# GRACE: A MEDITATION FROM CAMUS

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## Introduction

It was summer. Perhaps that is the reason I returned to Camus. The longer days and more relaxed pace gives one time to think, and Camus helps one think. Or perhaps there is some karma that drives one back to the same sources every twenty years or so. For whatever reason, this past summer I returned to the writings of Albert Camus.

It was not an escape, not a diversion from reality -- not, at least, for a theologian. Surely we know that the true masters of our trade are artists, such as Camus -- people who see real life so deeply and powerfully that they can distill the truth of a lifetime into the black and white of a single page.

I thus returned to Camus and found within three of his novels an inexorable logic, an argument, as it were, which I now share with you. I do not say it is *his* argument; I do not know what Camus would say about what I found. I only claim it to be there in his work, to be seen by those who see it. It is not so much in the books individually as it is in the three of them together, in their succession from one to the next, in their corporate voice. Let me explain.

## I. *The Stranger*: An Exploration of Sensualism

*The Stranger*, or *The Outsider*, was Camus' first novel. It assumes something and it says something. *The Stranger* assumes that there is a jarring difference between what we seek from the world and what the world offers us. We seek meaning, but the world is so stingy with meaning. We ask about our significance in the scheme of things; the world is so silent

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about significance. We hope; the world so regularly disappoints. This disparity is what Camus calls "the absurd."

The Christian should understand Camus' sense of the absurd. Christianity has long acknowledged that the source of life's meaning to which it attests, God, is not visible except to the eye of faith. The troubled muttering "Truly thou art a God who hidest thyself" (Is. 45:15) is, after all, in Christian Scripture, too. Even the writer of the Fourth Gospel, that nearly heretical triumphalist, concedes that "no one hath seen God at any time" (I:18). Must the Christian not also begin stunned by the same absurdity which so dumbfounded Camus: The silence of the important answers. Must the Christian, then, not have a special reason for paying attention to *The Stranger*?

*The Stranger* sketches out one response to the disparity between what we seek and what the world provides. It is an exploration of the possibility of dealing with absurdity through a life of intense and profound, honest sensuality. How do we deal with the absence of life's important answers? Through a life of faithfulness to the senses, to our feelings.

So the story is what it is: Meursault, an office clerk, hears that his mother has died. He requests a brief leave from his work and attends the funeral. Since he really is unmoved, he refuses to pretend, to manufacture emotion. He returns home, goes swimming, meets a girl, Marie, takes her to dinner, to bed, and begins a liaison with her. Later in the summer, in a fight on the beach, he shoots an Arab. The second half of the book recounts his arrest, interrogation, trial and approaching execution. He is convicted for the murder, primarily because of the outrage of those who noticed that he did not cry at his mother's funeral -- because he refused to feign emotions he did not feel.

Meursault is a stranger, not to the world as such, but to that human world which is an overlay of pretended feeling, of socially required hypocrisy. His shelter, his salvation is the realm of real sensations -- "to swim, to run, to make love, to feel the sun in ones face, to walk through Algiers in the cool

of the evening" (quoting Robert Thody). Meursault's real story is the history of his real sensations.

Toward the end of the book Meursault is visited by a priest who had come to hear his last confession: "Then, I don't know how it was, but something seemed to break inside me, and I started yelling at the top of my voice. I hurled insults at 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."

*The Stranger* stands as an exposition of one possible mode of living, a life lived in pursuit of genuine feeling, a life of profound sensuality. This is *one* way in which one may live -- we may live in this way, *if* we can. It is significant that Camus himself could not. He might have remained a sensualist, but he did not remain a sensualist.

Are there facets of our being which force us beyond the beatific experience of the senses? Are there human questions of such depth and magnitude that sensuality, if not illogical or useless, is somehow inadequate nonetheless?

Whatever your answer, the fact is that Camus explored a second mode of existence in another novel, *The Plague*.

## II. *The Plague*: An Exploration of Humanism

*The Plague* is a book, not about private feeling, or sensualism; it is about humanism, social feeling. If we cannot be content to live for the sake of our senses, what is the prospect of living for the sake of others? That prospect sounds so thoroughly Christian that we must be shocked when we learn Camus thought *The Plague* to be his most un-Christian book. We may understand, however, if we recall Camus' sense of the absurd.

Once again in *The Plague*, the absurd is the starting point, but this time it appears as the radical disparity between the

human desire for justice and the continuing reality of unexpiated suffering. *The Plague* is a story of suffering.

The city of Oran is stricken by a plague so severe that it is quarantined. Oran then becomes a microcosm, a world in miniature. The question Camus proceeds to address is this: What should we do in the face of suffering? The answer Camus gives is that we should love one another, but for a reason that differs enormously from that given by the Christian.

Camus' point of view is expressed by Dr. Rieux, one of the two pagan "saints" of the novel. Once Dr. Rieux is asked whether his exemplary sacrifices on behalf of the victims of the plague are prompted by belief in God. Rieux says no. Why then, he is asked, does he work so hard for other people? He replies that he would not need to work for others if there were an all-powerful God, for then he could leave the business of healing to God. His point is quite clear: one must love others *because* there is no God to love them.

Camus knows that cannot be the end of the matter, however. Even if others are not loved by God, why should they be loved by us? Dr. Rieux gives Camus' reply: "The evil that is in the world always comes of ignorance.... On the whole, men are more good than bad. But that is not precisely the point. They are more or less ignorant.... The soul of the murderer is blind." Evil is the fruit of not knowing.

Camus' commitment to others in *The Plague* is based on a confidence in human decency. It is not that we are so terribly good; it's just that we aren't really bad. Humans would do the good, Camus is saying, if only they knew what it was. Thus, really, all who suffer from the plague are like foolish children, their greatest vice being that they are ignorant, or at most careless.

In this way Camus justifies his rebellion against absurdity, his humanistic commitment to others. Others are essentially good, and thus deserving; the plague we carry and spread is carried and spread through ignorance.

Camus' version of humanism, however noble, is based upon the judgment that humans are fundamentally good. A more somber assessment, a more mixed reading of the human condition, would seem to force a reappraisal of Camus' kind of humanism. And what we find in Camus' third book is that more somber view of things.

III. *The Fall*: Preface to Christianity

The third novel is called *The Fall*. *The Fall* is a monologue, the confessions of Jean-Baptiste Clamence, a retired lawyer. Clamence had retired for an unusual reason. Famous for his altruism, known for defending the poor, a model citizen, Clamence's virtue was cultivated carefully. He was respected. He respected himself. Then, one midnight, something happened. As he walked home he crossed a bridge on which stood a "slim young woman dressed in black. The back of her neck," he tells us, "cool and damp between her dark hair and coat collar, stirred me. But I went on, after a moment's hesitation...I had already gone some fifty yards when I heard the sound...of her body striking the water...Almost at once I heard a cry for help, repeated several times, [a cry being carried] downstream...I wanted to run to her and I did not stir. I was trembling, I believe from cold and shock. I told myself that I had to be quick and I felt an irresistible weakness steal over me. I have forgotten what I thought then. 'Too late, too far...' or something like that."

As he later pondered the incident, what seemed so significant to Clamence was that he had acted, or refused to act, spontaneously. Clamence did not have time to think, to reason about the moral thing to do. His refusal to heed the cry of a drowning woman had sprung from his inmost self. He had responded from the real self beneath the layers of carefully crafted moral pretension, and he had turned aside! So much for basic goodness.

Pandora's box was opened. Having discovered this truth about himself here, this midnight on this bridge, he now saw the truth about himself at other times and places. Like the time he helped the blind lady across the street and then, with elegance, bowed before her unseeing eyes and tipped his hat.

Clamence now knew that the truth about himself lay far beneath his public goodness. He saw that his virtue was a charade, wrapped in an envelope of self-deceit.

Then Clamence casually refers to the reader of the book as one who is "something like myself," and the real point of the book is suddenly clear: "Therefore thou art inexcusable, whoever thou art that judgest: for wherein though judgest another, thou condemnest thyself; for thou that judgest doest the same things" (Romans 2:1). "None is righteous, no not one."

If this conclusion is rather near to the truth, it pretty clearly eliminates the basis of the humanism championed in Camus' second novel, *The Plague*. In *The Plague*, Dr. Rieux gave up his health and family and a colleague gave up his life because, it was argued, human beings deserve such love, and they deserve such love because they are good. But if *The Fall* is correct in its assessment of human nature, humans seldom truly merit the sacrifice of others. No, the claim is stronger: *Never* do we by our virtue deserve the compassion of others, and never do others by their goodness deserve our self-giving love. A rather depressing conclusion, I would say.

Oh yes, there is one more point to be noticed about this book, a very curious point. The protagonist, the bearer of these bad tidings in *The Fall* is named Jean-Baptiste Clamence. Clamence -- clemency, mercy, grace. Jean-Baptist -- John the Baptist, the one who goes before, who announces the coming of salvation. Jean-Baptiste Clamence...bad news which is somehow an announcement of grace?

## Conclusion

We modern Christians have contributed significantly to the recovery of a Biblical affirmation of the worth of persons. We have rediscovered the possibility of saying of the entire creation, "it is good," of ourselves, "we are good." And we have been insightful, no doubt, in unmasking the ways in which traditional Christian language and thought have frequently poisoned self-esteem, have kept the oppressed in their powerlessness by

persuading them that their place is a consequence of their worthlessness.

But even in the midst of this thrilling recovery of the goodness of things we may have suspected from time to time that we were being a bit unsubtle, a bit simplistic. That there is a contrary to our affirmation of wholeness, and that it, too, is true, paradoxically enough.

The insistence upon this contrary claim is the point of St. Paul in the book of Romans. Paul's way of putting the claim has its problems. He is unfair to the Jewish conception of Torah. He is mechanistic and crude in his reliance upon the "shedding of blood" motif. His christological exclusivism is unenlightened. Etc. Etc.

But Paul, like Jean-Baptiste Clamence, sometimes gets rather convincing in his depiction of human depravity. And he, like Clamence, has this annoying practice of addressing us, the reader, as if we were something like the model of depravity he is describing. And I suspect we know in our hearts that Clamence and St. Paul are...well, right.

But there is this other theme, too, in Paul as in Camus. This perplexing notion that the bad news is somehow good, healing, nourishing. That the realization of sin is also the experience of grace.

Again, we may quarrel with Paul's way of developing the point, but what of the point itself?

We now come together at the beginning of the academic year. Many of us are strangers. All of us are strangers, really.

What is the consequence of facing the facts at the outset? What if we really introduce ourselves? We are noble and petty, magnanimous and vindictive, caring and callous, honest and deceitful, cordial and cranky, faithful and faithless, healthy and sick, buoyant and distraught, open and pretentious, good and evil.

What is the consequence? Is it not that we are one? I did not say "alike." There is too much variation in our commonality to say that. No, we are one. We know and are known at the

outset. And in knowing and being known, we are able to accept and to be accepted. We can care and be cared for, shelter and be sheltered.

Surely that is Camus' point and Paul's point in insisting that an acknowledgment of sin is also a realization of grace.

And that, I suppose, is also the point of grounding this grace in the nature of God. This interaction of sin and grace is not a fabrication -- that is Paul's claim. It is rooted in the nature of things. The One who brings the world into being and sustains it, both condemns and accepts. And here, too, the condemnation is also, somehow, the word of acceptance.

In the world and in our lives, it is precisely where sin abounds that grace abounds all the more.