
camus

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blackwell great minds

camus

David Sherman

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*In Memory of my Teacher and Friend,
Robert C. Solomon*

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<h1>abbreviations</h1>	
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The abbreviations used in citations refer to the following works:

CTOP Caligula and Three Other Plays, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Vintage Books, 1958)

EK Exile and the Kingdom, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1991)

F The Fall, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1991)

FM The First Man, trans. David Hapgood (New York: Vintage Books, 1996)

HD A Happy Death, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage Books, 1995)

LCE Lyrical and Critical Essays, trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy (New York: Vintage Books, 1970)

MS The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1991)

P The Plague, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Vintage Books, 1991)

R The Rebel, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage Books, 1991)

RRD Resistance, Rebellion, and Death, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1995)

S The Stranger, trans. Matthew Ward (New York: Vintage Books, 1989)

introduction: situating camus

I am not a philosopher, because I don't believe in reason enough to believe in a system. What interests me is knowing how we must behave, and more precisely, how to behave when one does not believe in God or reason.

I am not an existentialist, although of course critics are obliged to make categories. I got my first philosophical impressions from the Greeks, not from nineteenth-century Germany, whose philosophy is the basis for today's French existentialism.

I'm not sure I'm an intellectual, and as for the rest, I support the left wing in spite of myself and in spite of itself.

Albert Camus¹

With these disclaimers, Albert Camus disavows virtually every conventional characterization of him. If Camus was not the "philosopher of the Absurd," one of the fundamental pillars of post-War French existentialism, and, more generally, an intellectual who was in many ways the moral conscience of his generation, what was he? What's more, after rejecting these characterizations, which seem to be plainly applicable, how could he then characterize himself as a supporter of the left wing, especially given his attacks on Soviet communism and the Algerian national liberation movement, not to mention his estrangement from the left-wing French intellectual establishment. Still, albeit with certain qualifications, Camus was all of these things. He was a philosopher of sorts, although surely not in the professional sense; he was an existentialist, once we get clear on what we mean, and he meant, by this expression; he was, without any qualification whatsoever, an intellectual, and, indeed, precisely the sort of intellectual that is tragically all but disappearing in the world today; and, finally, he was a left-winger, whose unrepentant anti-totalitarian views are now generally recognized to be part and parcel of any left-wing position that is worth its salt.

Although Camus was trained in philosophy, his finest works were, without a doubt, his novels. Crucially, however, according to Camus, there are no hard and fast distinctions between philosophy and good literature. In one of his two philosophical works, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (the other is *The Rebel*), Camus declares that “the great novelists are philosophical novelists” (MS, p. 101), and, in a review of Jean-Paul Sartre’s philosophical novel *Nausea*, he offers a basis for distinguishing amongst philosophical novels: “A novel is never anything but a philosophy expressed in images. And in a good novel the philosophy has disappeared into the images. But the philosophy need only spill over into the characters and action for it to stick out like a sore thumb, the plot to lose its authenticity, and the novel its life” (LCE, p. 199). Conversely, for Camus, just as philosophy disappears into the images of a good novel, which are themselves expressions of some aspect of our experience and, ultimately, our concrete form of life, in a good philosophy the images of the novel disappear into the concepts. Strikingly, then, if Camus’s statement of the novel’s relation to philosophy is inverted, the resulting statement of philosophy’s relation to the concrete images that constitute the novel is one that he would similarly endorse: “A philosophy is never anything but a novel (a concrete expression of our life experiences) expressed in concepts. And in a good philosophy the novel (the concrete expression of our life experiences) has disappeared into the concepts.” So far so good. But if in a lifeless novel the philosophy spills over into the characters and action, in a lifeless philosophy the novel’s (i.e., *life’s*) characters and action are driven from (rather than incorporated into) the concepts: “But the novel (the concrete expression of our life experiences) need only be driven out by the philosophy for the concepts to lose their authenticity, and the philosophy its life.” This is why Camus approves of Aristotle’s *Ethics*, which, “in one of its aspects, is but a long and reasoned personal confession. Abstract thought at last returns to its prop of flesh” (MS, pp. 100–101).

What this suggests is that Camus was working at the margins of philosophy, attempting to rehabilitate the interests of flesh-and-blood human beings, which had been all but driven from philosophy by virtue of its overweening proclivity for systematic reason. Such an endeavor falls squarely within a highly respectable line of philosophical inquiry, and, indeed, it may well be the impulse that motivates what is best in philosophy. Friedrich Nietzsche, Camus’s philosophical hero, did not “believe in reason enough to believe in a system,” but very few philosophers would maintain that he was not a philosopher of the first rank. (Unfortunately, however, there are more than a few philosophers who would maintain that he did have a “system,” which says more about these philosophers and the philosophical temperament of our times than it does about Nietzsche.) So, too, the more recent French poststructuralist movement, which owed more to its existentialist predecessors than it

ever cared to acknowledge, also put systematic reason in its cross hairs, and it frequently used terms such as “margins,” “borders,” boundaries,” and “interstices,” to signal its desire to open philosophy to reason’s “other.” Still, Camus’s claim that he was not a philosopher does contain more than a grain of truth. In any attempt to offer a “philosophy of the concrete,” either the philosophy or the concrete is going to suffer, depending on the approach, and there is no question but that Camus’s philosophical concerns were best captured in literary form. In this way, he differs from Nietzsche and the poststructuralists, whose experiments with form remained more or less within philosophy’s confines, and is more akin to the philosophical novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky, who, like Camus, also penned a number of highly significant philosophical essays. Moreover, to put it simply, some of Camus’s philosophical arguments were not especially good, as some philosophers have been only too willing to point out. Still, as I shall argue throughout, Camus’s basic concerns were, first, to describe a conflicted modern sensibility whose quandaries are not amenable to a rational resolution, and, second, to determine how to use the impoverished reason with which we are left to produce outcomes that are most in accord with his unwavering humanism. His basic concern was not to make airtight analytical arguments, although this can by no means excuse his more egregious arguments. Thus, while I am obliged to point out some of the worst mistakes in Camus’s arguments, I shall not dwell on them but instead shall attempt to penetrate to the philosophical intuitions that motivated them.

Given that “the Absurd,” the notion with which Camus is most often associated, was first devised by the father of existentialism, Søren Kierkegaard, and that Camus is almost universally taken to be at the heart of the French existentialist movement, his persistent claim that he was not an existentialist is rather strange. Still, while Camus’s disclaimer is not ultimately persuasive, it can be made comprehensible. In a 1945 interview, Camus states that *The Myth of Sisyphus* “was directed against the so-called existentialist philosophers” (LCE, p. 345), and, in a qualified sense, it was. At the time, however, Camus viewed existential philosophy as more or less synonymous with its religious variant, which he consistently rejected because it involves some form of a “leap of faith.” Thus, while he directly attacks religious existentialists like Kierkegaard, Karl Jaspers, and Leo Chestov, he only refers to Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time* in passing and does not refer to Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* at all. Neither of these works, which are indisputably among the most important in existential philosophy, is religious. It is, ostensibly, for this reason that Camus later shifts his position on existentialism, rejecting the label for reasons similar to the reasons that he denies being a philosopher. Heidegger and Sartre, albeit in different ways, are concerned with “ontology,” the systematization or classification of Being (i.e., the basic

structures of existence), and, as we have seen, Camus opposes systematizing thought. Lastly, from a personal standpoint, Camus had good reason to repudiate the term. It was Sartre who had popularized existentialism, and to be characterized as an existentialist was, inevitably, to be sucked into Sartre's orbit, which Camus fought against. Indeed, even Sartre tended to struggle against the term "existentialism," arguing that any "ism" invariably pigeonholes a thinker, neatly packaging him up to be sold in the market like a bar of soap.

