Invocation From Algeria: Albert Camus and the Living God

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Remember the word
The one from the manger?
It means only this —
You can dance with a stranger.
"Grace Notes" in **Wake Me When It's Over** — Abner Dean

IN the year that Albert Schweitzer went to Lambarene to become a saint of our century a boy was born in Mondovi (near Algiers), Algeria, destined to become one of the most sensitive consciences of our century. In Schweitzer was incarnated the struggle of nineteenth century man to understand and to transform his world. In Albert Camus was incarnated the agony of twentieth century man to live affirmatively in his world without understanding and without hope of transformation. So Africa received a benediction and brought forth an invocation.

Camus' parents were poor, working class folk. He never knew his father. His mother's deafness and speech impediment suggested to some interpreters that she might have been the inspiration for his symbol of the silent mother, the land of Africa.[1] She motivated him to attend the University of Algiers where he worked his way through, completing the license in philosophy, an equivalent to a degree, and a post graduate research project on the relationship between Augustine and Plotinus **(Neo-Platonism and Christian Thought).** When his hopes for a university career were dashed by tuberculosis, he turned to writing as a surrogate craft, as well as participating in experimental theater.[2] In 1933 he had a brief, unhappy marriage. In 1934 he joined the Communist Party, also something of a brief, unhappy marriage, for later he rejected Communism as finally inhumane, a rejection precipitating a "public break" between Jean Paul Sartre and himself.[3] In 1935 he founded a workers theater in Algiers and became an accomplished actor, living out of the "image" of the actor. John Cruikshank has written of Camus in this period, "He represented physical intensity and multiplicity and his profession emphasized the present and immediate by requiring him to live a succession of parts, always repeated yet renewed again."[4] In 1940 he married a second time — to Francine Faure.

In these years he began to mature under the influence of the works of Andre Malraux and Dostoevsky which came alive for him in actual production in his theater and, at the same time, developed an almost erotic love of nature; intoxicated as Peyre says, "with sunlight and the Mediterranean sea, accepting the pleasure of the flesh with pagan simplicity."[5]

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[1] Germaine Bree, *Camus*, Collection of Critical Essays, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1962., p. 5.

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[2] S. Beynon John, "Albert Camus," *On Contemporary Literature*, New York: 1964, ed. Richard Kostelanetz, pp. 307-, and Henry Peyre, "Albert Camus and Simone de Beauvoir," *The Contemporary French Novel*, 1955, 241-2.

[3] Nicola Chairomonte, "Sartre Verus Camus: A Political Quarrel," in *Camus*, ed. Bermaine Bree, pp. 31-37.

[4] John Cruikshank, *Albert Camus*, London: Oxford University Press, 1959, p. 56.

[5] Peyre, "Albert Camus and Simone de Beauvoir," p. 240.

His first two literary efforts (**Betwixt and Between,** 1937 and **Nuptials,** 1938) are really "sumptuous hymns to the world of physical beauty and the life of the senses."[6] Listen now as the young Camus celebrates the voluptuousness of life, a kind of baptism of sensuality:

> Like a pebble made shiny by the tides, I was polished by the wind, worn down to the very soul. I was a bit of that force upon which I floated, then much of it, then all of it finally, merging the pulsings of my blood with the great sonorous beatings of that natural heart ever-present everywhere.[7]
>
> The sun is married to the sea, the vigorous body of youth delights in the fire of the flesh. This is our single human gift.
>
> Except the sun, kisses and wild perfumes, all seems futile to us . . . . There is but one love in this world — to embrace a woman's body is also to hold close to oneself that strange joy which descends from the sky to the sea . . . . There is no shame in being happy.[8]

In his notebooks of this same period Camus was struck by the idea of a reversal of the story of Faust. Here a young man is promised by the devil all the goods of the world for twenty-four years, and the demonic price? The boy's body. Camus adds that the devil, taking a drag on an English cigarette, thought that price enough.

Into the midst of this nature worship, this "invincible summer," came the horror of Nazi supernature, the tragedy of Munich, the fall of France. Camus joined the French Resistance movement, editing an underground newspaper called **Combat,** and in 1942 published a philosophical manifesto entitled **The Myth of Sisyphus** as well as his first novel, **The Stranger,** a triumphant understatement (**Life** Magazine called it "Gallic economy")[9] of the irrationality of alienated man in an absurd world. It was destined to be his most famous work. He was almost instantly the talk of the literary world and within ten years after the appearance of **The Stranger** he had won a reading public, unmatched by any French writers except Malraux. During the war Camus continued the mood of **The Stranger** with the plays, **Caligula** and **The Misunderstanding.**

In 1947 he published a second modern myth, **The Plague,** in which threat of suffering and death imperils the meaning of existence. **The State of Siege** (1948) and **The Just Assassins** (1949) further depict man's revolt against the arbitrary and in 1951 **The Rebel** articulated this philosophy of revolt.

For five years Camus was silent and many thought he was written out, exhausted by his struggle with nihilism. Then in 1956 he produced a bitter, brilliant novel of such power that Stanley Hopper, former Dean of Drew's Theological school, judged that it "will easily rank with the finest literary work of our time."[10] Though Camus had consistently refused any labels such as theist or atheist, essentialist or existentialist, he had clearly written a work so packed with Christian symbols, so lucid about the desperate condition of man without God, that French Roman Catholics felt sure he was on the verge of joining the faithful. A leading American Protestant theologian, Robert McAfee Brown, (then of Union Theological Seminary, now of Stanford University) wrote a long, appreciative review article for **Christianity and Crisis,**"[11] entitled "The Fall and the Faith," in which he stated that Camus "may be closer to a state of grace than many conventional

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[6] *Ibid.* p. 308.
[7] Beynon John, p. 308.
[8] Peyre, p. 241.
[9] *Life,* Nov. 6, 1964.

[10] Stanley Hopper, *Christian Faith and Contemporary Arts,* ed. Finley Eversole. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962. "Camus: The Argument From the Absurd," p. 125.

[11] Robert McAfee Brown, *Christianity and Crisis,* Sept. 30, 1957, p. 123-126.

Christians."[12] (Waiving the question of a state of grace, it would be difficult to imagine a less controversial judgment now!)[13]

In 1957 Albert Camus was awarded the Nobel prize for literature. The committee cited him as the man among men who had illumined "the problems of human conscience in our times." He was forty-four years old, certainly one of the most honored young writers in history. Yet in the strange contingency of history he was not to be allowed to add significantly to his writing. He did publish a collection of short stories (**Exile and the Kingdom,** 1957) and a play adaptation of Dostoevsky's novel, **The Possessed** (1959).[14]

On January 3, 1960, Camus accepted a ride in a friend's sports car. Even though he had already made arrangements to take the train, he would naturally prefer such companionship. After a day of leisurely travel, and a good night's rest, on the afternoon of January 4 a tire blew out and the speeding sports car hit a tree. One of the great men of our time was dead at forty-seven in a car wreck.[15] It was so absurd that almost instantly many saw his death as a kind of bizarre invitation to his thoughts.

Albert Camus had, in my judgment, four regnant perceptions, four stations in his spiritual pilgrimage, four themes as a myth of invocation from the careening sports car.

I. EXISTENCE IS ABSURD

Stanley Hopper calls Camus' work "The Argument for the Absurd,"[16] Henry Peyre speaks of confronting "The world of the absurd,"[17] and S. Beynon John can correctly say, though not without comment, that Camus' "center of gravity" is in the "experience of nullity."[18] Camus himself subtitled the **Myth of Sisyphus** "an essay on the absurd."

What is man? He is a being who exists in a world without discernible meaning, or rather more precisely, without inherent meaning. The primordial myth of man is not the Garden of Eve as Adam, but the King of Corinth as Sisyphus, condemned by the gods to roll a stone up a huge hill only at each approach to the summit to have the stone roll to the bottom again. There is absolutely no prepared purpose in existence at all.[19] The universe is totally indifferent to whatever we do.[20] We are like sailors on the Zuider Zee, a setting quite unlike the clear air delineating the Grecian Isles, where clear deliberate reason sprang fully alive to discipline man's civilizing motion.

> But the Zuider Zee is a dead sea, or almost. With its flat shores lost in the fog. There's no saying where it begins or ends. So we are steaming along without any landmark; we can't gauge our speed. We are making progress and yet nothing is changing. It's not navigating but dreaming.[21]

It is a "stupid" world,[22] a world "hopelessly cut off" [23] from cosmic direction, a kingdom of exiles, alienated in a land

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[12] *Ibid.*, p. 126.

[13] Michael Novak, "The Secular Saint," pp. 29-37, *motive*, Nov. 1968. Cf. Allen R. Brockway, *The Secular Saint*, New York: Doubleday, 1968.

[14] In 1961 a collection of his essays, *Resistance, Rebellion,* and *Death* was published followed by two volumes of his notebooks: 1935-1941, 1942-1956, and a volume of his notes on trips to North and South America.

[15] Julian Hartt, *Christianity and Crisis,* p. 7, Jan. 1960, "Albert Camus: in Appreciation."

[16] Hopper, *Op. cit.*

[17] Peyre, *Op. cit.*, p. 241.

[18] John, *Op. cit.*, p. 310.

[19] Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus,* New York: Vintage, 1955, p. 112. Originally published in France, 1942.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 154-155.

