

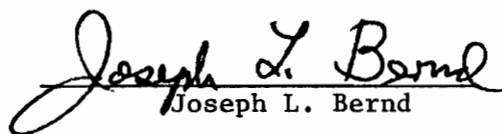
ALBERT CAMUS ON POLITICAL MURDER:  
A SIGN OF THE TIMES IN WHICH WE LIVE

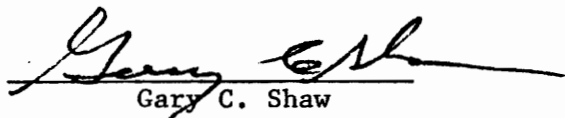
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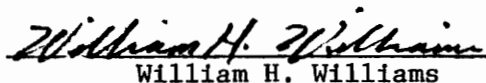
Michael Blair Camillo

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APPROVED:

  
Joseph L. Bernd

  
Gary C. Shaw

  
William H. Williams

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## PREFACE

The object of this essay is to show how the French writer and thinker, Albert Camus, responded to the political and social climate that prevailed in Europe just after the two world wars. More specifically, I want to discuss Camus' thought relevant to two main questions: (1) Is suicide the answer to the absurd?, and (2) Is murder permissible following the logic of the absurd?

In addition, I want to discuss Camus in terms of his search for a principle upon which to base a code of conduct. For really, if we look at it directly, suicide is an expression of private action, while murder is an expression of public action. Specifically, the question can be put in this form: How ought we to act towards ourselves and toward others? The first part has to do with suicide. The second has to do with murder. And if we take this one step further, we can see that murder can easily be translated into political murder. Quite precisely, it is this translation on which a major part of our discussion of Camus will center.

Hence, my presentation of Camus will not aim at developing a political theory, as that term is used to describe classical works, such as Plato's Republic, Aristotle's Politics, or Rousseau's Social Contract. Rather, what my presentation will aim at is Camus' answer to how men in the arena of politics ought to act toward each other. Certainly, in this sense, my essay will be normative, rather than quantitative.

I must also mention at this point that I am aware that it might be assumed that this discussion of Camus will be essentially a discussion of existentialism. This is only partially correct, and perhaps even misleading. Admittedly, Camus has talked at some length about key

## PREFACE (Continued)

existentialist concepts. But, does that mean he is an existentialist? Camus has denied the association. And, too, evidence will be presented in this essay to lay the groundwork for doubt for those hard believers, who insist upon calling Camus an existentialist. Still, I leave it entirely open to the reader to make up his own mind. This, then, is what will be presented. Now I will present the how.

## II

I believe that in order to understand Camus' thought relevant to his suggestion of how men ought to behave in the arena of politics, one must first have a good knowledge of his basic position on key philosophical issues. We will see that with Camus this is most important. Because, as I will present it, only after we have grasped his thought on philosophical issues can we go on to politics. Simply put, one must know whether or not life is worth living, before going on to decide whether or not there is value in political action. And, let us not say that the value of life is found in political action. Let us, for the moment, say that they are separate and distinct.

Hence, in light of my opening remarks concerning the issue of suicide, we might want to ask just exactly what Camus' position is on the value of life. However, in the large sense, asking this question now puts the cart before the horse, so to speak. A more basic question we might begin with is what does Camus feel is the nature of man? That is, what does Camus feel determines what man is and becomes? A hint to an answer to this question lies in what Camus has to say about history and man as a product of history. Thus, our question might best be put by

## PREFACE (Continued)

asking of Camus exactly what part does history, as a general force, play in determining man's nature?

I think now we can ask of Camus his position on the value of life. Specifically, does Camus believe life has value? Further, if he does believe life has value, what then determines that value? We will find that for Camus the value of life is inextricably tied to his discussion of science, and one further step, the notion of the absurd, which Camus argues grows out of the "unreasonable silence of the universe." Here, of course, I am interpreting the word "absurd" as having negative value with regard to life. Initially, in Camus' discussion, this is exactly the interpretation we want. However, in the end we will find that this negative value gives life value and allows us to live all the more. This certainly seems paradoxical. Thus, what we want to ask is how does Camus turn a reason for dying into a reason for living? In short, how does the absurd endow life with value and meaning? In fact, we will find from our discussion of Camus on the absurd that the less life means the more it can be lived with real value. At this point, this makes no sense at all. How then does Camus endow this with meaning and make this sensible? What we really want to ask is does the logic of the absurd dictate death? If it does, how then does Camus turn this logic into a reason for living?

Another area we will look at is what Camus has to say about freedom. Freedom has meaning in this context because it is essential to understand it so we can understand the phrase "the most living." This phrase, by the way, is essential to Camus' discussion of the absurd. Hence, what we might want to ask is what part does the concept of freedom play in

## PREFACE (Continued)

enhancing the value for living in the context of "the most living" vis-a-vis the question, is murder permissible? In light of this, we will find that a tension exists between these two opposites. Hence, in view of this tension, freedom takes on a crucial meaning for Camus. It is this crucial meaning that I will discuss with respect to the issue of rebellion in the arena of politics and history. But, even more, what I will discuss is the inability of the absurd to provide us with a principle for a code of conduct that does not permit murder.

Thus, we will find that the absurd is filled with too many contradictions to be able to provide us with this principle. For instance, one contradiction is "the most living"-- "all is permitted"-- against the notion that life is the one thing that keeps the absurd alive. We must ask then, if the absurd cannot offer this principle, where then do we look?

At this point, discussion of Camus' The Rebel becomes essential. First, we will look at rebellion, practiced by those individuals-- some out of mythology, some out of literature, and some out of history-- who practiced metaphysical revolt. We will find that metaphysical revolt is revolt against God, in whatever form He assumes. And, specifically, we will find that rebellion is important to Camus because, in the very end, it is rebellion, living the tension between "Why?" and "I am God" that forms our principle. But, we will find that metaphysical rebels have not remained true to this tension. Hence, we will see the conclusion they reach living out their revolt.

Next, from metaphysical revolt, we will go on to revolt carried into

## PREFACE (Continued)

history. This means we will look at revolution. And, more exactly, we will look at the French Revolution. Because, according to Camus, it was with this revolution that rebellion lost its virtue. And, ever since, it has done nothing to regain it. In short, the issue is one of extremism.

During two hundred years of European history, man has continually rebelled against oppressive conditions. But, in so doing, he has destroyed in order to create. What Camus argues for is creation, but not at the hands of destruction. In this context, we will see what Camus has to say about the role of reason in this drama.

In this sense, Camus' discussion of Hegel, the man who deified reason, becomes most germane. And, in reaction to Hegel, we will see what happened when some Russian assassins, basing their revolt on this reaction, revolted against the oppressive conditions in Russia at the turn of the century. These "fastidious assassins", as Camus calls them, are examples of men whose conduct is exemplary, but in a special sense. We will find out what this "special" sense is.

For our purposes this brings to an end our discussion of "Historical Rebellion", as Camus calls this section. But what is more important is that in the conclusions Camus draws it is evident that history can offer us no principle on which to build a code of conduct. As Camus presents it, rebellion, as practiced in history, has forever overrun its virtuous limitations. Extremism is not a virtue. Philosophy always gives way to psychology. Hence, we must look elsewhere. Camus, then, offers the only realm to which we might look wherein rebellion practices moderation-- the realm of artistic creation.



## PREFACE (Continued)

In this realm, according to Camus, the artist has reached a balance between form and content. In the novel, the artist can achieve a structure and a unity that is lacking in the world. But, at the same time, the artist does not ignore the world. Essentially then, the artist shows society what it looks like, and, hence, spurs society to cure itself. However, the artist does not want to destroy to create. And, that makes him far better off than historical rebels. In Camus' discussion of the artist we will see exactly what are the merits of the artist rebel. And, indeed, why Camus favors him and feels this is where our principle lies, generally.

I say "generally" because one cannot "live in fiction;" rather, we have to "live in this world." In this light, Camus goes on to discuss exactly how we may achieve in our own lives what the artist rebel achieves in the world of the novel. And, in this vein, Camus offers the principle that draws its sustenance from the Mediterranean tradition, viz., the tradition of the Greeks. Furthermore, he argues for this tradition over and against the Germanic tradition. In our discussion we will see why.

Finally, we will see what ought to be our principle for conducting our lives. In sum, we will find it is an outgrowth of the Mediterranean tradition. And, at this point, we will have reached the end of our search.

## III

Basically, then, I can put the form of this essay in this manner: In Chapter I we shall see the climate out of which The Myth of Sisyphus arose, as a response to post World War II despair and anxiety. Next, we

## PREFACE (Continued)

shall examine the content of this response, and ultimately we shall see how Camus answers the issue of suicide in the context of the absurd. But, we shall also find that in Camus' answer murder seems to be permitted in following the logic of the absurd and rejecting suicide. Hence, with this dilemma-- life as important, but murder seemingly permitted-- we can go directly into Chapter II.

Thus, in Chapter II we shall see how Camus answers this dilemma. And, once he has, we shall then see how his answer gives rise to his discussion of rebellion. The main portion of Chapter II, therefore, will be devoted to rebellion's role in history. But, we shall find that in his discussion no principle evolves on which we can base a code of conduct. Camus will then point to "artistic creation" and "the Mediterranean tradition" as the examples from which our principle arises.

Thus, Chapter III will be an in-depth discussion of these two major notions of Camus' thought. And, finally, in this chapter we shall find the principle on which we can base our answer to the question: How ought men to act?

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## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

In mid 1914 on the eve of World War I, Sir Edward Grey, then British Foreign Secretary, remarked to a friend, "The lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime."<sup>1</sup> It would be difficult to find a more prophetic statement concerning the moral and spiritual crisis, not to mention the political and social upheavals that European man has gone through since 1914. The loss of underpinnings for his beliefs and values is a topic so replete in the literature that by now it has become a cliché.<sup>2</sup> The lamps Grey metaphorically spoke of were those of reason, sanity, and justice, but also peace and freedom.

But, as with all "men of good will," to borrow the title of the French writer Jules Romains' multi-volume work, who fought to prevent war, their effort was in vain. In its wake European man was left with a ravaged continent. More than that, though, he was left without foundations. The complacency of pre-World War I Europe was never again to be felt. Out of the European mind sprang competing political ideologies. In a Europe shorn of a political structure that had previously held it together, the European man of the 1920s-1940s vainly grasped for anything that would return the order and the structure he had known.

In Russia, for instance, this took the form of men aligning themselves with the doctrines of communism. In Italy fascism carried the day; while in Germany nazism promised the German people a way out of their tunnel of guilt. In France the straw in the wind was socialism, bolstered by the writings of Marx, Proudhon, and Jaures.

On another level, though, the political malaise was reflective of

deeper problems European man faced. What, in fact, World War I raised as a question was what was European man to do in terms of civilization? The writers of the time, in particular Oswald Spengler, raised this question in his immensely popular book, Decline of the West. Its impact on the post World War I mind was significant. It seemed to articulate what European man felt. In the wake of World War I, man's notions of hope and progress were completely destroyed, or, at the very least, thrown into doubt.

However, if the Great War created a mood of despair and uncertainty, it did so only in light of current ideas that had their origin with men such as Freud and Nietzsche.<sup>3</sup> For example, in the thought of Freud, European man discovered the notion of the unconscious and its implications with regard to man's behavior. While in the writings of Nietzsche, European man found evidence that pointed to the irrational aspects of man's existence. In short, in these two thinkers, European man found deeper explanations of his motives which, to say the least, were unsettling. Hence, as opposed to a model of man that was based on rationality, Freud and Nietzsche uncovered the irrational aspects of man's behavior and existence. Man's new image, in light of Freud and Nietzsche, was no longer the image of a simple, rational creature that the eighteenth century had bequeathed.

But, Freud and Nietzsche were only two of the more stellar examples that formed the European mind. Not to be discounted was the impact of the dark, brooding Russian writer, Fyodor Dostoevsky. Indeed, it was Dostoevsky who wrote the premise<sup>4</sup> upon which the logic of totalitarianism and, hence, nazism and fascism was built, when he had one of his characters say, "If God does not exist, then all is permitted." How many times

have men used this kind of reasoning to perpetrate their criminal acts on an unknowing society behind the guise of political benevolence? In retrospect we can answer "too often." But, for the European man of the 1920s-1940s, unfortunately he did not have the benefit of hindsight we possess today. He was still grappling with his world, still clutching at straws in search of values and beliefs. But, in the words of T. S. Eliot, he found instead ". . .the hollow men. . ./ . .the stuffed men. . ./ . . Those who have crossed/With direct eyes, to death's other Kingdom. . ." and found that ". . .the world ends/Not with a bang but with a whimper."<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps a clearer picture of what kind of climate the European man lived in in post World War I Europe can be presented in the following way. As Roland Stromberg has written:

An unlucky enough man might have watched the mass slaughter of Verdun, seen the Bolshevik terror in Russia, observed the black-shirted and brown-shirted hysteria in Italy and Germany, the riots of starving workers during the great depression; fought in the Spanish Civil War, noted the appalling drift to world war in the 1930s, and perhaps ended in a Nazi concentration camp. . . It was seemingly a world of terror and inhumanity, marked by the almost total breakdown of civilized processes and political rationality.<sup>6</sup>

Our first reaction is to say that this historian has made a mistake. He called the man "unlucky." To have survived all these horrors, much like Voltaire's Candide survived his, he is in one sense a very lucky man. Seriously speaking though, it is clear that from the conditions depicted something was surely amiss in this best of all possible worlds. Hence, when Yeats wrote the following lines, he knew whereof he spoke:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold:  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world. . .  
The best lack all conviction while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.<sup>7</sup>

It is then into this milieu, this "nausea," as Sartre was to call it, that Albert Camus stepped. How Camus dealt with this malaise of thought and action, both philosophically and politically, and found within it reasons for living, reasons for hope in the face of overwhelming despair and anguish, forms the basis of the rest of this essay.

## Man and History

Camus wrote in the preface to The Wrong Side and the Right Side:

To correct a natural indifference, I was placed halfway between poverty and the sun. Poverty kept me from thinking all was well under the sun and in history; the sun taught me that history was not everything.<sup>8</sup>

What Camus seems to be saying in very poetic language is that though he knew the history of mankind was often brutal, nonetheless, there was a ray of hope now and again shining on the positive side of mankind's deeds. It is this posture of moderation and of hope in the face of pessimism that led Charles Rolo to say of Camus, ". . .in sum (he was) a good man."<sup>9</sup> But, even more so, this points to Camus' belief concerning the nature of man. For, as badly as man has acted in the past-- Auschwitz, Buchenwald, the Spanish Inquisition, the purges of Stalin--, there are still those moments in history that one could look back on with some pride-- the Marshall Plan, and the advances in science, especially medicine. This leads Camus to say:

. . .it is not indeed the task of intelligence to modify history, its real task will nevertheless be to act upon man, for it is man who makes history.<sup>10</sup>

But, if man makes history, it seems fair to say that history also has something to do in making man. As Camus writes in The Rebel, ". . .man is not entirely to blame; it was not he who started history. . ."<sup>11</sup> But, he adds, ". . .nor is he entirely innocent, since he continues it."<sup>12</sup> Still though, Camus argues that man must not give in to the irrationality of history. Because to do so leaves man ". . .to be treated as an object and to be reduced to simple historical terms."<sup>13</sup> And, above all, this is what Camus argues so forcibly against. For, in essence, Camus believes that man's total cognitive nature spurs him on



to be free in the face of an Absurd world-- a world that stands silent to the ". . .wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart."<sup>14</sup>

In light, then, of what I have presented so far concerning Camus and the nature of man, I hope one can see that with Camus one is not going to find an in-depth analysis of man's nature, such as the kind Sartre has presented in his essay, Existentialism is a Humanism-- page after dreary page on the subject of man's essence. In short, we can account for this by looking at Camus himself.

For one thing, Camus did not believe in philosophizing in the sense of carrying his discussion of man to the point of abstraction. As Camus writes in The Myth of Sisyphus, "This world I can touch, and I. . .judge that it exists. There ends all my knowledge, and the rest is construction."<sup>15</sup> And secondly (and this point is a telling one in getting at Camus' nature), he writes, "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide."<sup>16</sup> And, he continues, "Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy."<sup>17</sup> Hence, we can say that even though suicide does not strike us as a philosophical issue, rather a practical one, surely the worth of living is a philosophical issue that the act of suicide-- a very practical issue-- depends on.

Quite obviously then, these are not the comments of a man removed from the problems that are of this world. Hence, a philosophical discussion about man's theoretical nature in which we take man out of the context of real life and death issues is essentially meaningless for Camus. Suffice it to say, Camus accepted man as a reed, but in the

Pascalian sense, nonetheless, as a roseau pensant, who exists "in the silence of the infinite spaces." It is then for Camus to say, "Yes, I accept this. But, let us go on. Our work has only begun." And on Camus went, straight to suicide and then to murder. But, first let us look at suicide. "An act," according to Camus, "prepared within the silence of the heart."<sup>18</sup> However, before we do, let me set the context in which a discussion of suicide will be meaningful.

If Camus says anything, he says this: In view of three thousand years of history-- bloodshed, guillotines, gas ovens, gladiatorial battles, political assassinations-- that says man is a beast, there are countless reasons for dying, for committing suicide because of the utter nothingness of it all. Let us, then, instead find reasons for living. In short, anyone can find a reason for dying. But, it takes a special man who can oppose reasons for dying, and instead live. Any fool can die. We all will sometime. As Heidegger has argued, being born is being condemned to death. But, how many can live? Any man can say the taste has gone out of life. But, how many can live in spite of that? Any man can say life is utter nothingness, meaningless, futile, lacks an overall purpose-- there is no end to the things a despairing man can dream up-- and, in doing so, take a gun and kill himself. But, how many can live in spite of this? How many have the gall, the absolute fortitude to spit in the face of the absurd and live anyhow? This, this is the message which Camus presents in The Myth of Sisyphus. And, in this special sense, The Myth talks not only to European man of the 1940s, but to all men wherever and whenever they live-- 1940 or 1975, or 1984. In sum, it is easy to die. What's hard is to live in spite

of everything that says "Why live?"

### Man and Suicide

In the preface to Camus' major philosophical essay, The Myth of Sisyphus, he states, ". . .it is legitimate and necessary to wonder whether life has a meaning; therefore, it is legitimate to meet the problem of suicide face to face."<sup>19</sup> And, in another part of this essay he adds, "All the rest (philosophical problems)-- whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories-- comes afterwards."<sup>20</sup> With this opening Camus begins his discussion of the issue of the value of life. But, more pointedly, this discussion is really a discussion that hinges on the importance the notion of absurdity plays in determining that value. For a key question that Camus sets up for himself to answer is, "Does the Absurd dictate death?"<sup>21</sup> Or, as he asks in another way, "Is there a logic to the point of death?"<sup>22</sup> Both of these questions, however, are only indicative of the main thrust of the essay, which he states precisely as, ". . .the exact degree to which suicide is a solution to the absurd."<sup>23</sup> One can be assured that these ruminations are not those of a solitary, disengaged thinker. But, as Camus tells us, "These are facts the heart can feel; yet they call for careful study before they become clear to the intellect."<sup>24</sup>

Let us begin to see what the heart knows that the mind is not sure of. However, just before starting a brief word about the outline of Camus' argument. Schematically, Camus divides his discussion into three distinct, yet interconnected, parts. In the first, he discusses the topic of "absurd reasoning." The second main part he devotes to "absurd man," and in the third it is "absurd creation." What finally arises from

his treatment of this issue forms the basis for the rest of his writings. As Justin O'Brien has pointed out, "All of Camus' literary work rests on his philosophical essay, The Myth of Sisyphus."<sup>25</sup> We can even say that the logical progression is even more distinct when viewed in terms of what Camus argues man is obliged to do. That is, the question for The Myth is: Is man, following the logic of the Absurd, obliged to commit suicide? While the question for The Rebel is: Is man obliged to commit murder? Simply said, in the first is suicide the answer to the Absurd, and in the second is murder the answer for the rebel? Let us now turn to Camus' discussion of suicide.

To answer this problem, Camus goes to the very heart of the issue of suicide. Telling us that "(He) has never seen anyone die for the ontological argument,"<sup>26</sup> Camus is interested not in suicide as a social phenomenon, but the relationship of suicide to thought. Metaphorically, Camus states that he is interested in suicide when "the worm is in man's heart"-- when man is beginning to think, to be "undermined."

Next, Camus argues that in getting at the problem, it does no good for one to say that Mr. X committed suicide because life was too much for him. If we are to understand we must go beyond this kind of simplistic, obvious response to a deeper level and ask why. When Camus reaches this step, his discussion turns on the concept of habit. Habit, Camus argues, is that circumstance wherein we continue day in and day out to make the same futile gestures "demanded by our existence." But, what gives rise to these futile gestures is man's relationship with the world. By this Camus means the unresponsiveness of the world to man's demands. As Camus puts it:

. . .the ridiculous character of habit, the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation and the uselessness of suffering.<sup>27</sup>

In these few phrases Camus is stating more than meets the eye. For instance, "the uselessness of suffering" evokes images of Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamazov. It will be remembered that Ivan, in search of God, refuses to accept the suffering in the world of children. In his discussion with his brother, Alyosha, Ivan says he is willing to accept the suffering of adults, for very likely they have sinned and must be punished. But, what about children, he asks Alyosha. What have they done to deserve the terrible suffering, Ivan recounts to Alyosha. At the end, Ivan sums it up by telling Alyosha he must return his admission ticket.

What this example does then for Camus' purposes is to show an example of the absurdity that exists in the world for the man who logically tries in his heart to reconcile the image of a loving God with the image of a God who allows children to suffer.

At this point, Camus is ready to expand on what then leads to the absurd. For one thing to make the absurd have any meaning at all, it must depend as much on the universe as on man himself. To reach this point, Camus discusses the part science plays in constructing the absurd. He argues that science begins by telling us that the universe is subject to general laws. Beyond this, science tells us that matter is composed of atoms, and beyond this, electrons that are part of invisible systems. Finally, according to Camus, what started out as hard evidence has now been reduced to poetry. As Camus puts it, "So that science that was to teach me everything ends up in an hypothesis, that lucidity founders in

metaphor, that uncertainty is resolved in a work of art."<sup>28</sup> To what science can teach man, Camus retorts, "The soft lines of these hills and hand of evening on this troubled heart teach me much more."<sup>29</sup> And, he further argues, ". . .you give me the choice between a description that is sure but teaches me nothing and hypotheses that claim to teach me but that are not sure."<sup>30</sup> Finally, Camus asserts that he has become "a stranger to (himself) and to the world. . ."<sup>31</sup> He lives in a world that is not absurd, but in itself is not reasonable. However, what is absurd is, ". . .the confrontation of this irrational and wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart."<sup>32</sup> This kind of reason is what leads Camus to say, "the absurd depends as much on man as on the world."<sup>33</sup> And lastly, Camus' ultimate comment concerning the absurd and the world, ". . .the absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world."<sup>34</sup> To understand this statement is to understand Camus' analysis of the absurd-- completely.

From here Camus goes on to discuss "philosophical suicide." In essence, "philosophical suicide" amounts to accepting the Absurd to the point of rationally preventing one from being able to act. But, more than that. In preventing one from acting because of the recognition of the Absurd nature of each rational action, it forces the individual to reach outside of the real world. But, in that act of reaching outside the world, one is reaching for a meaning of life and a solution to the Absurd that does not exist. For, as Camus argues, the Absurd only has meaning for an individual in that relationship he has with the real world. And, reaching outside is really reaching for a meaning not in this world, like Kierkegaard, who reached for God. Hence, says Camus, "What can a

meaning outside my condition mean to me? I can understand only in human terms."<sup>35</sup> Or, as Camus expresses it another way, "the absurd is sin without God."<sup>36</sup> Perhaps a man's reach should not exceed his grasp. In some cases poetry is misleading.

Thus, Camus argues it is not the reaching beyond, but rather the striving to that is important. Because by striving to keep the Absurd alive, one can accept the choice of living all the more. The proverb, "Live for today, for tomorrow you may die," is not a careless piece of advice. Hence, it is not the length of life that is important, rather it is the amount of experience one can derive from life. As Camus writes, "There will never be any substitute for twenty years of life or experience."<sup>37</sup> Or, as Michael McGrath has argued, Camus, in putting his argument in the form of an absurdist wager really, is implying a moral to this position. As McGrath puts it, "Seek not ultimate justification for existence; seek only the experience of particular forms of existence."<sup>38</sup>

What Camus finally concludes, then, is one is able to live the most because one has come to the realization that in the long run, and even in the short run, there is no ultimate meaning. There is only meaning in what man can bring to his own life. As Camus wrote in the second and fourth letters of a series that are entitled Letters to a German Friend:

If nothing had any meaning, you would be right. But there is something that still has meaning. . .and that is man, because he is the only creature to insist on having one.<sup>39</sup>

Therefore, as far as suicide is concerned, it is a repudiation of the Absurd in that with the act of suicide one destroys not only life, but the Absurd. And, to destroy the Absurd amounts to destroying the value for living. For the value for living resides in the ability to

recognize the existence of the Absurd and, yes, to live in spite of the Absurd, ever cognizant of the fact that this individual experience that gives life meaning is not the hungering for the ultimate meaning of life in general. Hence, to paraphrase Camus, what is called a reason for dying may also be an excellent reason for living. Who says a circle can't be squared?

Put, then, in its simplest form, the argument is this: Knowing that there is no meaning to life and living in spite of it for each precious experience is revolt in defiance of the Absurd. Having the courage to live in spite of the Absurd is a personal act of denying suicide and affirming life. Also, continual awareness of the Absurd is necessary because it endows revolt with all the meaning it is capable of. And, only in revolt can we sustain the continual awareness of the Absurd that gives life meaning. Thus, to hear someone say, "At least I know I am alive" and to understand what he means with all the intensity and passion we can muster is to understand revolt and the Absurd and their relationship to life-- absolutely. Not all idle chatter is useless.

But, what kind of talk about revolt and the Absurd has any meaning if it is not grounded in the context of freedom? Camus recognizes as much and so launches into a discussion of absurd freedom. Telling us that ". . .if the Absurd cancels all my chances of eternal freedom, . . . it restores and magnifies . . .my freedom of action."<sup>40</sup> At this point, Camus' phrase, ". . .what counts is not the best living but the most living," should be written with a special fury that only understanding is privileged to. And, once it is written and understood in that special way, one can then go on, changed, with never the need to look back. For



the key words "the most living" illuminate Camus' position toward man and the meaning of the Absurd as no others can.

But, just as these key words set the tone, they also create a false impression that must be dealt with. Because in these words one is also able to see another phrase that lays at the foundation of Camus' work, The Rebel. That phrase is "all is permitted." Hence, "the most living," as a code of ethics for private action is as meaningful as "all is permitted" is, as a code of ethics for public action. But, as one can see, some notion of limits is needed in both cases. However, in The Myth Camus supplies no limits. As he states, "the point is to live." Quite obviously by this Camus means that the point is to experience, i.e., quantity over quality. Really for the absurd man the two terms are synonymous.

Hence, in Camus' own words, what this discussion has led to is this: "I (have) transform(ed) into a rule of life what was an invitation to death. . ."41 And, he adds, ". . .and I refuse suicide." Camus has surely done that, but not without encountering some major problems, such as the one I mentioned, i.e., the one of limits. However, should we be chagrined over this? For one to travel as far as Camus did to refute the nihilistic attitudes that prevailed in Western Europe between the two wars is certainly worth something. As he wrote in the preface to The Myth some thirteen years after its original publication:

Written fifteen years ago, in 1940, amid the French and European disaster, this book declares that even within the limits of nihilism it is possible to find the means to proceed beyond nihilism.<sup>42</sup>

Still though, Camus does recognize the shortcomings of the book and, perhaps, of himself at the time of its origin. Thus, he states, "After

fifteen years I have progressed beyond several of the positions which are set down here. . ."43 However, he does not want to leave the reader with the impression that he has abandoned entirely what he wrote for he adds, "I have remained faithful. . .to the exigency which prompted them (the positions)."44

In sum, then, we can laud what he has done, but we can also ask what about those limits? The Rebel, then, is our next point of departure. Camus has overcome suicide, given us reasons for valuing life, and has presented us with a principle for personal or, more specifically, private action, private conduct. But, he states, and I must state again, ". . . the point is to live." Thus, how does one "live the most" without infringing upon the rights of others? In short, where does "live the most" end and murder begin? That is the question The Rebel answers-- one, we can add, of limits, moral limits.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Barbara Tuchman, The Guns of August (New York: Macmillan Co., 1962), p. 122.

<sup>2</sup>See any literature of the twentieth century. Writers from Thomas Mann up to the present, including Ionesco, Sartre, Beckett, have made us all too painfully aware of the times in which we live.

<sup>3</sup>A good book to look at that discusses the impact of Freud and Nietzsche, among many other social and political thinkers, on twentieth century European man is H. Stuart Hughes, Consciousness and Society: European Thought 1890-1930 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961), see esp. pp. 125-153.

<sup>4</sup>Though I have stated it as a "premise," one could almost call it an epitaph as well. The phrase "If God does not exist, then all is permitted" might very well grace the tombstone of totalitarianism in all the forms it has taken in the twentieth century, as a reminder to future generations of what history in the end will not tolerate. Hence, it is an epitaph, a premise, and even a deathknell.

<sup>5</sup>T. S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men," in Selected Poems (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1964), stanzas 1, 5, lines 1, 2, 13, 14, 97, 98.

<sup>6</sup>Roland Stromber, An Intellectual History of Modern Europe (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), p. 401.

<sup>7</sup>William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming," in Selected Poems and Two Plays of William Butler Yeats, ed. M. L. Rosenthal (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1962), stanza 1, lines 3, 4, 7, 8.

<sup>8</sup>Albert Camus, Lyrical and Critical Essays, ed. Philip Thody, trans. Ellen C. Kennedy (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), pp. 6-7.

<sup>9</sup>Charles Rolo, "Albert Camus: A Good Man," Atlantic, May, 1958, p. 27.

<sup>10</sup>Camus, p. 196.

<sup>11</sup>Albert Camus, The Rebel, with a Foreword by Sir Herbert Read, trans. Anthony Bonner (New York: Vintage Books, 1954), p. 297.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 230.

<sup>14</sup>Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, Trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), p. 16. Hereinafter, cited as The Myth.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. v.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., backcover.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>38</sup>Michael J. McGrath, "Camus' Rebel and Malamud's Yakov Bok: God's Been Up So Long He Looks Like Down To Them," prepared for The Foundation of Political Theory Group, Chicago, 1974, unpublished, p. 5.

<sup>39</sup>Albert Camus, Resistance, Rebellion, and Death, with Introduction and trans. by Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), pp. 14, 28.

<sup>40</sup>The Myth, p. 42.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. v.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., pp. v, vi.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. vi.

## CHAPTER II

### The Absurd and Rebellion

With the publication of The Rebel, Camus took it upon himself to correct modern man's rush to oblivion and one step further, to destruction. For, in The Rebel Camus argues, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly, that ever since the French Revolution, European man has been working at one task. That task has been to relieve human inequality and suffering. We might say that even before the French Revolution men have been at work at this task. But, for Camus' purposes, his discussion of historical rebellion starts with the execution of Louis XVI.

However, though man has been working at this task, he has done it at the cost of human bloodshed. In a sense, man has employed abstractions, ideals, and all the rest of his virtuous rhetoric to justify his actions. This Camus finds deplorable. Hence, the point of The Rebel is to say to us that we should recognize abstractions for what they are-- terrible alibis for spilling human blood. Rather, what we should do is dedicate ourselves to preserving the dignity of mankind, not at the cost of achieving our ideals, but within the limits of preserving human life.

What this calls for, then, is a principle upon which we can build a code of conduct if we are to realize on earth this goal. Hence, in this light Camus examines the absurd in search of this principle. In doing so, it is his intention to discover in the absurd a plausible response to the rule upon which the absurd depends. Because "the most living", indeed, seems to argue that murder is permitted. But, if this is the case, then the absurd offers us no principle that would not conflict with preserving the dignity of human life. With this in mind, let us turn to Camus'

discussion of the absurd, as he presents it in The Rebel.

### The Absurd as an Answer

Camus, in the first part of The Rebel, lays the groundwork for answering the question we posed in the preceding section, that of moral limits to "the most living." For, as we have seen, the phrase "the most living" implies "all is permitted." Camus says the same thing when he writes, "Awareness of the absurd, when we first claim to deduce a rule of behavior from it, makes murder seem a matter of indifference. . ."<sup>1</sup> And, he goes on to say, bearing more to the point, "If we believe in nothing, if nothing has any meaning and if we affirm no values whatsoever, then everything is possible and nothing has any importance."<sup>2</sup> Thus, Camus concludes, "Evil and virtue are mere chance or caprice."<sup>3</sup> And, furthermore, in light of absurdist reasoning, ". . .we must prepare ourselves to commit murder. . ."<sup>4</sup> But, here Camus sees a contradiction in absurdist reasoning. For, as he argues, on the one hand, absurdist reasoning logically followed to its end allows, or does not refute, the phrase "all is permitted." But, looked at in a different way, it logically cannot avoid refuting this phrase. And, according to Camus, this is why.

First, absurdist reasoning depends on awareness of the "encounter between human enquiry and the silence of the universe."<sup>5</sup> That conclusion is basic. And, as Camus argued in The Myth, ultimately this leads to refutation of the act of suicide. However, in recognizing the importance of the encounter it is also important to recognize the value of life, for, indeed, it is life that keeps the encounter alive, so to speak. Thus, Camus argues that in the end, if life is recognized as the key component in keeping the absurd alive, then it follows that life is the essential

good for one man and, hence, for all men. Therefore, in committing murder, we kill the absurd for the other man, just as in committing suicide we kill the absurd for the one man. Thus, the contradiction of absurdist reasoning lies in the fact that "all is permitted," while at the same time absurdist reasoning refutes not only suicide, but murder as well. Or, as Camus puts it, "Absurdist reasoning cannot defend the continued existence of its spokesman and, simultaneously, accept the sacrifice of others' lives."<sup>6</sup> Which really leads one to the following solution to the contradiction, viz., all is permitted, so long as the absurd is allowed to live. Or, said differently, anything that destroys awareness of the absurd encounter is not permitted.

It seems, though, that Camus is not willing to take this step. He would rather, for the moment at least, dwell on the contradiction. The land between Scylla and Charybdis is Camus' domain. And, the logic of absurdist reasoning makes of him a prisoner of this land just as surely and as completely as the verdict of the Gods made of Sisyphus a prisoner of his rock. In the mind there is no difference between logic and verdicts. Both are compelling and no less rigid in their application. In the end, we must imagine Camus as happy as Sisyphus.

However, according to Camus, logic is not the only problem the absurd man faces. Complacency is another. "Living in front of a mirror (i.e., keeping the absurd alive) . . . runs the risk of turning the initial anguish. . . to comfort."<sup>7</sup> What this really points to is the psychological problem of concentration, but also more than that. Continual awareness of anguish cannot be sustained. Inevitably, pain becomes pleasure or, more correctly, it leads to a terrible ennui. Only in diversity can



the absurd be sustained. But, in the concept of the absurd, there is no room for diversity. It demands continual awareness, perhaps one might argue of diverse examples of the absurd, but that is not the same meaning of diversity we are after if we want to be able to sustain the absurd. Put simply, the only diversity that is humanly possible and could sustain the absurd is a mixture of conscious and unconscious moments strung together over a life time-- almost, if you will, the unity of self being realized in the manifold of creation. But, the logic of absurdist reasoning denies that this is possible, if the absurd is adhered to with all the logic it is capable of, or all the faith the absurd man can muster.

But, in saying this, we have pointed to another contradiction in absurdist reasoning, according to Camus. And that is, on the one hand, absurdity cannot be supported by human diversity. But, on the other, humanly speaking, only in diversity can we keep the absurd alive. And, of course, it makes no sense to attack this contradiction by arguing that we can remove the human element and all would be fine. Because, what does absurdity mean without human beings? That surely is both a nonsense question and one filled with understanding of what the absurd involves.

In truth, Camus has led us to the point wherein only one judgment about the absurd is correct. It demands all or nothing. There is no middle ground. Partially absurd men do not exist. Hence, again the faithful, absurd man is left with no choice, or more precisely, no rule of life gained from absurdist reasoning on which to judge the key question: Is murder legitimate or not? According to Camus, "(We are) swept along. . . intoxicated by nihilism. . .yet lost in loneliness, with weapons in our

hands and a lump in our throats."<sup>8</sup>

After all these arguments, one is led to believe that the worth of the absurd is zero. But then, like Phoenix risen from the ashes, Camus finds a new dimension in the absurd that outweighs all its negatives. This dimension is rebellion, or more precisely, protest. But, where does protest come from? According to Camus, its parent is methodical doubt. And, with this concept, he builds his argument.

First, he asserts that he believes in nothing and that he believes in the absurd. At this point, before we go on, we should make it exactly clear what Camus is asserting. He is not saying that he is a nihilist. Also, it is not a contradiction on his part when he asserts in the first clause that he believes in nothing, but tells us in the second clause that he believes in the absurd. We cannot retort, "Hey, wait a minute. I thought you just said that you 'believe in nothing.' Now you are telling me that you 'believe in the absurd.' Listen, you cannot tell me you 'believe in nothing' and then tell me you 'believe in the absurd.'"

Camus would answer us, I believe, by saying, "When I say that I 'believe in nothing,' what I really mean is that I believe that the universe offers no overarching meaning, that everything is futile, that there is no plan. That's what I mean by the word 'nothing.' And, if you will bear with me, when I say that 'I believe in the absurd,' essentially, I am saying that my definition of 'nothing' is really 'the absurd.' So, in essence, what I am really saying is that I believe in the absurd."

To which we answer, "Okay, you believe in the absurd. What then?"

Camus would then say, "What evidence, then, could one offer to prove to a skeptical person that one truly believes in the absurd?"

We answer, "You tell us."

Camus would then say, "According to my account in The Myth of Sisyphus life gains value through the fact that one lives in spite of the absurd. This really says that our living constitutes a protest against the absurd. Because we have said to ourselves (he turns away from us as if addressing some imaginary person), 'Listen, universe, you give me no reason for living. You do not answer my need for clarity and unity. But I don't care. I am going to go you one better. I am going to live in spite of that. Therefore, universe, you can rightly consider my living anyhow as a protest against your lack of unity and clarity-- against, if you will, the absurd.' (He turns back to us.) