Camus and Sartre is that the former gives an important place to human relatedness and avoids the latter's loveless individualism. For both writers there can be only one kind of meaning, and that is the meaning created by man himself; but for Camus this meaning is found not so much in individual as in corporate action, and the metaphysical rebellion which he demands issues in a sense of human solidarity….

[In The Stranger,] Camus cannot subscribe to any 'objective' theory of the atonement: the cross is meaningful because it typifies the human rebellion against the senselessness of existence, but we make a serious mistake if we think that it has created new conditions in which meaning has somehow become 'given' and permanent. This is precisely the mistake which the Church has made. If there is resurrection, if a supernatural order has now imposed its solutions upon absurdity, then Christ's death is no longer the desperate throw of man against futility; it is surrender, not rebellion, and it is therefore 'inhuman' in the sense that it ends by denying the need for rebellion and proclaims acceptance as the way of salvation. So man loses one of his essential dimensions, and turns into an ideology the values which have no existence except in unceasing, ever-renewed struggle.

Camus distinguishes sharply between 'the only two possible worlds that can exist for the human mind': they are 'the world of grace' and 'the rebel world'. The former is Christian, the latter is not. Either we deny all power to justify ourselves and wait submissively for supernatural blessings; or we decide that meaning can come only from our own efforts, and act accordingly….

The Plague is one of those rare novels which release the tragic protest and deepen our awareness of what is 'genuinely human'. We recognize ourselves in it, and yet we did not know that we could be as admirable as
this. Given the conditions of the plague, we might all hope to act like a Rieux or a Tarrou or an Othon.

Camus is surely right in thinking that to understand oneself as 'genuinely human' is to understand oneself as a rebel. It is important, however, to remove political overtones from the word 'rebel'. While it is true that the human rebellion may and often will find political forms of expression, the 'metaphysical' rebellion of which Camus speaks refers to something which preexists specific forms of rebellion and stands for a characteristic of our existential awareness as such. The word is not used to mean an attempt to overthrow some constituted authority: it points rather to the vision, the questioning, the protest which man finds in himself. The starting-point of rebellion is the recognition that the world provides no objective correlate which is coincident with man's interior vision, and it lays upon him the necessity of acting in the light of that vision while refusing to be an instrument of the forces which threaten it….

Of course there are limits to human understanding beyond which God is inscrutable and his ways past tracing out; if this were not so, God would be nothing more than an idol—a projection of human fantasies and ambitions claiming authoritative status. But the prophets of Israel will have none of this. The divine word is not an echo of human ambitions: it is a word of judgment as well as promise; it summons men to depart from iniquity and to ally themselves with the divine compassion.

There are thus two kinds of rebellion open to man: the false, self-destroying kind which is rebellion against God; and the true, liberating and life-giving kind which is rebellion with God. To obey God is to become a rebel against sin and evil, against all that separates man from the source of life and virtue, against all the destructive forces inside and outside man which masquerade as God. To obey God is also to align oneself with meanings and values which have their source in God but which man himself is called to actualize in human history—in politics, economics, social organization, as well as in the individual himself. The fact that these meanings and values always transcend the power of man to grasp or achieve is the reason why the human rebellion always has a Sisyphean character and never attains finality; at the same time, it also forces upon man the realization that he is not God. Only a transcendent God can give the lie to the absolutist claims of man; only a transcendent God is our safeguard against attributing divine authority to human programmes. Camus is right when he points to the terrible consequences which follow when man introduces 'absolutes' into his affairs and claims to be acting in their name. But this is precisely the primal sin of man in the biblical doctrine: 'ye shall be as gods' are the words which lead to the Fall; it is man at the height of his aspiration who forgets the limits of rebellion and plunges into disorder and misery. But without the transcendent God to remind him of his imperfect insights and the hidden 'cellarage' of his self-regard, there is no reason why he should ever do otherwise or understand the cause of his collapse.

The transcendence of God is therefore both the source of the human rebellion and its limitation….

I think we must say that Camus is mistaken when he places in opposition to each other the world of grace and the rebel world. To live by grace is to live as a 'rebel' and to find one's power of rebellion increased. This may seem a startling statement to those who see in the Church nothing but submission and inaction, but I agree with Harvey Cox in his belief that it is one of the great biblical correctives to the distortions of 'tradition'. Catholic and Protestant alike have too often understood 'grace' or 'justification' in essentially static terms having little to do with the ongoing challenge of the secular conditions of man's existence. This is not to deny the Church's historic role in the relief of need and suffering, but generally speaking this role has been performed without much radical questioning by the Church of the political, social, and economic orders themselves.

Camus's Don Juan is not 'innocent'. He has decided to live as if he were innocent, which is a very different thing. Such a choice is already reflective, already rational, and the life thus chosen must at least sometimes be beset by the alternatives which the choice has excluded. No doubt it is true that man is 'penetrated by the absurd', as Camus says, but it is no less true that he is penetrated by a sense of moral realities—which may, indeed, be ignored, but which cannot simply be excluded from consciousness by an initial choice. The philosophy of the absurd makes all purposive action—including the choice of absurdity itself—impossible. If, as Camus suggests, consciousness of the absurd makes all actions equal, then there can be no basis for choosing anything at all and life becomes a mere succession of random impulses…. 

Camus moved away from this position in *The Plague* and *The Rebel*. He did so by trying to fit a philosophy of revolt into his philosophy of the absurd. I have suggested that the two philosophies are inconsistent with each other: there is no reason for being a healer in an absurd world, and Camus was right when he said in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* that in such a world we can be virtuous only by accident. But *The Plague* shows that there are moral values: the whole novel can be read as a passionate protest against totalitarian political systems which are founded on murder and outrage. The philosophy of the absurd cannot account for the existence of the categorical imperative which summons men to revolt against human suffering; on the contrary, the fact that the world contains this imperative must be counted as evidence against absurdity. It is also make untenable the view that man can choose 'innocence'…. 

Throughout the novel one feels the intensity of Camus's sympathy for ordinary people, who may indeed have lost the innocence of childhood but whose guilt can never merit the monstrous tyranny of a hideous death. It is hard to disagree with this verdict, and the fact that the problem is a very old one which has called forth many attempts to justify God is hardly a sufficient answer to Camus's agonized question. One cannot help feeling that Camus has shown that all theodicies are in the end nothing but callous sophistry. 

If *The Plague* were merely about external evil for which man is not responsible, we should have to concede that Camus had made his point. But we have noticed that this is not so. The disease is also meant to be a symbol of the evil in man, and it is a weakness of the novel that microbes are very inadequate symbols of human motives. The plague bacillus creates no moral conflict: it must simply be opposed and eliminated. The matter is clear-cut and the appropriate human action is obvious to any reasonable man. But if the plague represents the evil element in man—the desire to dominate, for example—then moral conflict must arise and the problem of appropriate action will become incomparably more complex. The weakness of *The Plague* is that it tries to treat the latter kind of case as though it were the former kind, with the result that the moral ambiguity of human motives is hard to fit into the framework of the parable…. 

It is impossible to achieve personal sanctity, with or without God, in a world which does not offer unambiguous moral choices. Our very existence is a kind of 'fall' into unfulfilled potential in which there are no hard outlines and no escape from the anxiety which conditions all our becoming. Christ himself was not exempt from the tragic destiny which marks all genuinely human existence. To seek to abstract oneself from a sinful world in order to cultivate a detached rectitude is to be guilty of what Berdiaev called a transcendent egoism. It turns out that the pursuit of individual moral integrity is itself morally blameworthy, and may even be a subtle way of achieving that very sense of domination which, in its overt political forms for example, we rightly condemn. It is to this problem that Camus turns his attention in *The Fall*…. 

It is certainly a mistake to suppose, as some have been all too ready to do, that in *The Fall* Camus shows himself to be a convert to the orthodox Christian doctrine of original sin. Camus has not abandoned his theory of limits: excessive claims to virtue and excessive accusations of guilt are both disastrous, leading inevitably to tyranny and servitude. Man is not wholly innocent, and Clamence's recognition of the presence of self-regarding motives in his life of virtue is an advance on Rieux's simplistic morality of 'doing his job'. But to swing as Clamence does to the opposite extreme of unrelenting self-denunciation is to forget that there are also limits to guilt. Camus is suggesting that denial of man's *relative* innocence is as catastrophic as denial of
his relative wickedness….

I think Camus is implying that, although we are guilty, our only hope lies in our being treated as if we were innocent. He is hinting at something that is surprisingly like the doctrine of grace…. Camus sees that this is the only exit from the crushing morality of merit and desert, but he has failed to notice the emphasis of the New Testament on the cost and sacrifice which made it possible. The conclusion which Clamence seems to draw from the Gospel is the optimistic one that human guilt is not, after all, a very serious matter—a view which is very much in line with Camus's idea of the secret 'innocence' of man which we have noticed in his earlier books….

[For] all the shrewdness of its insights and the clarity of its language, The Fall is finally a disappointing book: it offers only an ironical commentary on a serious human question. We are left with a false prophet, and the solution to the problem of human guilt seems to vanish into the rain and fog of Amsterdam where the judge-penitent carries on his profession. Perhaps Camus is simply saying that there is no solution and that we must be content to live ambiguously in the strange half-light between guilt and innocence without claiming virtue and without losing heart. This is an attractive, almost Epicurean view, and probably most of us are able to live by it for most of the time. But it does not help us 'in the sombre season or the sudden fury', and it is hard to see how it can include the kind of challenge and sacrifice which made Camus's earlier imperative of revolt so exhilarating. There are limits to the living of life within limits.


It is true that, compared to the Arthur Koestler of Darkness at Noon, to the Malraux of La Condition humaine, to the Orwell of 1984 or of the essays on Mahatma Gandhi and Burnham, or to the Sartre of Les Mains sales or Les Séquestrés d'Altona, Camus does tend, because of [his] obsession [with the death penalty], to look at politics from a very narrow angle. He sees little but the problem of violence, and always in the highly generalized terms of a philosophy which, in his view, justifies killing in the name of historical inevitability. He offers nothing of Sartre's or Koestler's feeling for the complexity and unpredictability of history, little of Orwell's detailed analysis of how doctrines and attitudes change in response to different situations, none of Malraux's ability to dramatize the wide general sweep of the historical process and thus make it emotionally as well as intellectually comprehensible. But if he sees things narrowly, Camus also sees them sharply. The concern for the living individual already implicit in his early work, and essential to his view of the artist's calling, recurs in its most intense and moving form in those books and articles in which he is striving to protect men against the two worst things on ideology can do to them: kill them outright or deprive them of their individuality. It is this concern to protect the individual against both these dangers which inspires what is, from a political standpoint, his most complex and probably his most satisfying work: The Plague.

From the moment of its publication, in 1947, this novel was interpreted in political terms: as an allegory of the German occupation and French Resistance movement and as an interpretation of this movement presented by a man once involved in it, as a more general description of totalitarianism in action, and as a novel that recommended, though without leaving the plane of allegory, a certain form of political behavior. While it is on the first level that its transposition of the definite ambitions of the Nazi movement into the more impersonal activity of the plague is most open to criticism, it is nevertheless here that its immediate appeal to the 1947 reader was to be found….

[Paneloux] is, in fact, forced to confront the dilemma which Camus himself presents, in The Rebel and elsewhere, as the major objection to Christianity: that if God is all-powerful and all-good, it is impossible to understand why he should allow the innocent to suffer through natural causes. Such considerations are, of course, only tangentially relevant to the political content of the novel. No philosopher of history, however providential his vision, has maintained that absolutely everything is for the best, and that the progress of the
dialectic knoweth even the fall of the sparrow. What the introduction of these wider issues does illustrate, however, is the extent to which the Camus of *The Plague* avoids the major pitfalls of the political novel: relevance to only one period and to only one problem.

*The Plague* treats the problem of totalitarianism from a number of different angles, and it also recommends an attitude of tolerant agnosticism in political matters. But it is also a novel of the human condition, an attempt to show the problem of suffering in a metaphysical as well as in a political context. It may well be that, with the passage of time, its immediate applicability to the problems confronting France or Europe in the 1940's will become less immediately visible. It is already difficult for young readers to grasp the references to the German occupation and to the Resistance movement, and the gradual liberalization of even the French Communist party will make Camus's attack on totalitarianism increasingly difficult to understand. Nevertheless, three aspects of *The Plague* will more than outweigh these possible disadvantages: the excellence of Camus's prose, especially in the imagery which serves to emphasize both the naturalness of the plague and the delights of the natural life; the criticism of all forms of abstract thought; and the plea for tolerance, which has a far wider applicability than the immediate circumstances for which Camus was writing….

[The] political meaning [of *The Fall*] is linked to a particular interpretation of why bourgeois intellectuals are attracted by the absolute discipline of the Communist party which seems to have occurred to Camus during the controversies over *The Rebel*. They feel guilty at the privileges and freedom which they enjoy in a society where so many others are neither rich nor free, and they lack the strength of character to adopt a reasonable attitude toward their guilt. Acceptance of communism enables them to see this guilt as a necessary phenomenon and also offers them a way of escaping from it through the highly disciplined revolutionary struggle for a classless society. This meaning is not, however, something that leaps immediately to the eye, and it has never been as widely discussed as the relevance of *The Plague* to the German occupation. Indeed, it could even be argued that it is so well disguised by the other aspects of the novel, and especially by the light which *The Fall* casts upon Camus's attitude to Christianity, that a political interpretation is almost a classic example of the intentionalist fallacy….

[The] political meaning of *The Fall* is clear only to the reader who has been told that it is there, and the book is much less obviously a political novel than *The Plague*. There is no point in being committed unless people can see what you are being committed about, and the same criticism of relative obscurity can also be leveled at the short story "The Renegade," whose political implications are apparent only to someone with a fair understanding of *The Rebel*… *The Fall* and "The Renegade" are thus concerned, like *The Plague*, with totalitarianism, and both recommend, as did Camus's earlier novel, the same attitude of moderation: We must guard against exaggerating either our sinfulness or our initial revolt, lest we become infected with the intolerance and lust for power which characterize the bacillus of the plague.

All three works express the same agnostic humanism, but the second two are particularly open to the criticism that the diagnosis which they offer involves a considerable oversimplification of the issues involved….

Almost everything which Camus says about politics in the two volumes of his *Carnets* that have so far been published indicates that he took part in politics only reluctantly and always tried to give priority to artistic considerations. Had he been born in a different age, when political questions presented themselves with less urgency, there is little doubt that he would have remained a more detached artist, and that his work would have reflected more of his declared ambition to write prose as Mozart composed music. In a way, this would have been a pity. The great appeal which Camus made in the 1940's was as a moralist, and his intense concern for ethical questions fitted in remarkably well with the political mood of the time. The excellence of *The Plague* lies precisely in the way that this encounter between his conscience and the political atmosphere of postwar France gives rise to considerations that are applicable to the permanent problems of political action and not solely to one period. Without the impact that politics made on Camus in the 1940's, we should be poorer by a masterpiece; and without the political concerns that continued to inspire part of his work in the
1950's, we should lack the opportunity of seeing how some very good books can be written under the inspiration of some rather limited ideas.


*The Plague* will endure partly because it achieves something rare in fiction: its theme and plot resemble each other closely, each in itself demonstrating the same concept. Considering the horse and rider or chest and treasure relationship of plot and theme in most fiction, Camus' is a remarkable accomplishment. Much of the power of this powerful work is found in the natural interweaving of plot and theme which here, because of their similarity, peculiarly reinforce and electrify each other.

The plot of the story is revealed in five parts. Of these the middle one is smallest and the second and fourth largest, so there is in the structure some symmetry which is not, however, worked out down through the level of the individual chapters. Why then bother with dividing the novel into parts? Obviously Camus feels that each is doing a distinct job.

I believe the best one-word summary of the five parts of the book, in order, would be: unawareness, awareness, death, commitment, and life. First the people of Oran, and they are not extraordinary in this way, are characterized as making no effort to reach the true nature of each other, and, unaware of the reality of their world and its other inhabitants, they are unfit to become easily aware of the coming plague. Then the brutal statistics awaken them, and they psychologically gird for battle. In the third part, they are crushed both physically and psychologically; their bodies die, and so do their minds and hearts; they are ready to surrender, and their hearts are emptied of love. But in part four they learn how to fight; they learn that their resistance must be organized; they learn that only by fighting beside and for one another do they have any hope of surviving themselves. When in part five the plague leaves, the survivors, despite their tendency to isolate themselves once again, are keenly alive; and they have learned how to live better. Unawareness, awareness, death, commitment, life: that is the shape of the plot.

The theme of the plague is this: in life we choose either to live or to die. To die we first cease truly to communicate; to live we first communicate truly and then we commit ourselves to our fellow man. So this is the shape of the theme of *The Plague*: death—noncommunication—communication—commitment—life. Notice how very similar this is to the shape of the plot: unawareness, awareness, death, commitment, life. (Unawareness and awareness are so like non-communication and communication in this book that they are virtually the same.) Therefore, between the plot and the theme the only difference is that the concepts are in a slightly different order: compared to the order of the plot, the theme's parts are ordered 2, 3, 1, 4, 5; compared to the order of the theme, the plot's parts are ordered 3, 1, 2, 4, 5. The obvious reason for this juxtaposition is that death, which is thematically at the opposite pole from life, must dominate the fulcrum of the book for dramatic reasons. Either way, both plot and theme demonstrate the same concept, a concept which, when applied in an analysis of all the works of its remarkable author, should shed new light on his landmark thinking.


**Critical Essays: Camus, Albert (Vol. 9)**

**Camus, Albert 1913–1960**
The Algerian-born Camus was one of the most distinguished of the French existentialists, contributing seminal works in several genres: novels, plays, and philosophical essays. In his interpretation of existentialism revealed in both *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Stranger*, Camus attempted to deal with the problem of the absurdity of existence, the need for order and understanding in the chaos of existence. This concern remained central to Camus's work throughout his brief career. He was the recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957. (See also *CLC*, Vols. 1, 2, and 4.)

Reduced to its simplest expression, Camus's thought is contained in a single question: What value abides in the eyes of the man condemned to death who refuses the consolation of the supernatural? Camus cannot take his mind off this question. All his characters bring an answer; one has only to listen to them. (p. 92)

Objectivity with Camus does not strive to create an illusion of reality, for it is precisely the real which is being questioned. It strives, rather, to give the sensation of the fragmentation, the incoherence of a world which has, so to speak, lost its nuts and bolts….[In *The Stranger*] Camus wanted to show an alienated subjectivity by letting the character depict himself through acts which do not express him. The difficulty was the greater as the *récit*, by its very nature, supposes a narrator who arranges past events according to the meaning he confers upon them—whereas here, precisely, the meaning is lacking. The narrator has lost the key to his own secret: he has become a stranger to his own life. He holds only facts, and facts are nothing. Therefore, he cannot give his existence a meaning which would establish its unity. Having neither past nor future, he has only a present which is crumbling away and does not become memory. Time, until the final revolt, is nothing for him but a succession of distinct moments, which no Cartesian God pieces together, which no vital impulse spans, which no remembrance transfigures. Camus has rendered admirably this fall of the present into insignificance through a paradoxical use of the first person narrative. The main character gives an account of the facts as they occurred in his life up to the eve of his execution, without the perspective of the immediate past, without extension and without resonance. Nothing is explained, but everything is revealed by the tone and the structure of the work, by the contrast of the two climaxes: the almost involuntary murder, where "the red explosion" of the sun plays a more important role than the man, and which marks the culmination of fatality; the revolt which gives birth to freedom within the confines of a destiny narrowly bounded by death. The art of Camus's *récit* lies in the subtle use of the processes which take the place of analysis, in the way the discontinuity of existence is emphasized through the continuity of tone which places all events on a single plane of indifference.

And yet, the alienation is far from being complete. A stranger to himself and to others, Meursault has a homeland: sensation. Interiority has, so to speak, emigrated from the soul to the body, and only moments of happy sensation restore a friendly world to the exile. In this sense, Camus's hero is a sort of plebeian brother of Gide's *Immoralist* who gives to the exaltation of the body the value of a protest against the false seriousness of a morality which finds it can come to terms with injustice. (pp. 92-3)

Camus, like Malraux and Sartre, belongs to a generation which history forced to live in a climate of violent death. At no other time, perhaps, has the idea of death been linked so exclusively to that of a paroxysm of arbitrary cruelty…. Never before had death come to man with the new face now modeled by its millions of slaves. Neither the cult of the dead, nor any belief in glory, nor any faith in eternal life accompany death into this hell. This is the image of death which is woven into every page of Camus's work. (pp. 93-4)

From *Caligula* to *The Plague*, Camus covered the same ground as had Malraux from *The Conquerors* to *Man's Fate*. Like Malraux, he confronted this problem with the aid of Nietzsche. The drama for this Nietzschean generation was that it lived on Nietzsche's thought and had simultaneously to deal, in actual fact, with its caricatural realization on a practical plane. It exalted the will to power in the individual at the very moment it prepared to fight it outside in the form of imperialism…. Stendhal's Julien Sorel (*The Red and the Black*) dreams of "distinctions for himself and freedom for all." Though he scorns what he attains—"Is love (war, success) then no more than this?"—the disappointment is partial and does not put into question the value
of existence. When, after he has been condemned to death, Julien examines and judges himself, he can absolve himself. He has carried out without flinching the "duty" toward himself which his will to greatness had prompted; this certainly is his absolute. (p. 94)

Compare Meursault's attitude to Julien's as both face death. Just as he had not premeditated his crime, Meursault neither judges it nor assumes it. In contrast, Julien enters wholly into the least of his decisions. "My crime was premeditated," he tells the jury. Meursault neither gambles nor loses; the disconnected time in which he loses his way cannot find consummation in the moment. His entire existence is nothing but a misunderstanding, and it is through a misunderstanding that he eventually gives and suffers death. "I have not lived in isolation on earth," says Julien, "I had the powerful notion of duty … I was not carried away."

Meursault is carried away, as his generation was to be carried away into war, by the combined effect of fever and violence. He stands in the blind spot of indifference where everything is equivalent; Julien stands at the summit of a difference which owes its worth to a unique existence. And yet, in front of death, the two meet in a revolt born of their nostalgia for happiness…. But Julien's revolt has a limited purpose: against society it sets up the individual and his sovereign demands. Beyond the social mechanisms which have trapped him, Meursault directs his protest against the human lot. Amid the indifference of a world devoid of God, nothing has any importance or value, except the pure act of living.

To live is enough—there is no humility whatsoever in this assertion. Camus reached it through revolt…. Is there any certainty one can set up in the place of hopes which betray and despair which debilitates? Again Camus answers: to live. Life as passion, challenge, obstinate refusal of all supernatural consolation, amor fati. Here again, Meursault and Julien meet; both think "that there is no destiny above which one cannot rise through contempt." One also sees where they part company: from one obstacle to the next, from one victory to another, Julien conquers his destiny. No sooner has he reached the summit, than he is hurled straight into the abyss. Imprisoned, then condemned, it occurs to him that he might escape, but he does not dwell on the idea. A great individual does not begin his adventure anew, does not consent to repeat himself. Enlightened by his failure, Meursault reaches very different conclusions, and his modern revolt becomes clearly undifferentiated from the romantic revolt of which it is the heir: at the juncture he has reached, Meursault must consider the question of beginning anew. A sure instinct guided Camus when he chose the myth of Sisyphus. He understood with Nietzsche that repetition, starting over again until death, is the supreme test of the absurd. Hence the curious impression The Stranger makes on the reader. A book without hope, or rather against hope, it ends on a promise. (pp. 95-6)

In the trajectory of revolt which links us to the Romantics, Julien is at the highest, Meursault at the lowest point, but at the exact spot where revolt can surge up again. We can see what has been lost during the period that separates Julien from Meursault: the ideal of the Great Personality (today Malraux and Montherlant are the only writers who carry on this tradition). But, if it is true that the great personality contained the germ of its own disintegration, that between Napoleon and Hitler—the frantic puppet who has disappeared under the myths he fanned to a white heat—there exists only the difference between an original and its caricature, one may wonder whether revolt is not a phenomenon of decadence. (p. 96)

"War," wrote Saint-Exupery, "is not an adventure. War is a disease, like typhus." In order better to make us feel this, [in The Plague] Camus painted disease, not war. Consequently, realistic techniques, which, applied to the historical event, would have been laughable, become legitimate and effective. The objectivity with which Camus describes the epidemic is dependent on the same cryptic and non-naturalistic realism he used in The Stranger. Perhaps the use of the term cryptic to define a style which is at times sententious and whose transparency appears without mystery, will seem debatable. The multiplicity of meanings and interpretations it suggests, the deciphering it necessitates, certainly seem to remove it from allegory, which always conceals some precise object. Nothing of the sort in The Plague, where the scourge sometimes designates the event, sometimes the human condition, sometimes sin, sometimes misfortune.
Camus did not attempt to convey the complexity of the events through the technique of simultaneity and juxtaposition of scenes. To the pulverization of time and space he preferred the concentration of a continuous narration which could keep the tone of a testimony. The difficulty lay in taking up, one by one, through symbolic transcription, the themes of life and death during the occupation, starting from both subjectivity and collectivity. Certainly, the theme of the successive manifestations of the scourge is developed in too linear a pattern, and there is something too schematic in the characters, who synthesize the manifold aspects of the ordeal. One should not forget, however, that the real hero is not the I but the we elevated to the dignity of the particular being. Those who went through the ordeal of occupation recognize those situations where, speaking of themselves, they were compelled to say we at a time when each lived the we in an abyss of isolation and exile. The precarious solidarity which had thus linked people as they faced the catastrophe, and which would not out-live this catastrophe, called for a testimony which would rescue it from history and restore it to ethics. This is the task of the poet. Camus answered this call. He tried to describe an experience which had taken place at the level of intersubjectivity, without using either Jules Romains' unanimist technique or an analytical technique. Giving the humiliated we a voice required a form of speech simple enough to reflect the banality of the atrocious, and yet closely knit enough to sustain an insurgent thought. The slightest lack of authenticity would immediately have reduced the we to the they. A poet-moralist and not a novelist-poet, Camus is not gifted with the visionary imagination which creates myths and worlds. He draws a diagram and leaves it up to us to decipher it.

In one respect The Plague seems to us to fall short of the reality it recalls: it has no symbolic equivalent for the humiliation of the suffering inflicted upon man by man. It may seem strange that Camus should have deliberately left aside torture and the demonic attempt to reduce man to the state of a superfluous puppet. But we should not forget that the sentence of death is the central theme of his work. It matters little here whether it is nature, fate, justice, or human cruelty which pronounces the sentence. We know that in his most diabolic inventions man only imitates the tortures of life.... The "collaborator" who accepts and invites the plague is anything but a monster: he is a humbled individual, unhappy rather than despicable, who takes refuge in catastrophe in order to escape fear. Camus's attitude can be understood: by identifying war with the plague, evil with illness, he wanted to present a picture of sin without God; and in this perspective, the partisans of the plague are no longer "possessed," but sick. This leads him dangerously to dissolve individual responsibility in the diffuse guilt of life. "What is the plague?" says one of the characters, "it's life and that's all."... Guides and healers, the stubborn heroes of The Plague remain subjected to the precariousness which binds them to the we, of which they are and want to be a part. In short, attempting to be modest without God, they nurse the supreme ambition of doing without God, without aspiring to become gods. (pp. 98-100)

[In] The Plague, Camus's answer to the fundamental question—What value can withstand the death sentence?—is no longer the same as in The Stranger. For the exiled I whose existence is literally nothing but fall—a fall into the past, into the sin of indifference—the often ignored happiness which wells up with memory, the happiness of being, is the only authentic value. But for the man who starts to struggle, living is not enough. Man regains control of himself in the revolt against death, and henceforth this recovery itself, the good will to begin anew without illusions as to the outcome of the struggle, becomes for him the primary value. To be a man condemned, with and among other men likewise condemned: therein lies our task. For Camus, this is the province of ethics—of the we engaged in a desperate venture, beneath a narrow sky darkened by the plague. But Camus wants to base the common effort on individual freedom. We have already noted that he defines freedom through revolt and lucidity—by means of what limits freedom, since revolt clashes with the irreparable and lucidity with the irrational. It is a strange freedom whose motto is: "as if." It has made so many concessions to necessity that it can only act "as if" it were freedom. Camus knows this only too well and admits it: "What freedom can there be in the fullest sense without assurance of eternity?" He has granted himself the only freedom compatible with the world of the man condemned to death. Does it bring nothing but a semblance? If we examine it more closely, we can recognize it as the freedom of Adam and Eve banished from paradise, at the moment when alone and unprotected they assume the burden of their earthly existence. The mutilated freedom of Adam and Eve after the fall is not devoid of love, since it begets the
solidarity of this first we facing a hostile world. If we examine it even more closely, we recognize the frightening present-day freedom with which we face a future that must be created out of nothing. "The individual can do nothing, and yet he can do everything," said Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus. The Plague* reaffirms the same thing on the level of the "we." (pp. 100-01)

We do not propose to pit these two ethics against each other. We do not choose an ethic as we choose a coat. It steals in on us, permeates us, and is already within the walls while we are still arguing about it. The de-Christianized ethic is heir to Christianity in more ways than one, if only because it gives primordial importance to the theme of the sentence of death, which is the theme of the Passion. It began with an act of defiance, and it still must bring about the paradoxical fusion of revolt (in time) and acceptance (in eternity). If this ethic implies, as Camus thinks—but does he really think it?—a renunciation of eternity, it would annul itself by destroying the paradox on which it rests. All the contradictions in Camus stem from the fact that he wants to reduce freedom to the liberty of action in history, while seeking to find "freedom in salvation" through history. (p. 101)

Camus made use of two complementary art forms, the récit and the drama. In his récits, Camus successfully fused the tradition of the purest French artists, particularly of Gide, with the influence of Kafka. As for the drama, I detect no teacher save himself. It must be said, however, that he belongs to a time where metaphysical problems assume such a concrete appearance that writers as different as Gabriel Marcel, Sartre and Camus himself, feel the need to resort simultaneously to the discursive and to the dramatic expression of their thought. Camus reserved the theme of the will to power for his theater, and, for his récits, the theme of the struggle of the oppressed to whom violent rebellion is forbidden. Not that violence and revolt are absent from the récits, but they either assume a mask of indifference, or else they give way to the liberating action they stirred up. Since tragedy is by definition the place where a revolted freedom is at work, Camus has turned to tragedy when he wished to treat the problem of the relationships between freedom and revolt, By a kind of predestination, the debate which was personal to Camus coincided exactly with the political tragedy of our time. Inside, outside, the pressure was the same; Camus wrote *Caligula* and *The Misunderstanding* both in order to gain control over his own personal situation and in order to resist the pressure of history. His heroes, like Camus himself, experience the common condition as an individual condition, at the point where history and subjectivity collide. They also join the procession of characters who have incarnated the Lucifer myth of the Occident. Sustaining their particular conflicts, we discern the din of a vaster drama which, in the realm of fiction, reproduces the drama of history: the drama of the Great Personality. Its rise and fall, the heights it attains in Stendhal and Dostoevski, the blows it is dealt by Flaubert and Tolstoy, its crises, its resurgence and its ultimate defeat make up a history which lives once more with Camus's rebels. They mime the passion and the agony of individuality; their cry is his cry, their violence prolongs the wave of cruelty which always accompanies the destruction of a great model, be it the Knight, the seventeenth-century "Honnête homme," or the Significant Personality. (p. 102)

Play-acting, as Camus so clearly saw, is by no means an accidental trait [of Caligula's]; it is part of the very being of the tyrant. Insofar as Caligula is not equal to his scheme of total annihilation, and he knows it while not wishing to know it, he is in bad faith and therefore must play for himself and for others the comedy of absolute power. The staccato humor of the scenes of mockery alternates with the impassioned irony of the dialogues in which the ally of death confronts, first the defender of the sacred, then the advocate of reason. The struggle is all the more poignant as Camus turns against himself, being, in a sense, just as much on the side of Caligula as with Scipio, the poet, and Chereas, the wise man who refuses to acquiesce in the sacrilegious disorders of hatred…. The fear and the hatred of Caligula's victims, the breathless anguish of the Killer grow from act to act, until, at last, Caligula succumbs not to the revolt of his mediocre enemies, but to the blows of the two friends he has deemed worthy of delivering him from his fate. As he dies, he has the satisfaction of having driven the reasonable Chereas and Scipio the pure to that same violence which they condemned in him. Vanquished, but not punished, he recognizes his error: he demanded the infinite from that absolute finality which is death. What does he ask for? The impossible, the moon, "something which is mad
perhaps, but which is not of this world," and which he cannot make an attribute of his power. Caligula must eradicate from his soul this desire which makes him dependent upon something he cannot put into words. And it is precisely the one thing he cannot do. Therein lies his limitation, therein his paradox….

He externalizes evil in order to liberate himself, and by doing so he clings to necessity and plays into its hands. The externalizing of evil is nothing but a way of shifting the responsibility for original sin on an absent god. (p. 103)

When he equated freedom and revolt, Caligula forgot that it is always within the power of freedom to annihilate itself. To be sure, Camus is right in a sense: evil is outside; Sophocles is right: the gods have run the show. But the opposite is also true, as the myth of original sin recalls: freedom's attempt to destroy itself is consummated within.

Camus's art was never surer of itself than in The Misunderstanding. From an anonymous news clipping dealing with a chance event he drew a pure tragedy of high quality, achieving an architectural style which carries the play out of reality so that the sacrifice played out on stage becomes a kind of poetic celebration. Humanism, left to its own inclination, would easily fall into the "human all too human" if it did not preserve a sense of the sacred in profane tragedy. With The Misunderstanding all that was empathic and too highly colored in Caligula has disappeared. Only that blending of nostalgia and violence peculiar to all of Camus's rebels remains. His vengeful heroine has a stature, a splendor which make her not unworthy of comparison with Electra…. Thanks to the remarkable power of fusion which allows him to blend contrasts without blurring them, Camus combines an acute romanticism with the completely classic structure of his play. Romantic in its theme of discontent, in its demand for the absolute in earthly happiness, in its apotheosis of the body against a backdrop of absolute pessimism, The Misunderstanding is an austere work which harks back to ancient drama by way of Kafka. Everything begins and ends in an inn, which resembles the inn where Kafka's surveyor "K." appears, as it recalls the palace of Oedipus; all is consummated in the course of a night befogged by the thickening of the misunderstanding. Camus has returned to his themes—the conflict of sainthood and the will to power, of individual happiness and of action—and has narrowed them so as to make them converge on the central issue of the choice. Freedom surges up between chance and fate; nothing external limits it or forces its hand at the moment when it goes astray. It is freedom itself which begets the fate on which it runs aground. Therein lies the tragedy of The Misunderstanding, rather than in the consequences of the choice, however dreadful they be. The dramatic tension which one experiences here as a choking sensation derives less from the horror of the impending murder than from the contrast between the lucidity of the characters with respect to themselves and the blindness they display in their relations with one another. Everything takes place as if their lucidity were their prison. There is almost no sentence in the second act which does not have a different meaning for the one who speaks it and for the one who hears it. The entire play is built on ambiguity: one has to choose in the dark, without being recognized and without being able to make oneself known. Everyone is betrayed by everybody, including himself. Camus saw the heart of the matter: our modern tragedy is the tragedy of ambiguity touching all mankind. But Camus characteristically depicted ambiguity in the guise of misunderstanding rather than bad faith, just as elsewhere he reduces treason to a fear complex, and cruelty to the transgression of a man humiliated by death. All things being equal, his attitude recalls Corneille, always at ease in extreme violence, and whose vocabulary does not include the word for treason. In this light, the heroine of The Misunderstanding is indeed the sister of Corneille's heroines: she has the same tense nobility and the same willful mind in the madness of her pride. It is not by chance, either, that Camus recreates the pathos of ambiguity, as found in the Greek tragic poets. His conception of evil as diffused guilt and the fatal mistake of a will to power quite naturally recalls the Greeks. But he is faced with a new problem which neither the Greek nor the French classical traditions can help them solve. Individual conflicts tend more and more to become equated with collective conflicts, not in order to lose themselves in the collective, but in order to embody it…. The playwright must therefore simultaneously expand our field of vision and circumscribe the field of drama; he must rebuild a stage which spans the chaos and is ready to receive and transform the creatures which come to it out of chaos. If the poet thinks he can elude history by
means of a short cut, he becomes a counterfeiter; if he lets himself be absorbed by history, he becomes superficial. Yet, the duality of his point of departure must lead him to heights where, beyond antagonisms, the tragic poem finds the balance and calm of beauty. Camus almost meets these conditions in The Misunderstanding, a personal drama if ever there was one, but one in which we discern the rumblings of a collective disaster…. What makes The Misunderstanding a classical play, even though it carries romantic recrimination to a paroxysm, is much less its observance of the three unities than the intimate collaboration of the moralist and the poet in its creation. Camus proves, moreover, that the controlled and taut language which his cryptic realism calls for can, if need be, take over the functions of poetry and adapt to the needs of tragedy. We are far from ideological melodrama. (pp. 104-06)

The Misunderstanding ends on an indignant denial, a total denial of God in view of the endlessness of human suffering. And, as always, Camus's outraged awareness of the injustice done to man is so intense that it leads him to an affirmation of the exteriority of evil. Yet, in contrast, Camus shows us the will to deification as logically fulfilled in the deicide, or murder of the Son. In spite of everything, the free individual is still responsible for the alienation of his freedom. Sin without God is nothing but the choice of the wrong freedom.

A Mediterranean romantic in his insatiable longing for the finite, the tangible, for contours which light does not erode and which even night respects, Camus is very close to the Latin elegists in his lyricism, and to the Greek tragic poets in his pathos. He is in his own element with the French classics. A skeptic by temperament, not through philosophic conviction, a skeptic in so far as he is an artist, his lineage goes back to Montaigne and Saint-Evremond. But he is passionate, too, in a serious, virile fashion, and can also claim Corneille and Pascal as his ancestors. Besides, there is nothing he need disavow in order to reconcile within himself the teachings of the classics and those of Kierkegaard, Dostoevski and Chekhov. We have already pointed to the remarkable coexistence in Camus of the gift of fusion and of contradiction. (p. 106)


To characterize Camus as a religious-moral philosopher means to say that his preoccupation is with questions of the nature and meaning of men, their hopes, their possibilities, and their destiny. And within this area Camus has established a positive humanism, a religious philosophy which, to many, is the first move toward what has been termed a "new humanism."

What is mandatory is that, if there is to be such a thing as a new humanism, it cannot be developed in isolation from the great religious alternatives which the Western world possesses. This is to say that such a philosophy must be honest and articulate in the reasons it offers for rejecting the claims of Marxism and the Christian faith. Camus has not been remiss in this, inasmuch as a large portion of his philosophical work has entailed a criticism of the Marxist and Christian positions, and this is one reason for the importance of his thought. In this criticism Marxism has been the central and most urgent concern of Camus, and in The Rebel the sections dealing with Marxist theory and prophecy constitute one of the most trenchant critiques of Communist thought and action ever written from the viewpoint of moral philosophy. But, if large sections of Camus's philosophical works are devoted solely to Marxism, this is not the case with the Christian faith. Camus has nowhere, up to the present, dealt at length with Christian theology. But yet all his major works are filled with direct or indirect references to Christianity, and these constant references create the atmosphere in which Camus's positive thought moves. This lack of an extended critique of Christianity is explained by the fact that, although Camus is an anti-Communist, he is not an anti-Christian—he is simply a non-Christian. As such, he has never cut himself off from conversation with Christian thinkers but stands in a relation of tension to Christianity, directing his criticism to the moral effects of this faith without condemning its ultimate sources, even though he does not accept them. And, certainly, this is as it should be, for any Western philosopher who begins with the assumption that the Christian faith is an illusion and hence entirely discredited is suspect of
irresponsibility or willful ignorance. Although Marxism is, for Camus, the most urgent problem to which he addresses himself, it is the Christian faith which is the most fundamental issue and the one with which he must most clearly come to terms. (pp. 48-9)

For Camus the first data of religion and morality are the evil and death that are part of the abiding condition of men. Whether or not there be goodness or God is not a primary evidence of human existence—suffering and death are. (p. 50)

Camus understands … that in its best moments the Christian faith is active in its cultivation of beauty and goodness and sustained by a tragic hope in its acceptance of evil and death. And this is the Christian position which Father Paneloux puts forth in his two sermons in the attempt to bring meaning into the plight of a city beaten by the plague. It is true that, following the death of the child, Paneloux's second sermon was more moderate and less certain than the first; but the difference between the two sermons consisted in saying that, if the plague be not the punishment of the sins of the people, it is at least part of the designs of God, so mysterious they may be, and must, in faith, be accepted and finally loved…. Given human evil and death, either God is innocent and men are guilty or else God is guilty and men are innocent. The death of a child poses the alternative of all or nothing for the Christian faith. (pp. 52-3)

Camus raises the cry for a life in which values are found within history and within human action itself and not above or beyond history. He argues that, so long as we live with values which are posited absolutely and transhistorically, we shall not avoid murder. For it is only when one is absolutely certain of his values that the nonexistence of other men is justified. But, if the values of men are posited within the relativities of human history, then no man can with certainty sacrifice the lives of others for this uncertain value. The effort to validate these uncertain values of human existence was the purpose of Camus's most distinguished philosophical work, *The Rebel*. Against the aspiration for totality, conquest, and perfection in human history, Camus places a history in which men have limits, and knowledge has uncertainties, and values have relativity. To attempt to transform men into the image of an absolute value is not to fulfill them but to murder and deform them. For men are not infinitely plastic; they are not things which can be endlessly molded and changed. They have limits, and to go beyond these limits is only to add to the total of suffering in human history. It is this limit which all men find within themselves and which is shared in common by all men that is the only source of value which men possess. It is the only real value in human existence. And it is when this limit, this value, is transgressed that men revolt. Revolt, alone, is revelatory of human values and, as such, constitutes an essential dimension of human experience. It is on the basis of such an understanding of human value that Camus is able to say [in *The Rebel*] to a religion of historicity, "Does the end justify the means? This is possibly so. But what will justify the end? To this question, which historical thought leaves hanging, revolt replies: the means."… (pp. 55-6)

It is a curious thing about the thought of Albert Camus that he has not estranged himself from Christian readers. This may possibly be because Christian thinkers have not as yet realized the full import of what he has said about the Christian faith. Whatever the reason may be, it is interesting that, when Christians pick up the works of such a man as Sartre, it is largely with a mind to refute; but, when Christians pick up the works of Camus, it is with a mind to learn. (p. 56)

At first glance, it is a strange and artificial world in which Camus moves, until suddenly the thundering realization comes that this is our world of which he speaks; it is the history which daily moves about us, except that now it has attained a definitive clarity. Camus immerses us as he himself is immersed in the tragedy and tense hopes of the mid-twentieth century; he is, as he says, "a child of his times." This world and the history lying behind it, which Camus has delineated in his philosophical works, is the world that is in turn found in all his literary works…. It is the moral philosophy which underlies these novels and plays that gives them their force and desperation, and it is only in terms of this larger philosophical position that the literary works of Camus can be fully understood. For Camus is first of all a philosopher with serious moral and
religious concerns, and all his literary productions serve as functions of these concerns.

We come to understand the thought of Albert Camus only after we have probed the full significance of his optimism about man and his pessimism about human destiny. For this throws us back to the abiding evidence of evil in human existence. For the Christian the ultimate character of the universe is good, and in this he finds his hope and the ability to transcend and accept, to a degree, the evil in the world. But what, at this point, has become clear about the thought of Camus is that for him the ultimate character of the universe is evil and consequently men are always uncertain and always threatened; whatever goodness there be in life, it is in men, and this goodness is created only in the struggle of men to preserve and enlarge this area of goodness which they alone know and which they alone can guarantee. Value and truth lie within men, and it is only by virtue of the contrast which a threatening world presents to men that they become conscious of the salvation which lies within them. However strange this attitude toward the world may seem at first glance, further reflection will show that it is not after all either strange or even novel. Those who have come to know the thought of Sören Kierkegaard will here recognize remarkable similarities in what might be assumed to be quite disparate philosophies. More interesting still is the fact that Camus's attitude at this point is solidary with that of Christian orthodoxy in its depiction of man's life as a "trial." In face of the threatening character of the world, Camus calls men to revolt. And the call to revolt is nothing more or less than a call to create; to transform the inhumanity of the world into the image of man, to humanize what is inhuman—in short, to civilize. This is the "new humanism" put forth by Albert Camus—a humanism whose final and only goal is the uncertain and mortal lives of men, creatures who are not infinitely pliable and suffering but are limited and infinitely precious and must at all costs be defended against those who would judge their lives and history by that which is foreign to their lives and history. But, after all, we ask, what is man? Man, replies Camus, "is that force which always ends by holding off gods and tyrants"….


I do not think that any of the six tales contained in Exile and the Kingdom can be ranked with Albert Camus's most accomplished writings; but no other book by Camus has made me more keenly aware of the profound nature and actual status of his work. The quest, the intensity, the distribution of this work; what it has attempted and still is attempting to do; what new horizons open up before it: all seem to me to be more clearly visible here than anywhere else.

None of these tales are able to strike us, to hold our attention, to inscribe themselves in our memory with the force of The Stranger, The Plague, or even The Fall. The reason for this is evident. All of Camus's previous books carry through to conclusion a particular line of thought, which finds its form in the simplification and enlargement of a mythical image. These extremes of perspective, the massive writing have an imperious eloquence. Here we are brought back to a state of in-betweens, of confusion, to the careful fusing of the characteristics of everyday existence. Even when it is dramatic, this existence is composed of humble, day-to-day details. "The Silent Men," "The Guest," "The Adulterous Woman" are presented as realistic accounts: that is the way things actually happened, and there is always some detail, attesting to the brutish thoughtlessness of reality, which prevents the narrative from disappearing into the pure and inflexible line of myth. There is always some detail which describes an existing situation without any mental reservation. "The Artist at Work" and "The Growing Stone," on the other hand, have somewhat the appearance of fables. In "The Artist at Work" the irony of the narrator is directed visibly toward the narrative, dispelling the dust of insignificant facts. In "The Growing Stone" the tone is that of legend, but there is also amusement in this irony: the pleasure of recounting in a legendary tone. At any rate, it seems to me that these tales are the first in which Camus takes into consideration the actual subject matter of his narrative and dwells upon the details. Whereas previously he had sought the most exact and most simplified coincidence between a thought impulse and a dramatic action, here he is observing, imagining—caught in the web of reality. (pp. 152-53)
The author's impress is not as visible as usual: we no longer entirely recognize his austerity, his haughty abstraction, his willful reduction to bare essentials. The discordancy of tone may be perplexing because legend succeeds parody, interior monologue succeeds behaviorist narrative. Even the value accorded to geographical location is such as to surprise us. The Algeria of The Stranger and of The Plague was scarcely less allegorical than the Holland of The Fall. Here the setting is more than a conventional situation, or an allegorical agreement between space and mind: the Brazilian forest of "The Growing Stone," the North Africa of the other narratives—it is a fact, a reality which attracts to itself a large portion of that attention which had previously been fixed upon the moral and the symbol. (p. 153)

Camus's problem is to relate the unity of artistic expression with a vibrant inner experience, torn apart so that it may live. How can one gather into unity of expression that which escapes all unity? Sometimes in his linear narrative the unity of myth achieves artistic efficacy only by belying the truth of the experience: the roman-hypothèse achieves unity solely because it is false; it has the air of a dangerous abstraction. Sometimes, notably in The Plague, Camus tried to integrate his inner diversity with the unity of a form by composing, in mid-stream, a somewhat disappointing fusion. To go in one direction only, but to its extreme limit—or to bring into balance opposing tendencies: Camus hesitates between Descartes and Gide, between utmost rigor and infinite comprehension. But the true path lies beyond this hesitation. The present work, rather than being entrapped by the author's fame is still in the process of defining itself, of seeking out its rightful place. I have always thought this, and I find a moving and comforting confirmation of this idea in these lines which Camus wrote for an edition of L'Envers et l'endroit (Betwixt and Between): "The day when a balance shall be struck between what I am and what I do; on that day perhaps, I scarcely dare write it, I shall be able to give substance to the work of which I have always dreamed."

