

**ALBERT CAMUS:
The Absurd Hero**
by
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This article honours Albert Camus on the twenty-fifth anniversary of his death. His life span, from 1913 to 1960, covered a time which might aptly be named the disgrace of the western world. He was born in French Algeria and grew up in a working people's district of Algiers. When he was just seven months old his father was killed in the battle of the Marne of the first World War, and his mother, who could not read or write, supported her children by housecleaning.

There were no books in his house - not even a magazine or newspaper - yet as a child in school the boy commanded the attention of his class when he spoke. At seven, he later told a friend, he wanted to be a writer, and at twenty-four he came to realize that his real work was to create books out of the life he was living. In his acceptance of the Nobel Prize in 1957 he said that, "the writer's function is not without arduous duties. By definition he cannot serve today those who make history; he must serve those who are subject to it."

Albert Camus, an agnostic, was active in the resistance movement in France during the second World War. Thereafter his eloquence and honesty made him the conscience of his generation. Unable to express himself optimistically as to any future he could foresee, Camus was charged with pessimism by advocates of the two great systems of his time, Communism and Christianity. He replied that in a world without meaning he had faith in human values.

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In January of 1960, a powerful sports car was travelling north in France towards Paris. Albert Camus was a passenger in the car. He had won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1957 and had been called in the presentation speech "the conscience of the 20th century." He had been an actor and an editor, a dramatist and a novelist, and was active in the underground resistance against the Nazis in World War II. He was forty-six years old and well known around the world. Camus was travelling to Paris with friends after spending the New Year holiday on his property in the south of France. It was raining. The car came out at one point on a straight, clear stretch of road. About midway it went off the road and rammed into a tree. Camus was killed. One newspaper at the time reported, "It was a dramatic end for the young writer who was a leader and interpreter of the philosophy of postwar France's wild, young existentialist set."

If the existentialist set in France was wild, this is hardly a charge that can be levelled against Camus. A more thoroughly earnest man it would be hard to find anywhere. And yet, his sudden senseless death there on the road lends support to one of the fundamental ideas of the existentialists movement: that life is absurd, senseless, that anything can happen to anyone at any time, without rhyme or reason; life is illogical; the only god is the god of chance; "Time and chance happeneth to all men," as the preacher said many years ago. And yet, in his works Camus is stating, is demanding, that life has value without having meaning. In so doing he is rebelling against two things: on the one hand, *nihilism*, that is the belief in nothing; and on the other hand, the

Christian concept of *contemptus mundi*, contempt for the world, which forces one to turn away from the living, present moment and to be concerned about some time in the future.

Camus believed that life is neither a pilgrimage nor a programme, but an attitude. Translated into dramatic terms, life is not a plot but a scene. What is important is the living moment, the present. He takes his basic beliefs from Nietzsche through Kierkegaard, and Jaspers, and argues that the world is unsponsored, that there is no God, and with Nietzsche would agree that the old concept of God is dead. "Wither is God?" wrote Nietzsche, "I shall tell you, we have killed him, you and I, all of us are his murderers, God is dead. God remains dead and we have killed him. How shall we the murderers of all murderers comfort ourselves? What was the holiest and most powerful of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives. Who will wipe the blood off us? Freud told us that that would become the burden of the 20th century that we could not carry: original sin would become original guilt and pull us down as humans.

In Camus there is that basic problem that has existed for many people for many centuries. He could not accept the Christian dispensation for two reasons: first, the old problem of evil - if we have an all-powerful, all-good God, then why does evil exist? Second, because Christianity looks to the future - the city of God, the notion of future reward and punishment, instead of concentrating on the present, on the city of men and women. Camus writes: "Likewise and during every day of our lives time carries us, but a moment always comes when we have to carry it. We live on the future - 'tomorrow', 'later on', 'you will understand when you are old enough'. Such irrelevancies are wonderful for, after all, it's a matter of dying. Yet a day comes when a man notices that he is, say thirty. Thus he asserts his youth, but simultaneously he situates himself in relation to time; he takes his place in it; he stands at a certain point on a curve that he acknowledges having to travel to its end.; he belongs to time and by the horror that seizes him he recognizes his worst enemy, tomorrow. Tomorrow, he was longing for tomorrow whereas everything in him ought to reject it. That revolt of the flesh is the absurd." The revolt against nihilism came very early in Camus's career. In his *Letters to a German Friend* he wrote:

you supposed that in the absence of any human or divine code the only values were those of the animal world, in other words, violence and cunning. Where lay the difference between you and me? Simply that you readily accepted despair and I never yielded to it. Simply that you saw the injustice of our condition, to the point of being willing to add to it, whereas it seemed to me that man must exalt justice in order to fight against eternal injustice, create happiness, in order to protect against the universe of unhappiness. Because you turned your despair into intoxication, because you freed yourself from it by making a principle of it, you are willing to destroy man's works and to fight him in order to add to his basic misery. I, on the contrary, choose justice in order to remain faithful to the world. I continue to believe that this world had no ultimate meaning, but I know that something in it has meaning and that is man, because he is the only creature to insist on having one. This world has at least the truth of man and our task is to provide its justification against fate itself, and it has no justification but man, hence, he must be saved if we want to save the idea we have of life. With your scornful smile you will ask me, "What do you mean by saving man?" And

with all my being I shout to you that I mean not mutilating him, and yet giving a chance to the justice that man alone can conceive.

Now it becomes very clear I a comment like this that for Camus everything is projection. Law is projection. Religion is projection. Art is projection. These things exist only in so far as people define them. They are not part of a universal scheme of things which we simply have to plug into, but they are created by us and only we can define justice, love, art, in this world.

On the subject of nihilism, Camus wrote:

Europe and France have not yet emerged from fifty years of nihilism. That the moment people begin rejecting the mystification on which nihilism is based then hope is possible. The whole question is to know whether or not we shall develop faster than the rocket with a nuclear warhead and, unfortunately, the fruits of the spirit are slower to ripen than intercontinental missiles. But, after all, since atomic war would divest any future of its meaning, it gives us complete freedom of action. WE have nothing to lose except everything, so let's go ahead. This is the wager of our generation. If we are to fail, it is better in any case to have stood on the side of those who choose life than on the side of those who are destroying.

I would suggest then that Camus is basically a moralist. His basic concern is: can people alone establish a set of values? He has a humanistic view toward value. Value is not to be found in the clouds or in some Platonic other-world of essences. Nothing is given to us and the little we conquer is paid for with unjust deaths. But our greatness lies elsewhere. If our condition is unjust we have only one way of overcoming it, which is to *be* just.

Camus wrote again in his letter to his imagined German friend: "The moment they [torture, war crimes] are justified even indirectly, there are no more rules or values; all causes are equally good and war without aims or laws sanctions the triumph of nihilism. Willy-nilly we go back in that case to the jungle where the sole principle is violence."

The philosophy which supports Camus' position is presented most succinctly in one of his first books: *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Sisyphus, according to Homer, was the wisest of mortals. He is, however, accused of a certain levity with regard to the Gods. He stole their secrets. He also put Death in chains. Once, near death, Sisyphus rashly wanted to test his wife's love so he ordered her to cast his unburied body into the public square. He woke up in the underworld and there, annoyed by his wife's obedience, which was so contrary to human love, he obtained permission to return to Earth in order to chastise his wife. But when Sisyphus had seen again the face of this world, enjoyed water, sun, warm stones and the sea, he no longer wanted to go back to the eternal darkness. Recalls, signs of anger, warnings, were of no avail. Finally, Mercury came and seized Sisyphus and forcibly took him back to the land of the dead. As punishment, Sisyphus was destined to push a large rock up a large hell, then watch it crash back to the bottom. Then begin the push again, forever. But Sisyphus is conscious of his plight and herein lies the tragedy. For, if during the moments of descent he nourished the hope that he would yet succeed, his labour would lose its torment. It is this lucid recognition of his destiny that transforms his torment into his victory.

Camus says of Sisyphus: "I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain. One always finds one's burden again. But 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 fertile. Each atom of that stone, each universal flake of that night-filled mountain in itself forms a world. The struggle itself towards the height is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."