[21] Camus, *The Fall,* New York: Vintage, 1956., p. 97.

[22] Camus, *The Plague,* New York: Modern Library, 1947., p. 278.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 62.

without the possibility of music. That is what **absurd** means. It derives from the Latin **absurdus** (hard or grating) and its root word **surdus** (dead). So an absurd universe is a tuneless universe, a tone-deaf world, a world where there can finally be no dancing for joy.

And the guarantee of absurdity is death.

a) **Its inevitability**

There is no theme which haunts Camus more than the sheer vulnerability of every and any man to death. When Meursault reflects on execution for criminals he says:

> What was wanted, to my mind, was to give the criminal a chance, if only a dog's chance; say, one chance in a thousand. There might be some drug, or combination of drugs, which would kill the patient (I thought of him as a patient) some nine hundred and ninety times in a thousand. . . . For after taking much thought calmly, I came to the conclusion that what was wrong about the guillotine was that the condemned man had no chance at all, absolutely none. In fact, the patient's death had been ordained irrevocably. It was a foregone conclusion.[24]

And Camus makes it clear that every man is a criminal awaiting execution. The plague will finally kill you no matter how you fight it, or deny it, or postpone it. Dr. Rieux ends his chronicle of victory over the plague with searing, medicinal honesty. He remembered that the tale he had to tell could not be one of final victory.

> And indeed, as he listened to the rise of joy rising from the town, Rieux remembered that such joy is always imperiled. He knew what those jubilant crowds did not know but could have learned from books that the plague bacilla never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen closets; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves, and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and enlightening of men, it would rouse up the rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city.[25]

b) **Its uselessness**

In what Carl Michaelson called "the savage tale"[26] Camus immortalizes the irrational wastefulness of death. In the little story translated both "Cross Purposes" and "The Misunderstanding," a young husband decides to return home unannounced and disguised in order to surprise his wife and mother whom he has not seen in many years. They have been running a boarding house and have decided to murder and rob the next guest in order to obtain enough money to travel to the young husband. Before the "guest" can declare his identity, he is crushed between brutal caprice and fatal silence.

There is "no way out"[27]—reminiscent of Sartre's "No Exit"—and we are **de trop,** contingent, useless, disposable, replaceable, non-essential. And since this is true, we must in all honesty ask: Why exist at all? So in the **Myth of Sisyphus,** Camus states that the only serious philosophical problem is that of suicide. If death destroys life and life is absurd, why not at least cheat death by ending life in an act of will? Camus ultimately decides against suicide, but his question informs the "essay on the absurd," and his creation of Meursault in **The Stranger** is an incarnation of the question of the absurdity of existence. **The Stranger** almost literally commits suicide by an act of willessness. He is, in Tillich's phrase, "an object among objects,"[28] a "man without subjectivity."[29] Sartre correctly sees that in the novel all causal links are avoided since they would introduce the germ of an explanation and

[24] Camus, *The Stranger,* p. 139., New York: Modern Library, 1942.

[25] Camus, *The Plague,* p. 278.

[26] Michaelson, *Rationality of Faith,* New York: Scribners, 1963.

[27] Camus, *The Stranger,* p. 101, reminiscent of Sartre's "No Exit."

[28] Tillich, *The Courage To Be.,* New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press 1952., p. 145.

[29] *Ibid.,* p. 144.

some order other than simple necessity or pure succession. [30]

Meursault causes nothing to happen. The **sun** heats him, the **light** blinds him, his **mother's death** disrupts his work schedule, his **woman** makes love to him, his **friend** gives him a gun, the **gun** goes off, the **court** tries him, the **priest** comforts him. Only here in the last scene does Meursault show passion when he refuses the comfort of another world and the certainties of the man of God.

> I hurled insults at him. I told him. I told him not to waste his rotten prayers on me; it was better to burn than to disappear. I'd taken him by the neckband of his cassock, and, in a sort of ecstasy of joy and rage, I poured out on him all the thoughts that had been simmering in my brain. He seemed so cocksure, you see. And yet none of his certainties was worth one strand of a woman's hair.[31]

Why this outburst? Because the stranger is a kind of inverted evangelist, a prophet of lassitude, of the final impotence, the unimportance of all we think, do, feel, love, and believe. "Nothing, nothing had the least importance."[32] For men who think they choose are at last chosen inexorably by death.

There is only one final act worthy of a man: to remain lucid[33] to what the sun of nature has revealed:[34] "the benign indifference of the universe."[35]

2. MAN MUST REVOLT

Camus' problem is quite blankly this: to remain lucid and at the same time to cease being an outsider to his own world. His tentative solution is a double negative: he will say "no" to God and he will say "no" to death. He will say "no" to the absolute and he will say "no" to the dissolution. Man must revolt metaphysically and biologically.

a) Saying "no" to God

Camus does not proclaim as does Sartre, the death of God. Rather he refuses God—in a profound sense, is angry at God—for the transcendent God of the Christians is too far removed from the world to be part of us, and even when the Christian God participates he glories in suffering and cononizes death! In **The Rebel** Camus quotes Nietzsche with favor: "If we fail to find grandeur in God, we find it nowhere; it must be denied or created."[36] This means that saying "no" to God means saying "yes" to the world in a way that makes the world the only truth.[37] Yet Camus does not want to deify the world in the way Nietzsche did, to create a superman in the place of God, a superworld in the place of the kingdom of heaven, for to say "yes" to everything means to say "yes" to murder.[38] Even in revolt against God it must be remembered that life is not necessarily good. Kirilov says to Gregoriev in **The Possessed** in a passage that anticipates Stanley Kubrick's opening scene in "2001, A Space Odyssey:"

> Life isn't good, and the other world does not exist! God is simply a ghost conjured up by fear of death and suffering. In order to be free, it is essential to overcome pain and terror, it is essential to kill oneself. Then there will be no longer any God, and man will at last be free. Then history will be divided into two parts: from the ape to the destruction of God, and from the destruction of God . . . [Gregoriev breaks in] . . . to the ape?[39]

This risk of cosmic defiance is never forgotten by Camus (or Sartre, whose **Nausea** is one of the most profound

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[30] Sartre, *Literary and Philosophical Essays*, New York: Colliers, 1962., p. 42.

[31] Camus, *The Stranger*, p. 151.

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 152.

[33] Camus, *The Fall*, p. 45 and *The Plague*, p. 38.

[34] Camus, *The Stranger*, p. 19, 66, 67, 70, 71, *The Plague*, 102.

[35] Camus, *The Stranger*.

[36] Camus, *The Rebel*, p. 71.

[37] *Ibid.*, p. 72.

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 76. This is Camus' major objection to Communism.

[39] Camus, *The Possessed*. New York: Vintage, 1969. Originally published 1959.

studies of the consequences of atheism written in the twentieth century). These men are not playing intellectual games. They are not cafe atheists, parlor agnostics, or sophomoric cynics. Camus rejects God out of desperation, not recreation. He refuses "the vast consolation"[40] of ultimate will, paradoxical adventuring of Kirkegaard's leap of faith, and the final magnetism of Pascalian wager, and in fact reverses Pascal in betting against God. "Living," he says, "is keeping the absurd alive. Keeping it alive is, above all, contemplating it."[41]

God, then, for Camus is an evasion of absurdity, what Sartre called "bad faith," a kind of cheating. If God is alive, he lives in the midst of incredible suffering which apparently he can do nothing about. Ivan Karamazov (whom Camus played on the stage of the Algerian Theater of Travail) faced with this inexorable logic of belief, simply turned in his ticket to heaven. That forfeiture should leave both Ivan and Albert at the mercy of the logic of unbelief—namely violence, ruthlessness, and terror as Thomas Merton rightly points out. ("Terror and the Absurd: Violence and non-Violence in Albert Camus.")[42] Karamazov's fate is the subject of another discussion, but Camus simply would reply that nothing is gained by bringing to life a powerless god and very much could be lost, such as the drive to act now to alleviate the sufferings of mankind through specifically human motion. Merton may be correct in suggesting that for Camus God is still a **Deus ex machina,** but I would contend that nearly all popular theistic belief still has this kind of God in mind: a God that alleviates our anxiety about death, about powerlessness, about insignificance, about alienation, about sexual guilt, about responsibility. Even a hard core philosophical theologian like Shubert Ogden for all his litany of dipolar theism (the rhythm of uniting Hartshorne's ontological niceties and Bultmann's demythologizing) still defends God as a cosmic memory bank where kind deeds are stored — God as Dixieland if you please, a mind of cotton where old times are not forgotten! (Cf. **The Reality of God.**)

Camus will have none of this buffering (sounds like a pain killing drug!). The clean, spare style of his fiction is the perfect setting for his absolute refusal to be anything but aware. Awareness means being vulnerable to irrationality, possibilities of order, hate, hope, meaninglessness, and above all to compassion.