The work he dreamed of is not Exile and the Kingdom, but this collection of stories allows him to envision it somewhat better. Exile and the Kingdom and, as I can imagine solely from the nature of the title, L'Envers et l'endroit are faithful to the author's concept of truth because they are based on a constant coming and going, on a particular tempo. The Stranger, The Plague, The Fall all contain effective myths, rigorous thoughts, but because of that unity which is reflected by the single word in their titles, they destroy the rhythmical truth of a life seeking to know itself. (pp. 153-54)

Camus has a passion for the theater; but he does not seem to have the necessary genius. He wrote one theatrical masterpiece: Requiem for a Nun, but only by drawing upon Faulkner. His plays grow weaker as their structure becomes more dramatic. The finest one, Caligula, is simply a monologue. The best of Camus's writings up to the present have not touched upon this element of dialogue which is inherent in Camus. To be more precise, they suppressed or mitigated it; but here, in the succession of stories in Exile and the Kingdom, the tempo which myth destroyed, and which the theater reflected but feebly, imposes its rhythmical beat. (p. 154)

Each of Camus's books conformed to the other because each one brought forth only one word in its title instead of emitting the rhythm of an entire phrase. Thus The Fall corresponded to The Plague as The Plague corresponded to The Stranger. Exile and the Kingdom does not in the least correspond to The Fall; it does not add another segment in the formation of a line; but in contrast to the successes of abstraction, it poses an attempt at completeness….

The Fall fully explores one path, leaving us suspended on the verge of an answer which it cannot possibly give, because to do so it would have to return to the point of departure. Like all the preceding books, The Fall corresponds to a point in progression (which could, as is the case in this instance, assume a regressive pace), while Exile and the Kingdom contains a definite movement. In The Fall there is only an exile without a kingdom. There is no answer to the discovery made by Clamence (good itself is evil)—at least no answer which does not oblige us to start afresh from nothing. Here the answer is always given with the question, the right with the wrong side, the kingdom with the exile.
This book is not based upon a contradiction, and herein lies its success. The exile and the kingdom are not two continents separated by an ocean: they are two aspects of the same breath and heartbeat. The kingdom is in the exile, the exile is a path toward the kingdom—in fact, exile could actually be the kingdom. (p. 155)

In "The Guest," which is perhaps the most effective story in the collection, we see clearly that the conflict is not between solitude and fellowship, or liberty and submission. The hero does not oscillate between two forms of solitude: one, the cruelest of exiles, is a solitude in which the gestures of fraternity turn against us—the solitude of incomprehension; the other, which constitutes the sole portrayal of the kingdom, is the solitude in which we are aware of what we have done, and realize that it was necessary to do what he did. Is this the opposing of two attitudes: building up a good point and tracking down a bad one? Not at all. The book invites us to probe the very pulse of existence—which unfolds, then shuts up tight; reveals itself in a flash of light, then veils itself in obscurity; waxes and then wanes. The moralist who isolates and dissects is succeeded by the poet who puts together and restores the one complex throb of life. (p. 156)


So honest a man as Camus is obviously at a disadvantage in so dishonest an institution as the theater. His sincerity has become a legend, but it has prevented him from becoming a successful dramatist…. I can not think of a better application of the term "defect of his virtue"; Camus's strenuous virtue is the key to his plays and to his defective sense of the theater. Explicitly forswearing "psychology, ingenious plot-devices, and spicy situations," he requires that we take him in the full intensity of his earnestness or not at all.

Simple in plot, direct in argument, oratorically eloquent, his dramas are like few other modern plays. They remind us of Gide and of the early Sartre (in No Exit and The Flies), before Sartre mastered the deceptions of politics and of the stage. But even these comparisons are inadequate because Camus differs significantly from his many French contemporaries who have put ancient myths on the modern stage. The others have turned conventional myths—at least their antiquity has made them seem conventional—into instruments of iconoclasm. Obviously stimulated by French neoclassical drama, Cocteau, Giraudoux, and Sartre became the debunking inside-dopesters of ancient mythology; they made Oedipus into a young man on the make, Electra into a rather addled termagant, Zeus into a tyrant. They overturned or exposed the classical stories. But what Camus does is to begin with a sufficiently cynical legend—the history of Caligula or the murder of the prodigal son (the basis of Robert Penn Warren's "Ballad of Billie Potts")—and to dramatize it as forthrightly as possible, with no tricks, no sneers, no "modernization."

Both circumstances and characters are very carefully selected to perform only what the play requires. Nothing is ever thrown in for good measure or for any incidental purpose. We never encounter in these plays the casual bystanders whom a Broadway dramatist might permit to wander in. What characters there are have strict requirements imposed upon them. Camus primarily demands that his protagonists possess freedom, the capacity for exercising free choice. He has to go far to find his free men. His preference sets Camus off from his contemporaries in the theater; some of this difference is implicit in the contrast Eric Bentley once drew between "Strindbergian" and "Ibsensite" actors. The Strindbergian actor is less restrained: "His emotions come right out of him with no interference whatsoever and fly like bullets at the enemy." But Ibsen, not Strindberg, is the father of modern drama, and, consequently, modern stage characters keep their neuroses in check—or at least in balance. Camus's characters tend to be Strindbergian. Some of Strindberg's unbalanced heroes earn their freedom at the expense of their sanity; one of Camus's heroes, Caligula, pays just this price for freedom. Criminal purposes inspire the principal motivation of The Misunderstanding and so liberate the characters from ordinary scruples. The protagonists of The Just Assassins are also on the far side of the law, revolutionaries who have put aside the usual inhibitions and are in the act of measuring their freedom. The
most dynamic figure in *State of Siege* is, like Caligula, in possession of supreme political power and subject to no regulation by sanity. Camus's characters tear right into the issues, and they ignore small details. Just as Lear's "Pray you, undo this button," could not have occurred in Racine, it also would be an unlikely line in Camus. Everyone in these plays is ready for action—or, more often, for argument. Nothing may intervene to distract, irritate, or enchant us, to explain the characters or to provide context for the events.

The characters are free so that they may best contribute to the simple patterns which the plays work out. Of the four plays at hand, two are constructed to the very simplest formulas—*The Misunderstanding* and *The Just Assassins*. The former play requires to be read as an equation. The prodigal son returns wealthy and incognito, to be killed by his desperate mother and sister. Most have seen in this play a perfect paradigm of the absurdity of hoping to escape from poverty or exile. Camus has become more optimistic about man's fate, but, in squeezing a new interpretation out of the play, he still, inevitably, reduces it to a formula. It can be reconciled with a relative optimism as to man. For, after all, it amounts to saying that in an unjust or indifferent world man can save himself, and save others, by practicing the most basic sincerity and pronouncing the most appropriate word.

In other words, don't play jokes on Mother. This is what Meursault, of *The Stranger*, saw in the same story, but even this authority is not conclusive. Surely it is more exact to say that the slightest weakness, the most innocent facetious impulse, will release an absurd and implacable destiny. Still, relatively optimistic or not, the play is flesh fitted to the bare bones of an equation.

*Caligula* is something else again. It has more life and irony than any of the other plays, and it comes closer than any of the others to a balanced, qualified statement of a complex theme. Caligula compels us to admire his comic talents; in one unconnected episode after another, this tyrant and mass-murderer engages our interest and even our sympathy with his ingenious exposures of patrician banality and the illogic of daily life. In his defense, this engaging monster is permitted to point out that he has caused far fewer casualties than a major war. A successful revolt fortunately reminds us that, all kidding aside, we need to find some compromise between banality and the loss of freedom.

The language of these plays is lofty and pure. It reflects the complaint Camus once lodged against our time: "For the dialogue we have substituted the communique." The dramatist sets out to remedy this situation, but his dialogue tends to become, especially in *The Just Assassins* and *State of Siege*, a formal exchange of weighty remarks which too clearly expose the dramatist's designs on us. Hardly anyone else in the modern theater lectures us quite so directly…. Camus addresses us in the most elevated language he can write. The result has its merits as oratory and as dialectic, but it is deficient as drama.

The defect of Camus's plays bring to mind the virtues of his fiction, in which the method of narration always keeps us from colliding too abruptly with his themes and, above all, his ideas. This rationale surely underlies the impersonality of *The Stranger* and *The Plague*, as well as the highly subjective narration of *The Fall* and "The Renegade." The danger of becoming a pamphleteer in fiction must have been clear to Camus and must have compelled him to use technique as a shield for his ideas. But, in his plays, collisions are head-on; except in *Caligula*, we miss the theater's equivalents for the sophisticated method of his fiction. (pp. 170-72)


[If Camus] speaks now from the grave, as he does virtually every day, it is usually in this way: to confer some sort of nobility on other men's positions or prose. His reputation seems more and more honorific; his work has been carved up into quotations—a kind of *Bartlett's* of liberal piety, which now only awaits an edition…. If it is hard to think about Camus any more, it is partly because one has lost sight of the writer inside the statue.
A good way to begin seeing Camus himself again is by reading a new collection of his prose titled *Lyrical and Critical Essays*. (p. 276)

From the start, as throughout his career, Camus felt more lucidly than he reasoned. His ideas were the home truths of his experience, linked less by logic than by their emotional fit and weighed by their existential consequences. "I have never seen anyone die," as he put it, "for the ontological argument." Just as his theme of the absurd came directly from his life, so did its resolution—the conquering indifference in which he had been raised. (p. 278)


[One] recognizes the inseparable nature of content and form, idea and expression, in Camus's work. Indeed, the various attacks that have been mounted against Camus in terms of his alleged ideological unsoundness or lack of sufficient political commitment are ultimately irrelevant and based on a fundamental misunderstanding of his nature as a writer. To make such criticisms is to ask not that Camus should be a more honest or more sensitive writer but that he should be a completely different person as man and artist. This is equivalent to taxing Donne with not being Milton or Dostoevsky with not being Tolstoy…. Camus achieved, in his earliest published work, a wholly personal tone, a "lyrisme intense, sec comme le cri des cigales". As regards his desire for unity, this arose from a fundamental dualism—a view of life as rich in oppositions as those of Pascal, Nietzsche, Gide or Montherlant.

_"Beyond Contradiction," in The Times Literary Supplement (© Times Newspapers Ltd., 1973; reproduced from The Times Literary Supplement by permission), October 12, 1973, p. 1252._

*L'Etranger* is clearly structured by portrayals of death: there are three deaths portrayed—that of Meursault's mother, which opens the work; that of the Arab, which constitutes the pivotal event of the entire plot; and finally that of Meursault himself, which closes it. Thus, death is not only nearly constantly present in the novel (three times in this very short work), but these deaths constitute by far the most remarkable and dramatic events in the story—partly because all the rest is portrayed with unrelieved drabness, partly because of the special status of these deaths and the exceptional character of their portrayal.