Sisyphus is an absurd hero because he realizes his situation, does not appeal, and yet continues the struggle.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus establishes the epistemology on which he bases all his works. And it's a very simple epistemology. He says: "This heart within me I feel and I judge that I exist. This world I can touch and likewise judge that it exists. There ends all my knowledge and the rest is construction. Between the certainty I have of my existence and the content I try to give to that assurance the gap will never be filled." So for Camus one finds that life has **value** but no meaning. Meaning implies some sort of goal, some teleological approach, and, for Camus, there is no goal. Life is not a pilgrimage, death is not an open door, but it is a closed and blank wall which functions finally, of course, to force us to concentrate on life.

In Camus there is a precise use of the word "absurd". "Absurd" comes from the Latin *surdus* and in *surdus* we have a dual definition: it means irrational, insensible (from that side of it we still use the word in mathematics; a 'surd' is an irrational number). But Camus concentrates on the other meaning which comes from the root. That is, "deaf, silent". There are many examples in literature of this particular kind of silence. I think of *Romeo and Juliet* when Juliet has been ordered by her parents to marry the Count Paris, and in one of Shakespeare's best scenes in that play, he has Juliet's father talking (and, as you recall, he has already set up at the beginning of the play a certain moral stand, a certain set of values which he violates constantly; by the end of the play we know that Lord Capulet is at best a liar) in some very vicious language. Lord Capulet orders Juliet to marry Count Paris. She protests, to no end. She then turns to her mother who only says that you will do as your father says. Then, in desperation, she turns to her nurse, who, in her inimitable way, she says well, marry him, two husbands will be better than one, you will have more fun in bed. At this point in the play Shakespeare has, and the stage directions are implicit in the lines themselves, left Juliet alone, alone on-stage, and she kneels and she turns now from her earthly father to her Heavenly Father and says: "Is there no pity in the clouds that can see the depth of my grief?" And there is no answer, only silence. That is the absurd.

Perhaps the first absurd heroine was Rachel. You recall the slaughter of the innocents where Herod had all the young male babies of two years and younger put to death to ensure the liquidation of any possible king. And Rachel cried out, and Matthew tells it in these words: "In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation and weeping and great mourning. Rachel weeping for her children and would not be comforted because they are not." And there was no answer to the cry, only silence. That silence is the absurd.

Is there something of this sense of the absurd to be found in Camus?

Camus wrote *The Stranger* at the same time as *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and I would suggest that what he is doing in *The Stranger* is, in narrative style, showing us an absurd hero, or the beginning of an absurd hero in Meursault, showing us a man functioning in a society in which the values are no longer applicable, a man who has only himself and who must, as a matter of fact, discover who even he is. Camus once remarked:

It would not, then, be much of an error to read The Stranger as a story of a man who, without any heroic posturing, is willing to die for the truth. Once, paradoxically again, I said that I tried to symbolize in my character the only Christ

of which we are worthy. After my explanation, it should be clear that I said it without any intent to blaspheme and with but that slightly ironic affection an artist has the right to feel for characters he has himself created.

In *The Stranger* Camus develops Meursault in what he, himself, has called a negative fashion. As you'll recall, Meursault is described only by his answers to questions; he never asserts himself, he never volunteers. He is described by his responses to questions from someone else. In *The Plague*, the longer novel which follows *The Stranger*, the protagonist, Dr. Rieux, is another example of the absurd hero. In this book, we have the whole city of Oran condemned to death, as a plague strikes; a sort of multiplication of *The Stranger* where one man is condemned to die. A whole city is condemned to die and Dr. Rieux stays and fights the pestilence of his free choice.

What we see then in Camus is definitely not a universe in which we can feel secure and significant, a benevolent and rational universe. But rather we are shown as small and mortal specks on a minor planet, in an ordinary solar system, located no place in particular, in infinite space, and subject to all sorts of dark irrational forces, over which we have little control. We must live and must die with the fear and anxiety, the meaninglessness, frustration and futility that people today know. One must live in the present moment and attempt to find out the actual, bare, given facts of human existence; to find them out, to face them and to live with them. Camus does this; no more and no less. He becomes, as it were, a saint without a God. One could do worse than recall the epigraph which Camus uses at the beginning of *The Myth of Sisyphus*. He quotes from the Greek poet, Pindar, writing in the 5th century B.C.; "O my soul, do not aspire to immortal live, but exhaust the limits of the possible".