

# ALBERT CAMUS

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A man is dead: you think of his living face, of his gestures, his actions, and of moments you shared, trying to recapture an image that is dissolved forever. A writer is dead: you reflect upon his work, upon each book, upon the thread that ran through them all, upon their vital movement toward a deeper meaning; and you seek to form a judgment which takes account of the secret source from which they sprang and which is now stilled. But the picture of the man is not made up of the sum of your memories; nor the figure of the writer of the sum of his works. And one cannot discover the man through the writer, or the writer through the man. Everything is fragmentary, everything is incomplete, everything is the prey of mortality even when destiny seems to have granted both man and writer the gift of living to the limit of his forces, and of giving everything humanly possible, as in the case of Tolstoy. The story of a man is always incomplete; it is sufficient to think of what could have been different—almost everything—to know that his story can never contain the meaning of a human life, but only what that existence was permitted to be and to give. The truth was the living presence; and nothing can replace it. Immortality is an illusion for thought and art, as for man. They are nothing but relics mutely surviving time's erosion and history's disasters, like monuments of stone. But it is in this very fragility—that equates the humblest existence with the one that we falsely call "great" and is simply one that had the luck to express itself—that there lies the meaning and value of human life. And that value is eternal.

ALBERT CAMUS appeared in my life in April, 1941, in Algiers, where I had come as a refugee from France. I met him soon after my arrival, for in Algeria he was famous: the leader of a group of young journalists, aspiring writers, students, friends of the Arabs, enemies of the local bourgeoisie and Pétain. They lived together, passed the days on the seashore or hillside, and the evening playing records and dancing, hoping for the victory of England and giving vent to their disgust with what had happened to France and to Europe. They also put on plays, and in that period were preparing a production of *Hamlet* in which Camus, in addition to directing, played the leading role opposite the Ophelia of his wife, Francine.

He had published a volume of prose poems entitled *Noces*, they told me. I did not read it, because in those days I was not in the mood for prose poems, but chiefly because the company of him and his friends was enough. In their midst I found the France I loved and the pure clear warmth of French friendship. I attended the rehearsals of *Hamlet*, went to the beach with them, took walks with them, talking about what was happening in the world. Hitler had just occupied Greece, and the swastika waved over the Acropolis. I suffered continual nausea and solitude in the face of these events. But solitary and shut off as I was, I was the guest of those young people. To know the value of hospitality one must have been alone and homeless.

I try to recall details, as if through them I could relive those days and learn something more about the young writer with whom I actually spoke little, since he felt no more like talking than I. I remember being totally obsessed by a single thought: we had arrived at humanity's zero hour and history was senseless; the only thing that made sense was that part of man which remained outside of history, alien and impervious to the whirlwind of events. If, indeed, such a part existed. This thought I considered my exclusive privilege; I felt that no one else could be so possessed by it, yet I yearned for someone to share it with. But there was no one. It was not an idea compatible with normal life, let alone with literature—or so it seemed to me.

However, I did have something in common with this twenty-eight year old writer—love of the sea, joy of the sea, ecstatic admiration of the sea. I discovered this one day when I was his guest at Oran and we went by bicycle beyond Mers-el-Kebir to a deserted beach. We spoke little even then, but we praised the sea, which does not have to be understood, which is inexhaustible and which never palls. All other beauty does, we agreed. This agreement sealed our friendship. Camus told me then that he was writing a tragedy about Caligula, and I tried to understand what could attract a modern writer to such a subject. Unfettered tyranny? But contemporary tyranny did not seem to me to have much in common with Caligula's.

From Oran I continued my journey to Casablanca from where I had been told I could embark for New York. I said good-bye to Camus and his wife, knowing that we had exchanged the gift of friendship. At the core of this friendship was something very precious, something unspoken and impersonal that made itself felt in the way they received me and in our way of being together. We had recognized in each other the mark of fate—which was, I believe, the ancient meaning of the encounter between stranger and host. I was being chased from Europe; they remained, exposed to the violence that had driven me out. I carried away with me the impression of a man who could be almost tenderly warm one moment and coolly reserved the next, and yet was constantly longing for friendship.

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I SAW HIM AGAIN in New York in 1946 on the pier where I had gone to meet his ship. In my eyes he seemed to me like a man coming

straight from the battlefield bearing its marks, pride and sorrow. By that time I had read *L'Etranger*, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* and *Caligula*. In those black years the young man from Algeria had fought and conquered. He had become, together with Jean-Paul Sartre, the symbol of a defeated France, which because of them had imposed itself victoriously in its chosen domain—intelligence. He had won his position on the stage of the world; he was famous; his books were brilliant. But to me he had conquered in a more important sense. He had faced the question which I considered crucial and which had so absorbed me during the days that I first met him. He had mastered it and carried it to extreme and lucid conclusions. He had succeeded in saying in his fevered way and in an argument as taut as a bow why, despite the fury and horror of history, man is an absolute; and he had indicated precisely where, according to him, this absolute lay: in the conscience, even if mute and stilled; in remaining true to one's self even when condemned by the gods to repeat over and over the same vain task. In this lay the value of *L'Etranger* and *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* for me.