The death of the Mother is particularly traumatic, because the generative function of the Mother is such that her death represents the death of the principle of life itself, of the principle of passage from stasis to movement. The death of the Arab is the death of the Other, which draws its dramatic character from the function of the Other as the primary source of Self-consciousness. And the death of the Other is an image of the death of the Self—it enables the Self to conceive of the inconceivable, namely, the termination of its own existence; the extraordinary nature of this event is reflected in both style and action: the style takes on a quality of lyrical evocation, and action is presented in a slow-motion, ritual fashion which takes us out of the profane dimension and into the sacred. Finally, there is the death of the Self, which involves the death of the narrator and therefore of discourse; it also plays a parallel or antithetical role to the first death—just as the death of the Mother represented the death of birth, so the death of the son represents the birth of death, of a positive state of death into which Meursault leaps with a savage satisfaction. (pp. 183-84)

This consciousness labeled Meursault, whether it is primarily a recording or a creating consciousness, is clearly obsessed with death, and such an obsession is no doubt linked to that death wish (Thanatos) which characterizes all organic life. Portrayals of death may be taken as manifestations of this death wish, and Meursault's discourse is a dreamlike wish fulfillment oriented toward death.
Such a hypothesis throws new light on the central trait of Meursault's character, namely, indifference. Thanatos, Freud tells us, is even more basic than Eros, because "inanimate things existed before living ones";... as a result, at some deeply hidden layer of our subconscious is inscribed the following fatal word: "The aim of all life is death."... Meursault's indifference is a manifestation of the inanimate, and his obsession with death (which is the only event capable of moving him to drama and lyricism) reflects the realization, as strong as it is obscure, that death is indeed the goal and fulfillment of all, life being a temporary aberration which has alienated us from the primal stasis which was perfection. (p. 184)

There is, moreover, a further perspective possible on the theme of death in *L'Étranger*.... In ... setting his fatal (and fateful) action in perspective as an attack on an existing balance, an existing order, Meursault aligns himself with the archetypal figure of the challenger.... [He] must be publicly examined and vilified for challenging the order of things.

What is the nature of this order challenged by Meursault? Let us recall the context of the murder: a broad stretch of dry, sandy beach baking and dazzling in the scorching rays of a pitiless sun; a great rock with shade and a little spring of fresh water; and, between the suffering, sunstruck Meursault and this oasis of calm and refreshment, a dangerous adversary whose very presence challenges his approach. The threat represented by this adversary is such that the Arab represents death—a spirit of death preventing access to the release and happiness of the forbidden spring. What is this boon which death prevents us from attaining? Meursault's very name gives us the clue: through its meaning ("death leap") it makes of him an archetypal representative of the human condition, condemned to make eventually that ineluctable leap into oblivion. The deepest desire of mortal man (indeed, the strongest instinct of all mortal life, human or nonhuman) is to abrogate this fate—in other words, it is immortality, that eternal dream of our finite human nature. (pp. 184-85)

Whereas the principle of Thanatos rejects all activity as aberration and aspires to stasis, the principle of Eros, on the contrary, aspires not merely to activity but to frenzy and reduplication. It finds fulfillment in the generation of Others whose reflecting function satisfies its narcissism; often, it will constitute the Self as its own reflecting Other.

As with the manifestations of Thanatos, we find also in the case of Eros the three aspects and phases of elaboration represented by the Mother, the Other, and the Self. From this point of view, the Mother figures not as embodiment of the principle of generation but as first love object. The Other this time is not the antagonistic Other represented in Thanatos by the Arab, but the complementary Other represented by Marie. The Self manifests love for itself through its identification with nature (as opposed to society) and through the narcissistic character of the *parole vide* which is its discourse.

But besides these transparent manifestations of Eros there are also overt expressions of Thanatos which perform a second but vital function (at the subliminal level) as covert expressions of Eros. To expose this fully, we need to expose more completely the archetypal substructure of the work.

The perspective which dominates Western literature is that of the single white male. The most common structural principle in narrative constructs is Self/Other, usually expressed in terms of male/female. Usually, but not always—and this is the point relevant to our present concern. (pp. 185-86)

In the case of *L'Étranger*, the major symbol is the sun, traditional symbol of the male principle. Its heating and drying qualities regularly provoke, through their excess, the usual defensive, contrary reactions of the body: perspiration (which relieves body heat), even tears.... All such forms of dampness or liquid symbolize the female principle. But because of the structuring function of the two key descriptive passages—the funeral ... and the killing ...—the whole of the work is organized around a system of such symbols arranged in binary opposition: sun/sweat, sand/water, noise/silence, Self/Other. The fundamental unifying antithesis is that between the male or Self principle (represented in sun : sand : noise) and the female or Other principle (sweat
While the feeling of otherness in *L'Étranger* is chiefly the product of a sense of alienation from society as a whole with its arbitrary rationalistic structures, there are two particular human "opposite numbers" for the white male protagonist. One is Marie, the white woman Meursault loves. But in the mythic playing out of the clash of Self (male) versus Other (female) symbols, we find the series leading to a new, less obvious but more significant "opposite number": Self/Other, male/female, sun/moon, day/night, light/dark, white/black. This second figure is the Arab whom the white man kills: through his racial difference (as the woman through her sexual difference), he is seen by the Self as Other, and through his dark coloring he represents night as against day, a further opposition to the male Self symbolized by day: sun: light: white. This is confirmed by the manner in which the Arab, like the woman, is associated with the female principle through the element of water: the key scene with the Arab … associates him with the spring of fresh water and the pool of shade, opposed to the scorching heat, glare, and dryness of the sunbaked sandy beach.

This archetypal conformation provides a key to the statis structure based on the relationships existing prior to the action of the novel. This action, in my opinion, confirms our hypothesis in a most dramatic manner by translating the suggested static structure into dynamic terms: the action serves to manifest the underlying relationship. (pp. 186-87)

[Let] us recall the fact that the Arab has a knife, and that Meursault's killing of the Arab is partly caused by the fact that, in his sunstruck condition (he uses the terms ivresse, brûlure, feu), he confuses the sharp piercing pain of the sun with that of the Arab's knife. The aggressive and destructive—but also fertilizing—male principle … is symbolized in *L'Étranger* by the gun, whose report noisily breaks the passive but pregnant silence of the beach. The gun has become a ubiquitous and conventional symbol of male aggression: it represents that essential difference between Self (male) and Other which enables the Self to penetrate the Other, creating a darkly magic moment which brings together nonlife and life (before and after fertilization through intercourse), life and nonlife (before and after death through shooting).

Thanatos, then, can be said to structure *L'Étranger*: death of the Mother (she who gave life must succumb to death), of the Other (the Arab), of the Self (the latter involving death of discourse). But the principle of Eros is also given a significant role: in the relationships with the Mother (first love object), with the Other (Marie), and with the Self (imaged in nature, as opposed to society, and in the narcissistic discourse of the parole vide). And above all, overt manifestations of Thanatos involve covert manifestations of Eros, a notable example being the killing of the Arab, surrogate Other violated together with the virgin silence of the sunlit beach. (pp. 187-88)


Given Camus' objective in *The Plague* (to communicate convincingly his understanding of the human condition, and his urgent sense of how one ought to deal with it); given the terms in which he desired to embody his beliefs (the closed plague-ridden city as central metaphor); and given moreover his conception, as posited in the novel itself, of the difficulties besetting communication, then clearly any traditional narrative method would have had important disadvantages. For Camus had to cope with a unique set of paradoxes: to create a narrator who would be a reliable and effective chronicler, and yet not a professional writer; who would be at once objective and subjective, detached and involved, perceptive yet in some ways naïve, exemplary and yet the brother of erring mankind; and who would, nevertheless, emerge as an entirely credible character. The subtlety with which he resolved these difficulties, however, created in turn another paradox: so thoroughly did his art conceal art that the novel's great technical sophistication has not been much recognized. This is to say that the novel has not been fully understood.… [The] narrative techniques of *The Plague* … [are of a] "functional complexity": Camus' solving of complicated problems by complicated means, which,
however roundabout they might seem at first glance, are invariably right to the point. What finally emerges is
that, if Rieux wrote a chronicle, Camus wrote a novel; that *The Plague* is not an existentialist tract in literary
dress, but a triumphant artifice. (pp. 428-29)


Camus takes [a] step … toward unifying fictional perspective and ridding the novel of its omniscient author in
the Sartrean sense by writing *L'Étranger* in the first person, although it remains predominantly in the past
tense. In this work, however, Camus's first person is no less ambiguous than his past tense, so that ambiguities
found in both point clearly toward perspective as it is applied in the New Novel. In other words, Camus's
"objective" first person and his "present" past tense foreshadow not only the literal confining of perspective to
some form of interior monologue, but also the blatant creation and cultivation of the ambiguous perspective
adopted by the majority of French novelists after 1950. (p. 59)

Although point of view in *L'Étranger* is solidly centered within the single protagonist, Meursault, it focuses
alternately upon his *moi présent*, or his narrating presence, and upon his *moi passé*, or his remembered
participation in the past. (p. 60)

Camus manages by adroit manipulation of these two temporal moments to give the impression that events
occur as the story progresses, whereas, in actuality, the events recounted have taken place in the past and are
narrated as remembered exclusively by Meursault. The narrative tension thus created becomes acutely
dramatic in the final chapter when Meursault focuses upon his condemnation and the possibility of escaping
it: upon the meeting of past and present for a possible future or upon the reconciliation of past events with
present realities which deny him any future whatsoever.

The several ways in which Camus establishes this illusion of an unfolding present are not easily discernible
upon an initial reading of *L'Étranger*. Primarily, Camus's great innovation is to choose a conversational past
tense, the *passé composé*, rather than the traditional literary *passé simple*. In addition, he adds numerous
temporal indicators of the present, or "false presents," to the few true indications of the present, which make a
final impact of the complete moment sufficient unto itself. In this respect, Camus clearly exploits Sartre's
notion of *trompe-l'oeil* with regard to time in the novel, even though he originally did so a number of years
before Sartre's entire theory appeared in print. As yet unaware of the Sartrean precepts in their entirety, Camus
succeeded brilliantly *avant la lettre* in respecting Sartre's existential bias in his novel. Contrary to Sartre's
intent to simplify, however, perspective in *L'Étranger* is infinitely more complex and ambiguous than in
*L'Enfance d'un chef*; and it seems clear today that Camus willfully rendered it so. Again in this respect, as well
as in others, Camus's work serves as a clear transition between Sartre and the New Novel. (pp. 60-1)


Albert Camus' first novel, *A Happy Death*,…. offers an instructive lesson in the strategies of the imagination.
Though shot through with brilliant rays, *A Happy Death* is a chunky, labored work, cumbersome for all its
brevity, so cluttered with false starts and halting intentions that it occludes its own themes…. In the first
novel, the author fumbles, trying to pick himself up by too many handles, and growing more handles in the
process; in the second [*The Stranger*], he takes a short but decisive side-step, becomes less himself, and with
this achieved narrowness penetrates to the heart of his *raison d'écrire*.

The youthful Camus evidently had many attributes of a normal Algerian working-class lout. He liked soccer,
girls, beachbumming, moviegoing, and idleness. He had decided, one feels, to cherish the image of himself as
a citizen of the Belcourt slums…. The Camus whose gifts for reflection and self-improvement were early recognized and nurtured by a grade-school teacher, the Camus who entered the lycée at the age of ten, who studied philosophy at the University of Algiers from 1932 to 1936, who by the age of twenty-five was a working, travelling, published intellectual and the mastermind of a theatre group—this Camus figures little in the early essays or in the character of Mersault. Mersault, though his consciousness is brushed by philosophical speculation, confesses no ambition for his future and almost never reflects on his past.

By any standards, Camus' upbringing had been bleak. His father, an agricultural laborer, was killed in the Battle of the Marne ten months after Albert was born. His mother, a Spaniard, took the infant and his older brother Lucien from the village of Mondovi to the poor district of Algiers, where she became a cleaning woman. Camus was raised in a ménage that included his mother, a partially paralyzed uncle, and a domineering grandmother. These three adults were all illiterate and, in various ways, ill. The grandmother eventually died of cancer of the liver…. His mother, he wrote, "could think only with difficulty"; deafness, a speech impediment, and a docile temper combined to enforce a habit of silence. Camus once described his literary career as the attempt to speak for the "silent mother"—the inarticulate and disenfranchised of society…. Death for a father, silence for a mother: with such a parentage, Camus would never become a fluent or frivolous creator. At the moment of beginning his first novel, what, indeed, was his artistic treasure? A good education, a normal sensuality, a fond ear for working-class dialect, a rapturous sensitivity to nature, a conviction that paganism was being reborn around him in Europeanized North Africa…. Two events in his early maturity urged him toward energetic use of his capabilities: in 1930 he nearly died of tuberculosis, and in 1934 he joined the Communist Party. Yet always, in the heart of this young man, coexistent with the desire to celebrate and explicate, lay an unshakable lassitude and a blankness…. Around this natural infirmity, then, the novice artist must shape his strategies—no, not around it; he must point himself into it, for this silence is his message.

The first sketch, in the Notebooks, for the novel that is to become A Happy Death outlines, with an excessively formal scheme of alternation between past and present tense, what appears to be a story about love and jealousy among students, ending with the hero's death by disease…. Violent death does not figure in this first version, though the hero (called simply Patrice) does tell "his story of the man sentenced to death." The italicization of "happy" signals an arrival; a month later (September of 1937), the title "La Mort Heureuse" appears. That fall, the character of "an invalid—both legs amputated" begins to talk in the notes, and before the end of the year he has his curious name, Zagreus. To this new character adheres the old "theme of the revolver." (pp. 279-83)

Patrice Mersault, a poor young man, makes the acquaintance, through a mistress, of a legless invalid, Roland Zagreus, who shows him one day a safe full of money, a loaded revolver, and an undated suicide note. Some days later (in a chapter Camus transposed to the beginning of the novel), Mersault visits Zagreus, takes up the revolver, kills the cripple with it, leaves the suicide note on a table, and departs with the money. Walking away from this perfect crime, he sneezes, and the remainder of the novel traces his wandering, through a variety of countries and romantic entanglements, toward his own death, of pleurisy, chills, fever, and weak heart—a somewhat poetic syndrome. Assembled rather than conceived, the story has too many duplicating parts—too many women, too many deaths, too many meditative approaches to the lyrical riddle of "happiness." Simple problems of clarity exist. Has Zagreus deliberately invited Mersault to murder him? Why, when Mersault holds the gun to his head, doesn't Zagreus gesture or speak? "When he felt the barrel against his right temple, he did not turn away. But Patrice, watching him, saw his eyes fill with tears." These tears are given meaning not by the context but by an entry in the notebooks: "The man who doesn't want this easy way out, and who wants to chew over and taste all his fear. He dies without a word, his eyes full of tears." The murder is so abruptly rendered as to seem merely sensational. Nor do its consequences easily flow: after the murder and the theft, Mersault does not live like a rich man; he travels thriftily in Europe and loafs among friends. None of his pleasures are beyond the financial reach of Camus himself at this impoverished stage of his life. Mersault never becomes the proposed hero "who devotes himself completely to the
acquisition of money"; money never becomes an embodied theme.

Since A Happy Death arrives now with an excellent critical afterword by Jean Sarocchi, and since Camus suppressed the work, why belabor its weaknesses? Only to marvel at how its materials and concerns reëmerge in The Stranger, transformed by their new position within a unified action. (pp. 283-84)

Of himself, Camus wrote, in a youthful essay, "And yet, at the very moment that the world was crumbling, he was alive." A few sentences further: "Every time it seems to me that I've grasped the deep meaning of the world, it is its simplicity that always overwhelms me. My mother, that evening, and its strange indifference." Indifference, life, simplicity, the sun, death: the concepts link up, make a circle. "There is no love of life without despair of life," an essay affirms. Love, despair, silence, mother, nature. (pp. 285-86)

But A Happy Death, with its half-hearted autobiography, too numerous romances, static scenery-painting, and ingenuous melodrama, could not focus [his] anti-theology. The images that could, however, already lay in Camus' notebook. One of the entries for January of 1936 lists six story ideas; two are "Death of the mother" and "The story of the condemned man." These two preoccupations figure marginally in much of Camus' youthful production; with The Stranger, for the first time he invents them, in the freedom of fantasy. By proposing a young man who could not shed tears at his mother's funeral and went to the movies instead of mourning, and by rendering her pauper's funeral and his daily life in the full dry light of their absurd inconsequence, Camus placed his hidden theme of blankness where no reader could avoid being challenged by it. Though of course derived from observation (impressions of a funeral occur in the notebooks, and his grandmother's death had already provided matter for an essay), the central circumstance is imagined; Camus' mother, in fact, outlived him. His essays show how deeply he loved her. But by killing her in his mind, he unlocked an essential self. Meursault the essential orphan, in all his "simplicity" and estrangement, this cool monster who is Everyman, with his casual, androgynous voice that would blow down all our castles of Christian decency and conventional delusion. And by making this hero's condemnation to death literal and legal, instead of an attenuated wasting by disease, Camus immensely heightens the pressure. He is forced, observe, by these inventions to conjure up two blank-walled interiors—the old people's home and the jail—that crystallize Nada better than the open landscapes he so loved to describe. And the necessary characters of the warden and the chaplain, with their tragicomic eloquence, lead his book into a dimension undeveloped in A Happy Death—the dimension of the political. Society acquires spokesmen, and in debate Meursault turns singular, heroic, revolutionary. The fussed-over irrelevancies of A Happy Death fall away. The new novel pours smooth and hot from start to finish.

Fiction must hold in healthily tense combination the mimetic and pedagogic impulses. Perhaps because kind teachers had guided his rise from poverty, Camus respected pedagogy, wished always to make things formal and clear, liked stories to have morals. He sometimes reminds us of a schoolteacher standing before us insisting that though there is no headmaster and no grading system and scarcely any blackboard, we must stay at our desks, learning virtue and happiness with the diligence of saints. We must, in short, love our mother—"The earth! … that great temple deserted by the gods"—even though she is silent. After The Stranger and The Plague, Camus' fiction shows more intellectual will than vital, involuntary substance. The Fall and the short stories of Exile and the Kingdom seem relatively stiff and diagrammatic. The poet stoops in his prophet's robes. A Happy Death shows the other extremity of this curve—the beginning. when artistry and philosophy struggled with an abundance of live impressions; the prophet had not yet been robed, the young man stood naked. (pp. 286-87)


In the fiction of Albert Camus, man is constantly portrayed as seeking design in a universe that appears to be chaotic. Trapped in a world that is indifferent and at times even hostile to human concerns, man attempts to
create an order in which he is in harmony with his surroundings. In "La Pierre qui pousse," the concluding story of *L'Exil et le Royaume*, Camus reveals the fashion in which man creates the fraternal accord necessary to lead a fulfilled existence. Through the force of human fellowship, d'Arrast, the hero of the story, asserts his membership in the circle of human existence and creates a place of identity for himself in the universe. (p. 321)

D'Arrast, a French engineer, has been sent to Iguape, Brazil, where he is to oversee the project of damming a river which periodically floods the native settlements that lie along its banks. The countryside that surrounds Iguape appears to d'Arrast to be without pattern. This circumstance is aptly revealed in Camus' description of the landscape through which d'Arrast passes on his way to Iguape. The river across which he is ferried is a symbol of chaos and horror. [Claire adds in a footnote: The river might also be considered a symbol of death if one treats the reference to the ferry and the river as allusions to the ferryman Charon and the river Acheron of the Greek mythological underworld. The people of Iguape are in a sterile and deathlike condition before the arrival of d'Arrast; hence, it is fitting that the river which surrounds them should be associated with the tenebrous overtones of the river of death.]… [The river waters] are emblematic of the chaotic character of the universe in which d'Arrast finds himself.… Water in "La Pierre qui pousse" serves as a concrete, sensuous symbol of a universe that is not only indifferent to man, but also, at times, threatening.… Each year these waters inundate the clearings that border them, bringing misery and depravation to the inhabitants of the region. In this capacity, they embody the violent and unbridled forces of nature that submit man to their capricious control. Exposed to their all-encompassing power of destruction, man becomes nothing more than an object of prey, stripped of his identity as an entity unique from the other objects of nature.

The forest through which d'Arrast must make his way is a further symbolic representation of the chaotic forces which threaten man. Like the waters of the river, the forest is characterized by an unpatterned obscurity.… The chaotic character of the forest is reflected in the labyrinthine roads that d'Arrast must penetrate in order to arrive at Iguape. Irrational forces predominate in this world to such an extent that the forest becomes little more than an extension of the river, another aspect of the undistinguishable forces which make man's position in the cosmos uncertain.… The ambiguous nature of the universe is further associated with the image of the sky, which is little more than a viscous extension of the murkiness of the water and the forest.… As beacons of light, traditional symbols of certitude and absolute values, they are no longer capable of giving man direction, for they, too, are blurred by the same forces of inscrutability and incertitude which preside over the forest and the river.

Located in a landscape characterized by obscurity, man's position in the universe is depicted in the opening pages of "La Pierre qui pousse" as being like that of a blind man.… Man decreases in stature as the universe looms large. Even the work of construction which he has performed in the forest does not suffice to make his cities essentially different from the forest.… The settlement of Iguape and the men who inhabit it seem to have no individual identity capable of making them unique from the forces of nature that surround them.

The descriptions of the individuals whom d'Arrast encounters reflect this lack of human identity. A sense of chaos pervades the description of these people. The colony of Registro is inhabited by a group of Japanese immigrants. The village of Iguape itself is composed of many different types of people—gauchos, Japanese, Indians, half-breeds, and a handful of government officials of European descent. The languages that these people speak are similarly disparate: French, Spanish, Portuguese, and various native dialects. There is no pattern which serves to give these people a particular identity as humans. Rather, they are viewed from a detached vantage point, as though they were beasts rather than men. (pp. 321-23)

The dehumanized quality of the inhabitants of Iguape is most strikingly revealed in their attitude toward religion. This religion is nominally Christian, yet it contains much that is redolent of bestial, primitive rites. (p. 323)
Realizing that a religion that permits human deprivation to exist in the present moment in anticipation of future reward is unworthy of man's fealty, d'Arrast has abandoned the Christian faith. He is representative of a European order wherein the absolute rule of Christ, the Lord, has already been destroyed. Deprived of the right to act on his own, man is rendered immobile in a universe that threatens him. The term *immobile* itself recurs with significant frequency in the story, serving almost as an incantation urging d'Arrast to act in such a way as to remove from the people of Iguape the burden imposed upon them by their religion. (p. 324)

Although the natives disgust d'Arrast in their candid bestiality, they also possess a health and vigor which makes them attractive. D'Arrast's ambivalent attitude toward them is consummately reflected in the image of the *Diane Noire*, the female huntress who presides over the last phase of the ritual that d'Arrast is permitted to see. The embodiment of a Greek goddess, arrayed in a harlequin-like costume of motley color scheme, she is a symbol of the concept of Greek moderation gone awry as man becomes one with the forces of nature. These people embody man's innocence to such a degree that although d'Arrast may become ill at the sight of their lack of moderation, he cannot prevent himself from loving them. It is ultimately through asserting his fraternity with these people that d'Arrast will create a new order for himself and for the people of Iguape, bringing unity to an ununified world. (p. 325)

In serving as a force of mediation, enabling man to create a new, human-oriented order, d'Arrast assumes the characteristics of a religious savior. His role as messiah is appropriately elaborated by the rich Christian imagery which permeates "La Pierre qui pousse." This imagery is for the most part drawn from events which occurred in the life of Christ. (p. 327)

In examining the wealth of Christian imagery in "La Pierre qui pousse," it is essential to note the distinction between d'Arrast and the Christ of the Christian tradition as seen by Camus: unlike Christ, who became an institutionalized figure preaching salvation through faith in the future, d'Arrast opens the way for the people of Iguape to find fulfillment in their present circumstances by teaching them that man must be directly responsible for his actions. (That d'Arrast halts the futuristic projection of salvation is indicated by the fact that his watch stops running on the day of the religious procession.)