Such savage honesty in revolt is precisely what has called forth the observation by Marshall Fishwick commenting on men like Camus:

> No writers have taken fewer wooden nickles in an age of cultural counterfeiting. They have warned us against inauthentic existence . . . They attack the education of adjustment that presses life into neat packages and crushes into cliches. They know man is a bad actor, full of bad faith. Frequently he refuses to face up to his freedom; hides behind banalities; dodges responsibilities. Like the dishonest dentist, modern man makes a comfortable living disguising decay.[43]

b) **Saying "no" to death**

Assurances are born of naivete says Camus. Father Paneloux, the Jesuit priest in the plague struck city of Oran can preach truth with a capital "T" only because he is still in his library instead of on the streets. The nerve of the collegiate revolution is precisely here. I would say this not quite incidentally, since Camus is in the pantheon of the collegiate revolutionary along with such men as Eldridge Cleaver and Benjamin Braddock. Contact with death robs us of certainty and introduces perpetual

[40] Camus, *The Plague,* p. 91.
[41] Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus,* p. 40.
[42] *Motive,* Feb. 1969, p. 6.
[43] M. Fishwick, "A Kind Word for Conformity" *Saturday Review of Literature* Dec. 11, 1965, p. 24.

anxiety. But Camus insists we must not escape into alcohol,[44] or evening dress,[45] or even sensual pleasure. We must struggle against death with "all our might,"[46] "without raising our eyes toward this heaven where He sits in silence." **The Plague** is a sustained, almost faultless, plea to continue the "mad revolt"[47] against suffering, pain, and death. So in **The Rebel** Camus opens his philosophy of rebellion with the passage from Holderlin ("The Death of Empedocles"):

> And openly I pledge my heart to the grave and suffering sand, and often in the consecrated night, I promised to love her faithfully until death, unafraid, and with the heavy burden of fatality, and never to despise a single one of her enigmas. Thus did I join myself to her with a mortal cord.

What is a rebel? "A man who says "no," but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation. He is also a man who says "yes," from the moment he makes his first gesture of rebellion."[48] What is man as rebel now? He is Prometheus bringing fire from heaven, the fire of freedom, responsibility, dignity. He is saying "yes" by saying "no," and realizing that his only reward is chains and torture and derision. Yet even hell itself cannot forever hold Prometheus.[49] Perhaps it is our task to create history, not to end it. Out of our frustration, out of the night of death, solitude and estrangement, may yet come a precious, if tenuous, union with the mystery of being.[50] The rebel refuses resignation. He will not allow his life to be mutilated in the name of money or politics, or religion. The root of Camus' ethics is not a finally reasoned nihilism. His "no" is a fierce "yes" — a "yes" with militant tendencies. In almost bemused fashion he noted:

> If someone had told me to write a book on morality it would have a hundred pages and ninety-nine would be blank. On the last page I should write, 'I recognize only one duty, and that is to live.' And as far as everything else is concerned I say no.[51]

A vanished beauty, he said, will arise out of our tortured past, the image of harmonious insurrection which bears witness to the greatness of humanity.

3. FREEDOM IS JUDGMENT

One might be led to think that if God did not exist, everything would be permissible. That is what Dostoevsky says and he is quoted by both Sartre[52] and Camus.[53] But Camus will not allow the word freedom to be perverted into license or anarchy. Having found the irrationality of life and modeled on the **Myth of Sisyphus** and personified in Meursault, having declared war on chaos and capriciousness and modeled it on the myth of Prometheus and personified in Dr. Rieux, now Camus drives home the radical judgment of freedom, models it on the myth of Nemesis and personifies it in Jean Baptiste Clameau. Nemesis was the goddess of moderation and symbolized the limit of perpetual change. She became the "implacable enemy of immoderation."[54] But Nemesis was also justice and retribution, calling all our freedoms before the bar and judging them in the cold light of responsibility, and Nemesis is now calling Jean Baptiste.

We meet him in a small bar in Amsterdam and gradually his story unfolds. He had been a lawyer in Paris specializ-

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[44] Camus, *The Fall*, p. 73.
[45] Camus, *The Plague*, p. 179.
[46] *Ibid.*, p. 118.
[47] *Ibid.*, p. 196.
[48] Camus, *The Rebel*, p. 13.
[49] *Ibid.*, p. 276.
[50] Camus, "The Adulterous Woman," p. 32-33, *Exile and the Kingdom*, New York: Vintage, 1965. Originally published 1957.
[51] *Notebooks*, 1935-1942, p. 54.
[52] Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, p. 22, New York: The Modern Library, 1957.
[53] Camus, *The Rebel*, p. 71.
[54] *Ibid.*, p. 291.

ing in "noble cases" (widows, orphans — pure religion and undefiled), he helped people, he tells us, a proper humanitarian. But one evening he heard a laugh behind him and no one was there. It came to him as the laughter of judgment. As he examined his soul he began to see he was bursting with vanity. "I-I-I is the refrain of my whole life."[55] Even in his love affairs he couldn't really give himself. He was a spectator to his own love life! He confesses that once when walking over a bridge on the Seine he saw a woman lean over and heard her fall but did not attempt to rescue her. His world, from that moment on caved in on him. "The whole universe then began to laugh at me."[56] He tried to escape through debauchery, travel, but no country was far enough for him to escape himself. He became a "judge penitent" indulging in public confession at every opportunity, but not to secure his own innocence — to implicate the human in his guilt.[57] "Then imperceptibly I pass from the 'I' to the 'we'." The triple trick has been played. We have suddenly seen that Amsterdam's canals are the concentric circles of Dante's hell, that we have been led inside a Dutch heaven of the last judgment, and that John the Baptist had laid the axe of confession to the root of our vanity.[58]

Our vanity, our fall, our original sin, consisted precisely in supposing that freedom could be handled glibly, if at all. Says Jean Baptiste:[59]

> Once upon a time, I was always talking of freedom. At breakfast I used to spread it on my toast. I used to chew it all day long, and in company my breath was delightfully redolent of freedom. With that key word I would bludgeon whoever contradicted me; I made it serve my desires and my power . . . I didn't know that freedom is not a reward or a decoration that is clebrated with champagne . . . Oh no! It's a chase . . . . and a long distance race, quite solitary and very exhausting.

Radical freedom is a burden, a judgment where we are not alone in a forbidding room.

> At the end of all freedom is a court sentence; that is why freedom is too heavy to bear, specially when you are down with a fever, or are distressed, or love nobody.[60]

The trick is double, for not only has Jean Baptiste drawn us into his confession, he has once again refused to take responsibility for himself by the very subtle act of implicating us in his failure!

This deviously shattering statement, this duplicitous **de profundis** in Camus leaves the reader at the nadir of self-assertion. Can we really live in a world where "God has gone out of style?" John the Baptist may convict us, but who shall convert us? If there is no transcendent God (and we are locked out of the creeds of assurance from yesterday, is there the possibility of a true humanism?

Yet the trick is triple. For while Camus takes seriously the problem of responsibility even while satirizing Sartre's cafe confessionals, he never really even hints at making peace with the Christian doctrine of sin. Even admitting that man is tangled in a web of guilt is not the real, the final, the awful point. Freedom as judgment applies most scathingly to God himself. Any John the Baptist is really crying in the wilderness not to see this, and the Christian church according to Camus is full of false prophets. In **The Fall** Camus plants that excruciating paragraph asking about the melancholy air hanging over the gospels. That brooding quality is the result of guilt. Not man's but God's — the God of Jesus that slaughtered the innocents so that the Bethle-

[55] Camus, *The Fall*, p. 48.
[56] *Ibid.*, p. 80.
[57] *Ibid.*, p. 140.
[58] Hopper, *Op. cit.*, p. 126.
[59] Camus, *The Fall*, p. 132-133.
[60] *Ibid.*, p. 133.

hem babe might live — a Messiah by murder. God has watched the martyrs die, the wars of religions rage, the inquisitors' flames consume. If God is, he is responsible, if not as actual perpetrator, then as in Peter Berger's phrase "eternal bystander."[61]

Richard Rubinstein, the Jewish "Death of God" Theologian is totally immersed in Camus on this point and shifts from the New to the Old Testament with his somber criticism — no too weak a word, this "agony of insight" (Outler). In **After Auschwitz** he says that no Jew after the crematoria could believe in God. If God couldn't hear the cries of six million Jews he isn't merely deaf; he's not there at all.[62] What is even more sobering says Rubinstein is the fact that precisely **because** God has chosen this people that they are forced through the centuries into unimaginable deprivation and persecutions.

Camus' challenge in **The Fall** is almost the reverse of Voltaire's. It is not the whimsical, "If God did not exist we should have to invent him," but the brutal "if God did exist we should have to destroy him."

Stated even more searchingly, his question is: "Can a Christian be a decent human being?"

4. MEANING IS COMMUNION

The Fall was originally to have been included in the collection **Exile and The Kingdom,** but developed beyond inclusion in that book of short stories. Yet the stories do follow up Camus' question and accent his last theme. One story in particular sets that theme. It is called, **The Artist At Work.** It is a story of the painter, Gilbert Jones swallowed up (what else!) by conditions around him; his wife and three noisy children, his tiny apartment, and his early success as an artist. Jonas retreats into his bedroom for some privacy. The phone rings, the children scream, the wife goads, and he cannot work. At last he builds himself a loft and climbs into it. There is a feverish fit he works in the dark painting his masterpiece and falls exhausted. When his friend, Rateau, looked at the canvas he saw the masterpiece. It was a completely blank canvas in the center of which Jonas had merely written, in very small letters, a word that could be made out but without any certainty as to whether it should be read "solitary" or "solidary."[63]

Freedom then is an ellipse with two foci: I and Us. The student revolutionary calls it "collective conscience." The ancient liturgies call it communion. The former speak only of freedom. The latter speak also of love. The former appeal to a horizontal context. The latter affirm a vertical dimension. It remains to be seen in "human" relations are really possible on a horizontal plane only.

Albert Outler once suggested that an existentialist was simply a fundamentalist who finally got his logic straight. In his critique of easy modernity entitled **Who Trusts in God** (and with Outler that is an exclamation point not a question mark) he spins out the further suggestion that men like Camus may in good conscience attempt sainthood without God, but that such autonomy inevitably leads first to anarchy and then finally to anomie, ripe for totalitarianism to step into the vacuum of the inability to act humanly. The clarity of Outler's affirmation here is as fitting as Camus' own. Horizontal communion breaks up on the shoals of selfishness, temptation to power, and lack of mythic motivation to transcend suffering. What is not so clear is the inhibiting role of man's guilt about himself and his abdication of responsibility for his own acts, a continuing attention to some power beyond himself about which he can never be

[61] "Camus, Bonhoeffer and The World Come of Age," *The Christian Century,* Vol. LXXVI, 1959, p. 417, 450ff.; mimeo, p. 3.

[62] See also Rolf Hochhuth's *The Deputy,* Act V. "Auschwitz, or God, Where Are You?"

[63] Camus, *Exile and the Kingdom,* p. 158.

lucid. Revelation is still fairly mysterious and still allows miracle and authority—sure marks of another grand inquisitor. Priests are as susceptible to the plague as are ordinary men and so are theologians.

Camus' answer to Outler is Father Paneloux. The orthodox father is not refuted by any argument; neither is he castigated because he is a Christian. He dies caring for the victims in Oran, after he has come apart at the theological seams. His theodicy is transcended not by the living God, but by the living need of fellow human beings. Intellectual games that theologians play too easily become abstractions. When God becomes an abstraction it follows inevitably that man becomes an abstraction said Camus, and he is quoted by Daniel Berrigan on the steps of Sproul Hall in Berkeley as a text for his act of treason in Maryland. Blood poured on the draft files is a prophetic challenge to the abstraction of war, of Vietnam, of the Communist menace, of Americanism. Love and mercy for the victims of the world are realities about which we can be clear. That is the absolute heart and compassionate mind of Albert Camus.

Thus it seems more than passing strange that Carl Oglesby, former national president of the SDS and "revolutionary in residence" at Antioch College, should state that the function of Camus was to be misread by American college students. In a scorching review ("The Deserters: The Contemporary Defeat of Fiction," **motive,** Feb. 1968) Oglesby chides Camus for his melodramatic showdown with the cosmos, for his vastly sophisticated **Invictus,** his pursuit of the disappearing ultimates which result in politics of disengagement that masquerade as precisely the opposite. Oglesby even goes so far as to indict Camus for turning into the most prosaic meaning of Sartre's dictum, "Man is a useless passion."

It is on the basis of this kind of analysis that Camus has become an embarrassment to the New Left, as both Michael Novak (**The Secular Saint**) and Steve Weissman ("The New Left meets the Dead God", **New Theology No. 41**) have noted. He helped them through a period of anxiety in the quiescent fifties, but impedes them now as quixotic in the revolutionary sixties.

Camus' answer to Oglesby and the New Left is both the satire of Sartre's cafe politics in **The Fall** and the militant condemnation of evolutionary rhetoric in **The Rebel.** The full force of Camus' philosophy is directed against History spelled with a capital H. The Marxist rejection of God and the Christian scheme of redemption was no clean rejection at all. It allowed a new god and redemptive pattern and called it Dialectical Materialism. It was in fact another abstraction: History. In the name of this abstraction all sorts of horrors could be perpetrated on the human race, since all was finally subservient to the idea, the idolatrous process of becoming. The man committed to revolution easily fell prey to rationale for mass murder, a conclusion starkly forced by the example of Russian and Chinese purges. Purges became possible in situations requiring **purity** instead of compassion, mainly revolution. Rebellion holds steadily in focus the ambiquity of the human situation. It refuses to alleviate the absurd by capitulating to meaning which dissolves compassion. It is really Oglesby who has misread Camus. His peroration in "The Deserter" sounds exactly like a panegyric for the author of **Exile and the Kingdom.**

> The true existentialist who chooses his history, who chooses his situation, and who chooses at the same time to change it; who declines exile and desertion, and who declines to be defeated by a despair which he nevertheless refuses to reject.[64]

The last piece of fiction that Camus published picks up this peroration and

[64] *Exile and the Kingdom,* p. 24.

dances with it. Camus states straight out that all his work was a unity, if not a seamless garment, at least, one might put it, using the same cloth, with threads of absurdity, revolt, judgment, and communion. So now in "The Growing Stone," he draws together those threads into a remarkable summary: Sisyphus celebrates communion in exile.

The story is set in South America far from both the decadent wrath of Europe and the mystical Eden of Algeria.

An engineer named D'Arrast has come to build a dam near the Brazilian town of Iguape and is being honored by the mayor of the city, even to the point of being given authority over the local chief of police, called the judge, a drunken, inefficient fellow. D'Arrast becomes acquainted with the village native culture through his chauffeur, a native named Socrates. Socrates tells D'Arrast about the local religious holiday — "The Feast of Good Jesus," celebrated because of a miraculous "growing" stone in a grotto to which the faithful bring hammers to break off a piece for happiness. The night before the "good Jesus" procession the natives dance in a big hut in another feast — this for St. George. D'Arrast meets a stranger at the grotto, who has been saved from drowning by good Jesus and who promised to carry a hundred-pound stone in the procession. The yellowskinned stranger, a ship's cook by trade, invites D'Arrast to the big hut for the paroxysm of ritual to St. George, where the cook dances too feverishly and too long and where D'Arrast is finally asked to leave just as the ceremonial modulations begin to climax. The next day the cook collapses under the stone before he reaches the church and D'Arrast, like Simon of Cyrene, picks up the burden and carries it, not into the church, but back down the trail into the big hut, dumping it among the ashes of the last night's communal orgy. The poor natives gather into a circle around the stone and ask D'Arrast to sit with them. The chiding words of Socrates seem to echo as the circles close, engineer and peasant (foreign power and native): "In your country there's only the Mass. No one dances."

William Power, Professor of Old Testament at Perkins School of Theology, has reminded us that theology perhaps may only be told as a story (Jackson Lectures, **Perkins Journal**, Spring, 1969) and Camus himself said that philosophy can only be written as a novel. Perhaps we must let the case rest here, with this final story.

Sisyphus is in a grotto, engaged in an absurd task for a stranger that still allows the stranger his manhood in fulfilling the task for himself. This sensitivity to spiritual need, without reliance on miracle or institutional faith, this identification with the land, the body, the common circle of humanity — this and nothing else is the kingdom. To eat at the feast of good Jesus is to take the burden of understanding. That alone is the rock that grows, upon which community is built. In the early part of the dance, D'Arrast was asked by the native to unfold his arms, "You are hugging yourself and keeping the saint's spirit from descending"[65]

Is there more that must be said? Outler and Oglesby and Shubert Ogden and others certainly think so. Julian Hartt confesses after great appreciation that he does not know how to hold together Camus' vision of cosmic absurdity and passionate creativity.[66] Perhaps Mercutio's modest description of his fatal wound will do as well for Camus' humanism

> 'Tis not so deep as a well
> nor so wide as a church door.
> But 'tis enough, 'twill serve.
> (Shakespeare: Romeo and Juliet)

Sartre once said that **The Stranger** was like creating a dance behind a glass panel, so that no sound penetrated, only

[65] *Ibid.*, p. 191.

[66] *Christianity and Crisis, Dec. 12, 1960, p. 8.*

unconnected, isolated action, islands of discontinuity. Camus liked that figure of the absurd man behind the pane of glass and used it not only in his notebooks[67] but as a regnant image for all his work.[68] He puts up the glass panel and makes his stranger dance. He said existence was absurd, but by his passionate creativity he said "no" to meaninglessness. If he had been spared, perhaps he would have written more of love, or even of redemption. But he would call that childish insulation. We must keep the word from the manger. May I add my own word to Abner Dean's graceful quatrain:

Remember the word, the one from
the manger.

The manger is romantic and far
away, a perfumed place with
straw and a baby's low cry.
Bring a torch Isabelle and see
the soft and lovely King.

The one from the manger.

The manger is rejection and next
door now
The manger is stench and anguish,
an excruciating birth among the
beasts.
The manger is afire with jealousy
and jaundice and the torch of
power fever is pulsing in the void
of justice.
The manger is callous and unlovely
and inhumane
The manger is me.

It means only this.

Only this: He comes again and cries
and feeds and grows and dies.
He comes unknown as one who
knows what it is to live.
He comes as powerful Redeemer, as
helpless child and dead man, as
friend to all, a stranger.

It means only this.

You can dance with a stranger.

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[67] Philip Thody, ed., *Notebooks*, 1935-1942, pp. 130-131, and his philosophical reflections (*Myth of Sisphus*, p. 11).

[68] Sartre, *Literary and Philosophical Essays*, New York: Collier, 1962., p. 39.