With an almost monstrous richness of ideas and vigor of reasoning Sartre had said something similar. But when he arrived at the question of the connection between man and history today; between man and the choices which impose themselves today, Sartre seemed to have lost the thread of his reasoning, to have turned backward to realism, to categorical obligations imposed on man from the outside, and worse, to notions of the politically opportune. Camus held firm, at the risk of exposing himself, defenseless, to the criticism of the dialecticians, and of seeming to pass brusquely from logic to emotive affirmation. It is certain that what induced him to remain firm was not an ideological system, but the sentiment, so vehemently expressed in *L'Etranger* and in some pages of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, of the inviolable secret which is enclosed in every man's heart simply because he is "condemned to die." That is man's transcendence. That is man's transcendence in respect to history; that is the truth which no social imperative can erase. Desperate transcendence and truth, because they are challenged in the very heart of man, who knows that he is mortal and eternally guilty, with no recourse against destiny. Absurd such transcendence and truth—but absurd as they were, they were reborn every time that Sisyphus descended "with heavy, but equal, steps, toward the torment whose end he would never approach. . . ." This secret, like the "eternal jewel" of Macbeth can never be compromised or violated without sacrilege.

Albert Camus had known how to give form to this feeling and to remain true to it. Because of this, his presence added to everybody's world, making it more real and less insensate. And because of this, not of his fame, the young writer from Algeria has "grown" in my eyes, worthy not only of friendship but admiration. It was no longer a matter of literature, but of directly confronting the world. Literary space, that *trompe l'oeil* that had been invented in the nineteenth

century to defend the individual artist's right to be indifferent, was broken. Camus (and, in his very different way, Sartre) by the simple act of raising the question of the value of existence, asserted the will to participate actively, in the first person, in the world; that is, to challenge directly the actual situation of contemporary man in the name of the exigence of a conscience whose rigor was not attenuated by pragmatic considerations. With this, one might say, he returned to the *raison d'être* of writing. Putting the world in question means putting one's self in question and abandoning the artist's traditional right to remain separate from his work—a pure creator. In the language of Camus this signifies that if the world is absurd, the artist must live immersed in the absurd, must carry the burden of it, and must seek to prove it *for the others*.

This was the real and the only valid meaning of *engagement*. Such a choice carried within itself the threat of the cancerous negation that Camus called nihilism. One had to go through the experience of nihilism and fight it. The simplest act of life is an act of affirmation; it is the acceptance of one's own and others' lives as the starting point of all thinking. But living by nihilism is living on bad faith, as a bourgeois lives on his income.

IN 1946 CAMUS was invited to speak to the students of Columbia University in New York. I have kept notes of his talk, and am sure I can reconstruct it without betraying his meaning. The gist of the speech was as follows:

We were born at the beginning of the First World War. As adolescents we had the crisis of 1929; at twenty, Hitler. Then came the Ethiopian War, the Civil War in Spain, and Munich. These were the foundations of our education. Next came the Second World War, the defeat, and Hitler in our homes and cities. Born and bred in such a world, what did we believe in? Nothing. Nothing except the obstinate negation in which we were forced to close ourselves from the very beginning. The world in which we were called to exist was an absurd world, and there was no other in which we could take refuge. The world of culture was beautiful, but it was not real. And when we found ourselves face to face with Hitler's terror, in what values could we take comfort, what values could we oppose to negation? In none. If the problem had been the bankruptcy of a political ideology, or a system of government, it would have been simple enough. But what had happened came from the very root of man and society. There was no doubt about this, and it was confirmed day after day not so much by the behavior of the criminals but by that of the average man. The facts showed that men deserved what was happening to them. Their way of life had so little value; and the violence of the Hitlerian negation was in itself logical. But it was unbearable and we fought it.

Now that Hitler has gone, we know a certain number of things. The first is that the poison which impregnated Hitlerism has not been

eliminated; it is present in each of us. Whoever today speaks of human existence in terms of power, efficiency and "historical tasks" spreads it. He is an actual or potential assassin. For if the problem of man is reduced to any kind of "historical task," he is nothing but the raw material of history, and one can do anything one pleases with him. Another thing we have learned is that we cannot accept any optimistic conception of existence, any happy ending whatsoever. But if we believe that optimism is silly, we also know that pessimism about the action of man among his fellows is cowardly.

We opposed terror because it forces us to choose between murdering and being murdered; and it makes communication impossible. This is why we reject any ideology that claims control over all of human life.

It seems to me today that in this speech, which was a sort of autobiography, there were all the themes of Camus' later work, from *La Peste* to *Les Justes* to *L'Homme Révolté*. But in it there remained, discreetly in shadow, the other Camus, the one that I can call neither truer nor artistically superior, for he is simply "the other," jealously hidden in his secret being—the anguished, dark, misanthropic Camus whose yearning for human communication was perhaps even greater than that of the author of *La Peste*; the man who, in questioning the world, questioned himself, and by this testified to his own vocation. This is the Camus of the last pages of *L'Etranger*, and especially the Camus of *La Chute* in which we hear his deepest being, the self-tormenting tormentor speak, resisting all forms of complacency and moral self-satisfaction. He wrote, "I was persecuted by a ridiculous apprehension: one cannot die without having confessed all one's own lies . . . otherwise, be there one hidden untruth in a life, death would render it definitive . . . this absolute assassination of the truth gave me vertigo. . . ." With these words, it seems to me, the dialogue of Albert Camus with his contemporaries, truncated as it is by death, is nonetheless complete.

*Translated by MIRIAM CHIAROMONTE*