Inasmuch as it is ultimately humanity and not divinity which he represents, it is but fitting that d'Arrast should bear parallel resemblances to non-divine figures in Christian mythology. Thus, he resembles St. Peter, for he is given three opportunities whereby he can deny that which is most sacred to him—human fraternity. On the third occasion, when the cook needs his help, however, d'Arrast does not deny the bond of fraternity that beckons him. Rather, like another religious figure, Simon of Cyrene, he helps the cook to bear his cross. Finally, like St. George, whose spirit pervades the action of "La Pierre qui pousse," he encounters the forces of chaos which threaten man and helps to inaugurate a new order.

D'Arrast's response in combatting the forces of chaos is one that is as much intuitive as it is intellectual. The forces of chaos no longer threaten d'Arrast, for having assumed responsibility for his action, he is no longer without identity.

Having discovered his human identity, d'Arrast is no longer in exile. His kingdom is that of human fellowship. "La Pierre qui pousse" thus concludes *L'Exil et le Royaume* on an affirmative note. The silent solitude of the opening pages of the story is contrasted with the [concluding] sense of communication and comradeship. (pp. 327-29)


There seems no good reason why [Youthful Writings] should have been published. Of its two hundred and fifty-six short pages of text, ninety-nine are devoted to an introduction in which Paul Viallaneix summarises
the seventeen brief specimens of Camus's youthful writings which it contains, and makes a perfunctory attempt to relate them to the circumstances of Camus's upbringing and to the themes of L'Etranger and Caligula…. 

The specimens of Camus's early writing cover the years 1932–1934, when he was aged nineteen to twenty-one. Antedating by five years the appearance of Le Mythe de Sisyphe, the first of his major works, they show little promise of the writer that he was to become. There is evidence of his youthful study of philosophy in his praise of Bergson, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche and in an unconvincing attempt to represent the art of music as making contact with a world of Platonic Ideas. He pays tribute to Verlaine and to the largely forgotten Jehan Rictus for his Soliloques du Pauvre. Under the heading 'Intuitions' there are sixteen pages of 'reveries born of a great lassitude' which are intended to 'record the desire of a too mystical soul, in search of an object for its fervour and its faith'. There are faint touches in them of the irony but little of the logical discipline that was to distinguish Le Mythe de Sisyphe.

The best passages are those in which Camus expresses his love for the local Algerian Scene. Unfortunately, his prose being at its most poetic, they are also the passages that pose the greatest problems for his translator….

Now that the study of contemporary literature has become an academic subject, there will be scholars who cherish every scrap of writing by those who have any claim to literary eminence. Camus's own reputation as an essayist, a playwright and a novelist is deservedly secure and the publication in English of these juvenilia will do it no harm. It will, however, be of interest only to his academic devotees who could, presumably, have been trusted to find their own way to the original texts. (p. 13)


Analysis: Other Literary Forms

Albert Camus was an important novelist and playwright as well as a philosophical essayist and journalist. He translated and adapted the works of Spanish, Russian, and American writers such as Pedro Calderón de la Barca, Lope de Vega Carpio, Fyodor Dostoevski, William Faulkner, and James Thurber. During World War II, he was the anonymous editor of Combat, and he often practiced the trade of journalism during his brief life.

Analysis: Achievements

At the early age of forty-four, Albert Camus accepted the Nobel Prize in Literature. He had already been feted by the literary elite of Paris and had himself become the center of a cause célèbre due to his criticism of Soviet Marxism and its concomitant lack of a humanistic face. More than thirty years after Camus’s death, the philosophic and aesthetic values found in his writings continue to attract a wide audience, from American high school students to deconstructionists. Few contemporary writers have provoked more thoughtful discussion concerning the human condition and the themes of absurdity, revolt, and fraternity found in the human struggle. Perhaps Camus’s principal achievement centers on his refusal to make a distinction between his writings and his own actions. In his works, these actions take “form” in his protests against racism, intolerance, and human indignity, wherever they may be found. Camus’s durability may, in the final analysis, rest as much on the character of the writer as on his art.
Analysis: Other Literary Forms

Considered by many to have been the outstanding figure in his generation of French letters (rivalled only by his sometime friend and colleague Jean-Paul Sartre), Albert Camus is best remembered as the author of thought-provoking essays, such as *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942; *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 1955) and *L’Homme révolté* (1951; *The Rebel*, 1956), and novels such as *L’Étranger* (1942; *The Stranger*, 1946), *La Peste* (1947; *The Plague*, 1948), and *La Chute* (1956; *The Fall*, 1957). *L’Exil et le royaume* (*Exile and the Kingdom*, 1958), a collection of thematically linked but otherwise widely varied short stories, appeared in 1957 to considerable acclaim.

Analysis: Achievements

Despite a lifelong interest and participation in the theater, frequently as actor or director, Albert Camus never achieved with his plays the success that his essays and prose fiction enjoyed. Still, the plays are valuable for their development of the themes that preoccupied him throughout his career. It was his single-minded engagement with these fundamental moral and philosophical dilemmas that won for him a reputation as the conscience of his generation—a reputation confirmed in 1957 by the Nobel Prize in Literature, which he received when he was only forty-three years old.

Analysis: Other literary forms

Albert Camus (kah-MEW) considered his vocation to be that of novelist, but the artist in him was always at the service of his dominant passion, moral philosophy. As a result, Camus was led to cultivate several other literary forms that could express his central concerns as a moralist: the short story, drama, and nonfiction forms such as the philosophical essay and political journalism, all of which he practiced with enough distinction to be influential among his contemporaries. Moreover, these works were generally written side by side with his novels; it was Camus’s customary procedure, throughout his brief writing career, always to be working on two or more compositions simultaneously, each expressing a different facet of the same philosophical issue. Thus, within a year of the publication of his most celebrated novel, *The Stranger*, there appeared a long essay titled *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942; *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 1955), a meditation on the meaning of life in an irrational universe that begins with the assertion that the only serious question confronting modern man is the question of suicide and concludes with a daring argument that finds in the legend of Sisyphus a strangely comforting allegory of the human condition. Sisyphus, who becomes in Camus’s hands an exemplary existentialist, spent his days in the endlessly futile task of pushing a boulder to the top of a hill from which it always rolled down again. Every human life is expended as meaninglessly as that of Sisyphus, Camus argues, yet one must conceive of Sisyphus as happy, because he was totally absorbed by his assigned task and found sufficient satisfaction in its daily accomplishment, without requiring that it also have some enduring significance. There are close links between such reasoning and the ideas that inform *The Stranger*, but it is erroneous to argue, as some have, that *The Myth of Sisyphus* is an “explanation” of *The Stranger*. The former work is, rather, a discussion of similar themes in a different form and from a different perspective, in accordance with Camus’s unique way of working as a writer.

That unique way of working produced another long philosophical essay, *L’Homme révolté* (1951; *The Rebel*, 1956), which has affinities with the novel *The Plague* as well as with four of Camus’s plays written and produced in the 1940’s: *Caligula* (pb. 1944; English translation, 1948); *Le Malentendu* (pr., pb. 1944; *The Misunderstanding*, 1948); *L’État de siège* (pr., pb. 1948; *State of Siege*, 1958), and *Les Justes* (pr. 1949; *The Just Assassins*, 1958). Each of these plays is also related by certain thematic elements to the two novels that Camus published in the same period.
Camus’s earliest political journalism, written before 1940 and dealing with the problems of his native Algeria, attracted little attention, but his work for the underground newspaper Combat during and after World War II achieved considerable celebrity, and the best articles he wrote for Combat were later collected in a volume that was widely read and admired. During the civil war in Algeria, in the 1950’s, Camus again entered the lists as a political journalist, and because he was by then indisputably Algeria’s most famous man of letters, his articles were of major importance at the time, though highly controversial and much less widely approved than the wartime pieces from Combat.

Camus produced only one collection of short stories, L’Exil et le royaume (1957; Exile and the Kingdom, 1958), composed during the same years as the novel The Fall, but those stories have been very popular and are regarded by many as among the finest short stories published in France in the twentieth century. The volume is particularly noteworthy because it offers the only examples Camus ever published of fiction composed in the third-person mode of the omniscient narrator. The first three of his published novels are variations of the limited-perspective first-person narrative.

Deeply involved in the theater throughout his career, both as writer and director, Camus adapted for the French stage the work of foreign novelists Fyodor Dostoevski and William Faulkner, and of playwrights of Spain’s Golden Age, including Pedro Calderón de la Barca and Lope de Vega Carpio. These adaptations have all been published and form part of Camus’s contribution to the theater.

Analysis: Achievements

To the immediate postwar public, not only in France but also throughout Europe, Albert Camus seemed a writer of unassailable stature. Although Camus himself repudiated the designation, he was regarded worldwide as one of the two principal exponents of existentialism (the other was Jean-Paul Sartre), the single most influential philosophical movement of the twentieth century. Indeed, the existentialist worldview—according to which the individual human being “must assume ultimate responsibility for his acts of free will without any certain knowledge of what is right or wrong or good or bad”—has profoundly shaped the values of countless people who have never read Camus or Sartre.

In the 1950’s, Camus was widely admired not only as a writer but also as a hero of the war against fascism, a spokesman for the younger generation, and a guardian of the moral conscience of Europe. That reputation was consecrated in 1957 with the award to Camus of the Nobel Prize in Literature, at the remarkably young age of forty-four. Yet, as has happened to many other recipients of the Nobel Prize, the award seemed almost a signal of the rapid deflation of his renown. Camus suddenly came under severe criticism for his stand on the Algerian Civil War, was attacked as self-righteous and artistically sterile, and was finally denounced as irrelevant by the new literary generation then coming to prominence, who were weary of moral issues and more concerned with aesthetic questions of form and language. Camus’s fame and influence appeared to many to have suffered an irreversible decline by the end of the decade, at least in France. (In the United States, the case was different: Made more accessible by the “paperback revolution,” Camus’s works were enormously influential among American college students in the 1960’s.) There were those who suggested that the automobile accident that took his life in January of 1960 was a disguised blessing, sparing him the pain of having to witness the collapse of his career.

It is true that, in the late twentieth century, generations after the height of Camus’s fame, French writers and intellectuals showed no influence of Camus in their writings and scant critical interest in his works. Still, his works have enjoyed steady sales among the French public, and outside France, especially in the United States, interest in Camus has remained strong. There has been an inevitable sifting of values, a crystallization of what it is, in Camus’s work, that still has the power to survive and what no longer speaks to successive generations. It has become clear, for example, that his philosophical essays are too closely tied to the special circumstances
that occasioned them; in spite of a few brilliant passages, those essays now seem rambling and poorly argued as well as irrelevant to the concerns of modern readers. Camus’s works for the theater, too, have held up poorly, being too abstract and inhuman to engage the emotions of audiences. Although his plays have continued to be performed on both sides of the Atlantic, interest in them has steadily declined over the years. It is his fiction that still seems most alive, both in characters and ideas, and that still presents to the reader endlessly fascinating enigmas that delight the imagination and invite repeated readings.

Although the total number of Camus’s fictional works is small, those works are, in both form and content, among the most brilliantly original contributions to the art of fiction produced anywhere in the twentieth century. In particular, Camus expressed through fiction, more powerfully and more memorably than anyone else in his time, the painful moral and spiritual dilemmas of modern man: evil, alienation, meaninglessness, and death. He invented techniques and created characters by which he was able to make manifest, in unforgettable terms, the eternal struggle of Everyman for some shred of dignity and happiness. His stories have accordingly taken on some of the haunting quality, and the prestige, of myths. For that reason, it seems safe to predict that it is his fiction that represents Camus’s greatest achievement—an achievement that will endure long after his philosophical musings and political arguments have been forgotten.

**Analysis: Discussion Topics**

Is it accurate or useful to consider the work of Albert Camus “existentialist”?

How are Camus’s Algerian origins reflected in his fiction?

Why is Meursault executed in *The Stranger*?

Why does Camus not reveal the identity of the narrator of *The Plague* until the novel’s conclusion?

What is the significance of the title *The Fall*?

How does *The Myth of Sisyphus* help explicate some of Camus’s fiction?

What is going to happen to Daru after the final words of “The Guest”?

How does Camus treat the theme of capital punishment?

How does a tension between solidarity and solitude shape Camus’s work?

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