Nevertheless, when properly qualified, the statement that Camus was an existentialist is correct. Like Heidegger and Sartre, Camus was influenced by Edmund Husserl, whose philosophical methodology, "phenomenology," aims to get back "to the things themselves," by which he means things as we directly experience them. Now, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, as we shall see, Camus attacks Husserl for aiming to get to the "extra-temporal essences" of the objects of experience, but this attack is one with which both Heidegger and Sartre agree. Trained in the sciences, Husserl was an epistemologist (one who is concerned with getting to the ultimate grounds of our knowledge), while Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus were all existentialists, philosophers who are concerned not with the ultimate grounds of our knowledge but with the ultimate grounds of our ways of being in the world. In this sense, they were all existential phenomenologists. However, unlike Heidegger and Sartre, who furnish what they both call a phenomenological ontology, Camus remains firmly planted on the grounds of the concrete experience itself, refusing to systematize it. He is, in other words, an existential phenomenologist shorn of the sorts of theoretical apparatuses toward which Heidegger and Sartre are drawn. It is for this reason, the desire to remain firmly bound to the concrete experience, that some of Camus's best philosophy is found in his literary works, while the philosophical works as such can occasionally get bogged down. For Camus, when philosophical reason gets airborne, it falsifies the sorts of experiences that inspire it, but this skittishness with respect to philosophical reason in no way undermines the fundamentally "existential" nature of his concerns.

Camus's attacks on Soviet communism and the Algerian national liberation movement do not invalidate his claim that he was a leftist, but they do reflect how the complexities of historical and personal contingencies affect the positions that the individual adopts and how these positions are then characterized. Particularly after Nikita Khrushchev's revelations about life under Stalin, Soviet communism came to be seen as little more than "state capitalism," a system that in many ways mirrored the rigidified class structures of the western capitalist nations (although it cannot be denied that, on the whole, it had fewer civil liberties and a more elaborate social safety net). As a result, the very notion of what constitutes a leftist changed, and, in any event, it surely came to be the

case that one did not have to refrain from attacking the Soviet Union to establish one's leftist bona fides. Indeed, leftist opponents of western capitalism, such as the philosophers of the Frankfurt School, had been doing so for some time. Camus's position on the Algerian national liberation movement is a somewhat tougher one to square with his purported leftism, but it must be emphasized that Camus never refrained from attacking the ugly injustices of French colonial rule, even if he ultimately believed that Algeria should remain linked to France. As a *pied-noir* (a French Algerian) it would have been difficult for him to have taken a position that would have resulted in his family's expulsion from Algeria, the only country that they knew, and the federal scheme that he advocated was based on democratic principles. In any case, even if one disagrees with Camus's particular position on the Algerian War, his leftist commitments, which included a staunch commitment to the working classes that trended toward anarcho-syndicalism, cannot be denied, even though they were not tidily expressed in his politics.

What Camus was, in the final analysis, was one of the leading intellectuals of his time, a great existential novelist who refused to cede what he took to be the moral high ground in highly polarized political times. By virtue of this position, he was unable to find the grounds on which he could satisfy the demands of any political constituency, and thus he was attacked by virtually every political constituency. According to Theodor Adorno, the Frankfurt School philosopher who (along with Herbert Marcuse and Max Horkheimer) also refused to side with either Soviet-style communism or American-style capitalism, "wrong life cannot be lived rightly,"² a truth that is surely manifested in the particulars of Camus's own conflicted life (public and private). And yet, as Adorno also contends (and there is no contradiction here), a free man is one who refuses to bow to the coercive structure of bad alternatives but rather criticizes the situations produced by these coercive structures with the aim of changing them,³ and this was certainly Camus's own view. Indeed, by bearing witness to the violence of his times rather than giving up the ground of his humanist commitments, Camus has served as a model for many thinkers who refuse to falsify their moral experience in the name of something "higher." No less rigorous a philosopher than Bernard Williams makes just this point in his last work, *Truth and Truthfulness*. After declaring that one can have confidence in an intellectual "only if one can respect the writer's dealing with everyday truths," Williams defends Camus against Sartre and, more generally, the French left, which held him in contempt for what they saw as his "fatuous humanism, subjective moralism, and incompetence in philosophy": "Camus may have been less a professional philosopher than Sartre, but it is far from clear that he was a worse one. What is certainly true is that he was a more honest man, and his authority as an intellectual lay in that fact."⁴

