Entranced by Reality

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Albert Camus's mouth is taut and determined, but his earnest eyes, fixed beyond the photographer's frame [see end], look more weary than masterful. He cuts the countenance of a man who has seen more than he wanted, but who won't look away. It's a face both brave and vulnerable, fitting for one of the twentieth century's most doggedly humane and honest writers.

This incisive portrait graces the cover of Robert Zaretsky's smart, galvanizing new book, *A Life Worth Living: Albert Camus and the Quest for Meaning.* Zaretsky's slim volume churns between sympathetic biography, basic textual exegesis, and his own Camus-inspired reflections. The book is structured around five untidily overlapping themes, each the focus of a separate chapter: Absurdity, Silence, Measure, Fidelity, and Revolt. Zaretsky's Camus is a man in full, possessed of remarkable courage, sensitivity and intelligence. If *A Life Worth Living* is more heartfelt appreciation than rigorous evaluation, it is a welcome reanimation of a deeply compelling writer, and one that ably ties together various strands of Camus's thought and action.

Albert Camus was a *pied-noir*, an ethnic Frenchman living in French Algeria. He was born in 1913, and at the age of 25 he moved to France, where he joined the Resistance movement, writing and editing for a dissident paper called *Combat.* He became a writer of significant repute, and lived mainly in France until his death (by car accident) in 1960.

But as Zaretsky demonstrates, the interwoven beauty and violence of Camus's Algerian childhood made an indelible mark on the whole of his wide-ranging thought. It is a signal achievement of Zaretsky's book to show how the different parts of Camus's thinking cannot be neatly compartmentalized. They all flow from Camus's singular commitment to concrete reality, forged beneath the hot Algerian sun. The determination to not just think, but also to *look*, is key to Camus's greatness.

There is no way for a thinker—or indeed, a user of language—to eschew abstraction entirely, of course, but Camus was deeply attuned to the dangers of excessive abstraction. This may not sound particularly heroic, but it can be, and it certainly was in Camus's day. Camus's peers, mid-century French intellectuals, were all too susceptible to the raptures of abstraction. The Left Bank *bien pensants* were, with few exceptions, stalwart armchair Marxists, obliquely aware that the divine dream of the worker's paradise was exacting a brutal toll on the actual humans of the Soviet bloc, but blissfully unmoved by this fact. Camus publicly, angrily, charged that their fixation on beautiful ideas made them insensate to the ugly cost such ideas imposed on the much-beloved proletariat. And indeed, it is now difficult—impossible—to think Camus wrong.

Zaretsky quotes the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who writes of the Stalinist horrors with chilling coolness, explaining that only the unfolding of history will "give us the final word as to the legitimacy of a particular form of violence." Camus righteously fumes in response that "man has been delivered entirely into the hands of history … because we live in a world of abstraction, a world of bureaucracy and machinery, of absolute ideas and of messianism without subtlety." Camus's rejection of blood-draining Stalinist abstraction put him far out of favor with his peers, most notably his once-close friend Jean Paul Sartre, who publicly denounced him for his political apostasy.

It was not only the neat certainty of Soviet ideology that Camus resisted. During his lifetime, his native Algeria was torn in a long and bitter struggle between French colonizers, who flagrantly oppressed native Algerians, and Algerian nationalists, who took up arms against civilian *pied noirs.* On the Left Bank, this was understood to be a clear-cut, one-sided battle between virtuous freedom fighters and vicious colonial oppressors.

Having grown up on actual Algerian soil, Camus simply didn't recognize the black and white situation described by comfortable French intellectuals. He condemned the violence on both sides, and called for a peaceable coexistence between the *pied noirs* and the native Algerians. While in Stockholm in 1957, accepting the Nobel Prize for literature, Camus was confronted by a young Algerian nationalist who demanded to know why Camus had not taken an unambiguous pro-Algerian position. Camus famously responded: "People are now planting bombs in the tramways of Algiers. My mother might be on one of those tramways. If that is justice, then I prefer my mother."

In another famous example: Camus strongly opposed the death penalty, but rather than simply rehearsing arguments about the proper tasks of the state and the social functions of punitive action, he travelled to some executions and wrote about them in excruciating detail in his essay "Reflections on the Guillotine." He begins with the explanation that "When silence or verbal trickery helps to maintain an abuse that needs to be ended or suffering that needs to be soothed, there is no choice but to speak out and show the obscenity disguised by a cloak of words." We learn, for instance, that the cheeks of one particular convict—Charlotte Corday—became blushed after her head was severed from her body. Camus's wager is that "The man who enjoys his coffee while reading that justice has been done would spit it out at the least detail."

Camus is right about this. A normal, comfortable civilized life is unavoidably supported and protected by violence—police violence, warfare, the slaughter of animals, capital punishment, etc. But most of this violence is invisible to us on a day to day basis. Reasonable people can disagree about the justice of these various species of violence, but shouldn't we have to look at what we're doing? Isn't there something cowardly about passing our violence into the hidden hands of certain designated violence-workers? It is darkly comic to read, in 2013, Camus's assessment of his own day: "Just as we now love one another by telephone and work not on matter but on machines, we kill and are killed by proxy. What is gained in cleanliness is lost in understanding." This was long before the rise of ubiquitous internet pornography, sexting, offshore help centers, and drone warfare. If anything, we are sailing higher and higher into the thin air, away from the cluttered floor of embodied reality.

Camus would be increasingly appalled by this ascent. He, for his part, was too much entranced by mere reality to take his leave of it. In an essay titled "The New Mediterranean Culture," he describes a deep spiritual connection between Mediterranean people and "the courtyards, the cypresses, the strings of pimentos" that mark their land. He concludes that "There are, before our eyes, realities stronger than we ourselves are. Our ideas will bend and become adapted to them." This "fidelity," to mere reality, Zaretsky explains, is the source of Camus's "measure"—his stubborn refusal, or perhaps inability, to trade the finite real for visions of some infinite ideal.

This stubbornness is the key marker of Camus's perspicacious political vision, and it is buttressed by his deep love for the beauty of his native landscape. He was not just an important political polemicist, but also a beauty-seized rhapsode, susceptible to being carried away by the raw sensuality of his homeland, and then capable of writing prose that takes his readers along with him.

In one of his most lyrical essays, "Nuptuals at Tipasa," Camus exults in the stark beauty of an Algerian mountain town on the verge of the Mediterranean Sea: "Deep among wild scents and concerts of somnolent insects, I open my eyes and heart to the unbearable grandeur of this heat-soaked sky." Caught up in the rapture of reality, this professional man of letters, a perceptive commentator on Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky and Kafka, seems almost ready to renounce the life of reflection: "We walk toward an encounter with love and desire. We are not seeking lessons or the bitter philosophy one requires of greatness. Everything seems futile here except the sun, our kisses, and the wild scents of the earth." One could very sensibly argue that the pleasure and vibrancy of his aesthetic experiences served as a vital counterbalance to one of the most common and dangerous pitfalls of professional thinkers: the temptation to float off into the cool, exhilarating ether of abstraction, leaving messy, mundane realities behind.

It makes sense. The pleasure of intellectual ascent is real, and so moderating it is made easier when one has the ballast of aesthetic pleasure, which is necessarily related to specific, concrete phenomena. Camus was not entranced by trees in general, but by *this* particular clump of cypresses. A great deal depends on what we choose to pay attention to. Camus attended, with great pleasure, to particular physical things, and his political thought reflects this. As Aristotle explains in the *Nicomachean Ethics,* we all tend to excel at pursuits that bring us pleasure. A soldier who exults at the thrill of battle will simply tend to be a better soldier. A woman who revels in mathematics will simply tend to be a better mathematician. A man like Camus, who exults in the concrete particulars of a landscape, will be more likely to attend particular realities with care. It is no coincidence that on a panoply of political and ethical questions, Camus's thinking is precisely marked by such attentiveness.

But of course, Camus was a thinker, even while carried away by the beauty of his beloved Mediterranean. For him, the Algerian landscape was not only an inoculation against excessive abstraction, but a source of wisdom. Along with rocks and sky, flora and fauna, he saw profound, fundamental truths about reality. "There are evenings," he writes, "at the foot of mountains by the sea, when night falls on the perfect curve of a little bay and an anguished fullness rises from the silent waters … In this golden sadness, tragedy reaches its highest point."

Nature-rhapsodes—think of the German Romantics or the New England Transcendentalists—often tend to deify nature in one way or another, but Camus was not so inclined. He thought that for humans, the experience of nature was not all rapture. It was also tragedy. In his famous long essay "The Myth of Sisyphus," Camus explains why this is:

> A step lower and strangeness creeps in perceiving that the world is "dense," sensing to what a degree a stone is foreign and irreducible to us, with what intensity nature or a landscape can negate us. At the heart of all beauty lies something inhuman, and these hills, the softness of the sky, the outline of these trees at this very minute lose the illusory

> meaning with which we had clothed them, henceforth more remote than a lost paradise. The primitive hostility of the world rises up to face us across millennia.

This realization, that nature even at its most beautiful defies our attempts to understand it, stands irrevocably apart from us, is a deep root of Camus's famous assertion that the world is "absurd." Camus's main idea of absurdity, as Zaretsky unpacks it, is a matter of imbalance between desire and reality—humans long for ultimate meaning and crystalline clarity, but the god-shorn cosmos offers neither of these. It remains coldly, majestically indifferent and inexplicable.

The first part of Camus's response to this fact is to advocate for clear-eyed acceptance—we should commit to live fully in this absurd world, "without appeal" to God or Progress or any quasi-mystical utopian politics. This is simply all there is, and once again, we should look straight and hard at reality, without veiling it behind the gauzy fabric of some high concept or conceit.

But now Camus the sensitive observer is joined by Camus the actor, the man-in-the-world. The second question for Camus, in fact the most pressing question in all of philosophy, in his estimation, is whether one ought to continue to live under such conditions, or whether suicide is the most rational response. His conclusion is that we should indeed continue to live, and in fact not only live, but fight back, become rebels against the inhumane cosmos. The cosmos may not be on my side, meaningless death may be the last word, but I must refuse to let that fact prevent me from living as deeply and bravely and beautifully as possible. I must remain human.

So, then, for Camus, the absurd man must live with vigor and dignity and compassion, even if the universe is cruel and indifferent to him and his fellow men. If real people, here and now, are suffering injustice, the absurd man will do everything in his power to alleviate their pain; cosmic insignificance—or even ultimate futility—be damned. Speaking through the character of Dr. Rieux in his novel *The Plague*, Camus writes, "We refuse to despair of mankind. Without having the unreasonable ambition to save men, we still want to serve them."

"We refuse…" ; "We still want…". It is simultaneously a modest and outrageous formulation, and it is absolutely central to Camus's ethics. Most thinkers have argued that their favored moral system should be embraced because it runs parallel to the grain of the universe or history or nature or the Divine will, it accords with reason or human nature, or whatever. Camus makes no such claim. He imagines that he can simply stand athwart reality, and advocate for ethical norms that he wishes to embrace, because he knows they are right.

As a simple matter of fact, Camus's rakish, stubborn adherence to his intellectually rootless ideals made him right. He was consistently more likely than his contemporaries to oppose injustice of all kinds, and to denounce evil regimes. His relentless demand that we truly *look* at what we are and what we're doing should be emblazoned on a banner and displayed in every ethics classroom and voting booth and checkout line.

But if Albert Camus was clearly a wise and admirable man in many ways, what is the lasting value of his thought? More than a half century after his death, he is still praised, debated and invoked in urgent political discussions, but he did not pretend to be a great philosopher, in the mode of Aristotle or Kant or Hegel. Nor was he. His thinking is too personal, too scattershot, too practical for that. There are many academic philosophers who label themselves Kantians, but does it make sense to be a Camusian? Perhaps not. He was a singular thinker, and his thought thins dramatically when abstracted from the particular wiry, dark-haired, deep eyed *pied-noir* who gave birth to it. His great writerly achievements flow from the fact that he remained entirely that man when he sat down to write. One marvels at the intricate ingenuity of the Kantian system, but one *loves* Camus the man.

Predictions of future taste are unsteady things, but it is entirely possible that in fifty more years Camus will be little read. His essays are brilliant, dramatic, inspiring reads, but his fiction, which is much more widely known, is just good. But whatever posterity chooses to read or neglect, Camus will continue to be of at least historical importance. It has often been observed that the 20th century was an age of ideologies, when abstract ideas ran roughshod over millions upon millions of real human bodies. In this context, Camus's fidelity to fleshly reality was remarkable and heroic. If he was not a man for all seasons, he was without question a man for his season.

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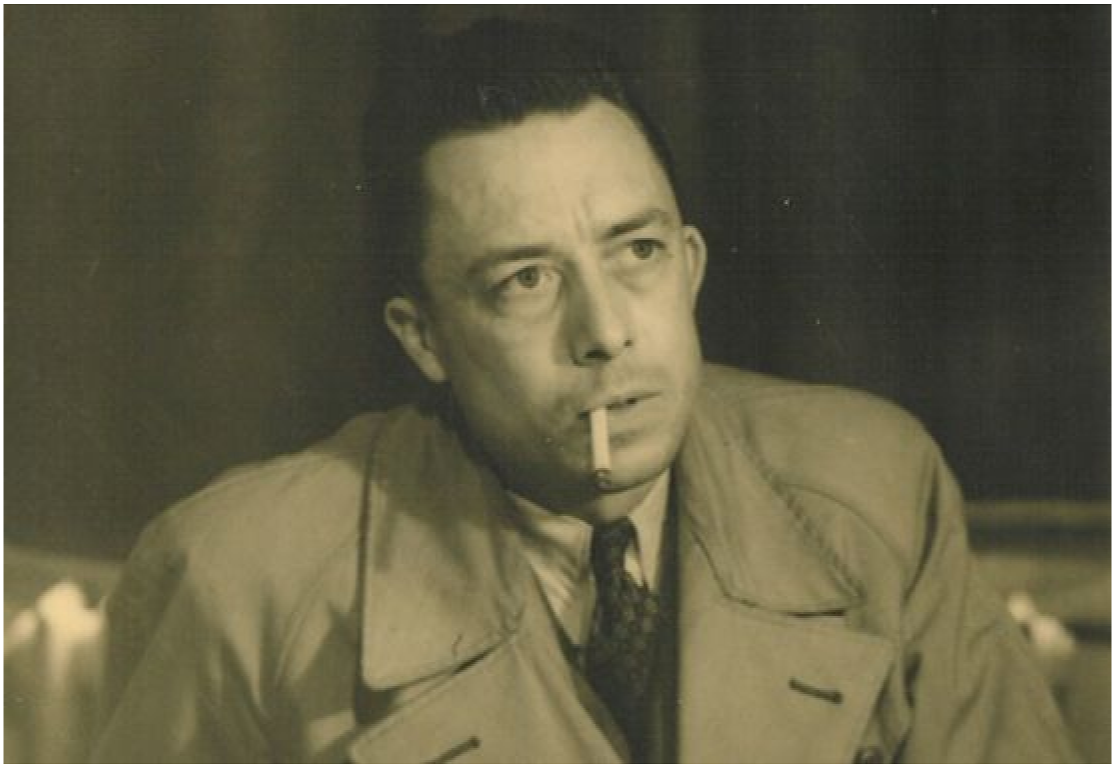

Albert Camus in 1957 (Wikimedia Commons)