In what follows, I shall consider Camus's works from the perspective of this "intellectual honesty," which manifests itself in his refusal to falsify Williams' "everyday truths," or what we might more accurately call the "truths" of individual experience. This refusal can be understood on (at least) two levels. At the first level, generally speaking, the phenomenological portraits in the literary works reflect the existential temptations of an overwhelmed modern consciousness, while the philosophical-political works reflect the efforts of a morally committed consciousness to come to grips with a modern world that seems unable to make good the moral imperative. To be more precise: Camus's literary works contain an array of characters who represent particular responses to "the modern predicament," which, at its philosophical root, is the experience of "the Absurd," and what he skillfully does is use these characters to work through the underlying logic of these existential responses, or what, following Hegel, we can call "forms of consciousness." Whether we are dealing with Meursault of *The Stranger*, who seeks to innocently throw himself back into "life" and ends up on trial for his life, or Clamence of *The Fall*, who scornfully aims to put himself on the throne of unimpeachable judgment and ends up as a compulsive, lifeless game player, we see the unfolding logic of two modern temptations at their purified extremes. Thus, it is not that these characters are themselves champions for the truth but, rather, that they truthfully reflect, albeit in purified form, everyday existential temptations, and Camus uses them to tease out the implications of these temptations. Alternatively, if the experience of "the Absurd" is at the root of our nihilistic individual and collective ways of being, Camus's philosophical-political works reflect his attempt to draw more life-affirming implications from "the Absurd" rather than succumb to its more superficial logic. "The realization that life is absurd cannot be an end, but only a beginning," Camus contends, and what we must ponder are "the consequences and rules for action that can be drawn from it" (LCE, pp. 201-2). Although, as Camus points out, "the Absurd" can appear to countenance seducers and conquerors, what it truly demands is creation, and, ultimately, self-creation, with which the repetition-compulsions of both serial seduction and conquest, not to mention the vicissitudes of totalitarian politics, are wholly inconsistent. Indeed, for Camus, the underlying condition of self-creation is a non-negotiable moral imperative, albeit one that does not neatly dovetail with conventional bourgeois morality, certain aspects of which are part and parcel of the nihilistic response to the Absurd that Camus sets himself against.

Whether from a literary or philosophical-political perspective, Camus's works convey an existential sensibility that continues to resonate for "we postmoderns," but it resonates in ways that are not so easily captured by philosophical discourse, which leads to the second level on which we might understand Camus's refusal to falsify the "truths" of individual

experience. Thus, while many recent French postmodern philosophers have argued some variation of the claim that to recapture the sensuous, particular, concrete, individual experience, we must refrain from doing (conceptual) violence to the “otherness” of the objects of our experience, their theoretical (not to mention systematic) approaches lose both the object and the experience in the process. Phrases such as *différance* (Derrida) and *différend* (Lyotard), not to mention (ontological) disquisitions on the relation between repetition and difference (Deleuze), do not get us any closer to either the concrete objects of experience, or (therefore) the desired experience itself. Camus, in contrast, starts from the perspective of the sensuous, particular, concrete, individual experience (i.e., from the phenomenological perspective), teases out its implications, and refuses to surrender it for the sake of philosophical rigor or political expediency. His thought, in other words, starts from the experiential excess that is beyond philosophy’s boundaries, and it is for this reason that, shortly before his death, Camus declared that the most neglected part of his work had been “the obscure part, what is blind and instinctive in me. French critics are mainly interested in ideas.”⁵ Still, without more, this leaves us with a deep problem: what is blind and instinctive in us is precisely what must be whipped into shape by the “higher” demands of morality, which generally require us to abstract from the sensuous, particular, concrete, individual experience. In other words, how could Camus have been an advocate of both “the lived experience” and “the moral imperative,” which seem to conflict. The preliminary answer, which will be teased out during the course of the book (and especially in the “philosophical-political” chapters), is that there is a complicated relation between lived experience and the moral imperative, and that it was Camus’s important insight to recognize the bilateral (or, as some philosophers would put it, “dialectical”) nature of the relation. In other words, Camus recognized that syllogistic moral reasoning, stripped of the concrete lived experience, could be employed to justify a political violence at least as horrifying as a lived experience that does not advance to the level of moral reasoning.

These two levels correspond, at least crudely, to what ethicists call normative ethics and meta-ethics, respectively. Generally speaking, normative ethics deals with questions concerning the principles and rules by which we should live (i.e., the determination of goodness and badness with respect to principles and rules, which, in turn, determines the rightness and wrongness of our actions) and meta-ethics deals with the overall standing of the moral enterprise itself (i.e., its basic nature, its viability, and, ultimately, whether it can even be justified). This approach seems right to me because one cannot help but be struck by the ethical force of Camus’s works, whether literary or philosophical-political, and it is for this reason (rather than the *mere* fact that he was a great

novelist) that he is a part of the Blackwell Great Minds series. As was already emphasized, however, Camus was not even a professional philosopher, much less a systematizer, and even those of his commitments that raise crucial philosophical issues do so from the margins of the philosophical enterprise. If Camus is tentatively searching for the grounds and content of a phenomenological ethics, then a systematic ethical exposition should not be expected, and, indeed, one shall not be forthcoming. To systematize Camus's commitments in the name of making him consistent, and, therefore, a "respectable" philosopher, would not only be to misrepresent his thought, but, even worse, to butcher what is most important in it. If the impulse to systematize Camus's theoretical commitments is to be resisted, so, too, is the impulse to psychologize them (as certain critics are inclined to do, especially within the framework of the Sartre-Camus quarrel). It may well be the case that "all philosophy is personal," as Nietzsche famously contended, but to simply fob off the philosophy without analyzing how it stands, even if only with respect to how it coheres with the life that engenders it, is to do unwarranted violence to thought itself.

Because I am primarily concerned with Camus's ideas, I shall structure this book along conceptual, rather than chronological, lines (although, for the most part, the conceptual and the chronological go hand-in-hand). Accordingly, after an introductory chapter on Camus's life, I shall primarily consider *The Myth of Sisyphus* in chapter 2 (The Absurd). Although *The Myth of Sisyphus* was published shortly after *The Stranger*, its exposition of the Absurd sets the philosophical stage for virtually all that follows. In chapter 3 (Life), I shall consider the two other works that constitute what Camus called his "cycle" on the Absurd, *The Stranger* and *Caligula*, and in chapter 4 (Scorn), I shall again deviate from the order in which Camus's works were published (but this time more drastically) by considering *The Fall*. This progression is justified on the following grounds: toward the end of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus offers two ways of dealing with the Absurd – one can either fully throw oneself back into "life" or surmount it by scorn – and by directly following Camus's philosophical exposition of the Absurd with his paradigmatic examples of these two gambits, I can better depict the concept of it. In chapter 5 (Solidarity), I shall consider *The Plague*, which, Camus asserts, represents the movement in his thought from solitary revolt to solidarity. Although Camus begins his move to the political here, by examining solidarity in the framework of a natural metaphor that basically represents an absolute evil (like Nazism), he avoids complex political issues. In this sense, *The Plague*, although considered part of Camus's second "cycle" on revolt, actually reflects a collective response to the problem of the Absurd. In chapter 6 (Rebellion), I shall consider what might crudely be called Camus's ethical and political philosophies by considering *The Rebel*

(and, to a lesser extent, two plays, *State of Siege* and *The Just*), which examines the moral basis for political engagement and the failures of teleologically driven political doctrines. In chapter 7 (*Realpolitik*), I shall consider Camus's relationship to *realpolitik* as it is manifested in the public break with Sartre over *The Rebel* and his positions on the Cold War and the Algerian War. Finally, in chapter 8 (Exile and Rebirth), I shall consider *Exile and the Kingdom*, a collection of short stories that explores the quandaries of the modern consciousness as it is thrown back on to itself by the profane world, and *The First Man*, an autobiographical novel that Camus hoped would constitute an artistic rebirth of sorts but was not completed at the time of his death.

notes

- 1 Olivier Todd, *Albert Camus: A Life*, trans. Benjamin Ivry (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), pp. 408, 379, and 408, respectively.
- 2 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (New York: Verso, 1974), p. 39.
- 3 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1992), p. 226.
- 4 Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2002), pp. 11–12.
- 5 Todd, *Albert Camus*, p. x.

introduction: situating camus	9

camus's life

One of Camus's most fascinating protagonists, Jean-Baptiste Clamence, the self-styled "judge-penitent" of *The Fall*, proclaims that "charm is a way of getting the answer yes without having asked any clear question" (F, p. 56). Camus himself possessed such charm. A handsome man, who might be described as a better-looking version of Humphrey Bogart, Camus looked and lived the part of "the existentialist," and in many respects he was the very embodiment of the cultural reputation that the intellectual came to have in France following World War II. Unlike most great thinkers, whose personal lives can be easily relegated to a long (or, perhaps, not so long) footnote, Camus lived a fascinating, complicated, and, ultimately, conflicted life. As with all highly accomplished human beings, Camus not only had an interesting mixture of qualities, but the strengths and weaknesses that constituted these qualities were often intertwined. Rightly depicted shortly after his death as "the present heir of that long line of French moralists whose works perhaps constitute what is most original in French letters,"¹ he could be insufferably self-righteous. Rightly depicted as a sensualist trying to redeem the moment of happiness in a world all too devoid of it, he was a womanizer who could cause unhappiness in those around him, not the least of whom was his wife. And, rightly depicted as someone who was both personally and politically committed, he could be aloof and indifferent. On the whole, however, Camus was an admirable and decent man who, more often than not, evidenced warmth, humor, and a concern for the plight of his fellow human beings, especially the least fortunate. What he undoubtedly was not was the *bon homme* (literally the "good guy," meant pejoratively in the narrow sense of the conventionally "moral man"), who is considered "nice" only by virtue of an utter lack of interesting qualities that might threaten others.

Camus was born on November 7, 1913, in Mondovi, Algeria, which, at the time, was a French colony. Camus's family were *pieds-noirs*, a term signifying that, although Algerian born, they were of French descent. His father, Lucien, a cellarman for a wine company, was drafted by the French army in 1914 and killed later that year in the Battle of the Marne,

one of the bloodiest of World War I. His mother, Catherine Sintès, a cleaning woman of Spanish descent, was illiterate and partly deaf. Camus grew up in a small three-bedroom apartment in Belcourt, which he shared not only with his mother and older brother, Lucien, but also with his mute uncle, Etienne, and his maternal grandmother, Madame Sintès, who, by all accounts, ran the household in a despotic fashion. Although a poor, working-class town made up of *pieds-noirs*, others of European descent (mostly Spanish and Italian), and, of course, Arabs, Belcourt was not without its charms, not the least of which was its hot, sun-drenched climate and its close proximity to the beach, which facilitated in Camus a lifelong love of soccer and swimming. As he would later write in "Return to Tipasa," by virtue of having grown up in this world instead of the cold, damp, greyness of northern Europe, he had come to appreciate that "within me there lay an invincible summer" (LCE, p. 169). In no small part, Camus will self-consciously bring this "Mediterranean sensibility" to bear in his work.

As a student Camus excelled in his studies, and, early on, was particularly influenced by Louis Germain, who recognized Camus's potential. Under Germain's tutelage, Camus earned a full scholarship at a relatively prestigious high school located in nearby Algiers and, therefore, was able to continue with an education that his family could not otherwise have afforded. In 1930, while still in high school, he was diagnosed with tuberculosis, a disease that would plague him for the rest of his life, and he was forced to leave school for the better part of a year. To avoid infecting his brother, with whom he had to share a bed, Camus began to live at the home of his aunt and uncle, Antoinette and Gustave Acault. As owners of a butcher shop, the Acaults were comparatively well off, and Gustave was an intellectual of sorts, engaging his nephew in long conversations about literature and politics. The Acaults showed Camus that life contained possibilities that transcended the hard-scrabble existence that he had known, which had produced in him a fatalistic indifference that he never completely left behind. On returning to high school, Camus was deeply influenced by his philosophy teacher, Jean Grenier, who, with the publication of his book *Islands*, was a rising star in literary circles, and his celebrated friend André Malraux, whose influential book *Man's Fate* had greatly impressed Camus. At this time, Camus was already beginning to evidence the philosophical commitments that he would largely retain for the rest of his life. Unlike many French thinkers, who were taking their philosophical cues from Husserl, Heidegger, and, to a lesser extent, Karl Jaspers, Camus's interests tended not toward German philosophy but rather toward the ancient Greeks. The one notable exception to Camus's general indifference toward German philosophy was Nietzsche, who, initially trained as a philologist, had himself been enamored of the ancient Greeks, and,

in particular, their aesthetics, to which Camus himself was also powerfully attracted.

In 1932, Camus met Simone Hié, who was addicted to morphine, and in 1934, one year after he enrolled at the University of Algiers to do graduate work in philosophy, he married her. While matriculating at the University of Algiers, whose philosophy department now included Grenier, Camus not only worked odd jobs but also found the time to participate in political and literary activities. Although he viewed Communist doctrine as little more than a secular religion, Camus joined the Communist Party because it was committed to improving the living conditions of the working classes and redressing the political oppression of the indigenous Arabs. As a burgeoning intellectual, Camus's tasks ran mostly along cultural lines, as he gave lectures and ran a popular theater for the Party, the Théâtre du Travail. Around this time, Camus also began working on his first book, which, composed of five short essays, would deal with the experiences of his childhood. Alternatively translated as *The Wrong Side and the Right Side* and *Betwixt and Between*, the book would be published two years later. In 1936, Camus completed his work at the University of Algiers by successfully defending his dissertation, "Christian Metaphysics and Neoplatonism: Plotinus and St Augustine," and, later that year, he separated from his wife, who was rapidly deteriorating because of her morphine addiction. The following year, he broke with the Communist Party, founded his own independent theater company, Théâtre de l'Equipe, and began working on a short novel, *A Happy Death*, which he chose not to publish. Revolving around a character named Mersault, who kills a wealthy invalid to acquire the money he thinks that he needs to live more fully, *A Happy Death* is, in many respects, a dry run for Camus's now classic novel *The Stranger*.

Although Camus was ambivalent about the Communist Party throughout his association with it, his politics were decisively leftist, marked by an unwavering support for the working classes and an equally unwavering opposition to heavy-handed colonialism and, most of all, fascism. He had previously been somewhat involved with an anti-fascist assemblage called the Amsterdam-Pleyel movement, and, in the fall of 1938, with fascism firmly rooted in Spain and Germany (and threatening to spread elsewhere), he went to work as an editor and journalist for the *Alger Républicain*, a new newspaper both sympathetic to the working classes and dedicated to fighting fascism. Camus was hired by the paper's charismatic editor Pascal Pia, with whom he established a close relationship, and was initially charged with reporting on matters of local government. Distinguishing between working class *pieds-noirs* and the rich *colons*, who set the rules of colonial administration, Camus attacked corrupt colonial practices as they manifested themselves in the judicial and economic realms. He would wryly recount the politicized nature of

the local criminal trials and, in what was arguably his best series of articles, examined the plight of the nearby Kabylisians, whose abject poverty was viewed with serene indifference by the colonial authorities. As war between France and Germany became all but inevitable, Camus turned his attention toward the international political scene, with respect to which he clung to a pacifist line. With the advent of war in late 1939, however, the *Alger Républicain* was all but doomed, as its positions continually ran afoul of the strictures of the military censors, and the paper was banned in early 1940. Pia was able to secure editorial positions for both himself and Camus at the relatively apolitical *Paris-Soir*, and Camus left for Paris, but not before publishing his second collection of essays under the book title *Nuptials* and proposing to Francine Faure, whom he would marry later that year.

During 1940, while all of Europe was plunged into war and France fell to the Germans, who occupied the country and established the collaborationist Vichy government of Marshal Pétain, Camus (while working for *Paris-Soir*) all but finished what he would refer to as his "first cycle," which was comprised of "three absurd works": *The Stranger* (a novel), *The Myth of Sisyphus* (a philosophical essay), and *Caligula* (a play). Toward the end of the year, Francine met Camus in Lyons, where they married. Shortly thereafter, he was laid off by *Paris-Soir*, and, with no real job prospects, the couple left for Oran, where the Faure family resided. (Located in Algeria, Oran would be the site of Camus's novel *The Plague*). After a period of unemployment, Camus accepted teaching positions at local schools, and it is during this time period, the spring of 1941, that he learned that *The Stranger* would be published by the French publishing house Gallimard. In the spring of 1942, right around the time that *The Stranger* was published, Camus underwent another severe bout of tuberculosis, and, on the advice of his doctor, he and Francine set off for the mountains of southern France later that summer so that Camus could convalesce in the mountain air, which was supposed to be beneficial for tubercular patients. Francine returned to Algeria in September, intending to head back to France later that fall, but in early November the Allies took control of Algeria, and Camus was effectively trapped in France.

For roughly the next year, during which Camus continued to live by himself in southern France's Haute-Loire region, *The Myth of Sisyphus* was published, and he worked in earnest on what would be his next major "cycle," which would deal with revolt. This cycle, just like the first one on the Absurd, would be comprised of a novel, philosophical essay, and play, and during this year Camus worked hard on the novel and the play, *The Plague* and *The Misunderstanding*. In the fall of 1943, Camus moved to Paris, which he had been visiting with increased frequency over the previous months, and he took a position as a manuscript

reader at Gallimard. As the author of *The Stranger* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus's reputation was starting to take off, and his presence in Paris (indeed, at Gallimard no less) just helped to intensify this phenomenon. During this period of time, Camus met Malraux, who had not only been an early inspiration to Camus but had also favorably reviewed *The Stranger* for Gallimard when the publishing house was deciding whether it should be published. It is also during this period of time that he met Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, which produced what is arguably the most highly publicized intellectual friendship-cum-confrontation of the twentieth century. In many ways, Sartre and Camus were polar opposites: Sartre, the son of an upper-middle-class Parisian family, had gone to the best schools, while Camus, the son of working-class *pièdes-noirs*, had gone to provincial schools; Sartre was a short, ugly, bespectacled man, while Camus was tall and handsome; Sartre was a first-rate philosopher, powerfully influenced by German philosophy, and a somewhat lesser novelist, while Camus was a first-rate novelist and a somewhat lesser philosopher, influenced more by the ancient Greeks than by the Germans (with the notable exception of Nietzsche). Nevertheless, for a relatively short period of time, Camus and Sartre became close friends, haunting the Parisian café scene, where they would drink and look to pick up women.

In late 1943, Camus joined the French Resistance and became active in the underground Resistance paper *Combat*, which he served as both an editor and a writer (pseudonymously, of course). By early 1944, the handwriting was already on the wall for the occupying Nazi regime, and Camus's articles, reflecting this state of affairs, are marked no less by a concern with post-occupation political realities than with the realities of the Nazi occupation. The motto affixed to each edition of *Combat* under Camus was, accordingly, "from resistance to revolution." For Camus, however, what this meant was a democratic, working-class "revolution" from below, one that was beholden to the sorts of classical moral principles generally rejected by the Communist Party, which was also angling for power in the post-War era. During the waning months of the Nazi occupation, Camus met the beautiful actress Maria Casarès, whom he cast in the upcoming performance of *The Misunderstanding*, and with whom he began an affair. Casarès, who was of Spanish descent like Camus's mother, would, with varying degrees of involvement, play a role in Camus's life until his death.

In August 1944, Paris was liberated, and *Combat*, which would now be placed under the direction of Pia, was able to begin publishing out in the open. Shortly after the liberation, Camus began to publish a series of essays or so called "letters" in *Combat* grouped under the title *Letters to a German Friend*, in which he seeks to make sense of what has occurred and voices what he takes to be the moral imperatives for post-War Europe.

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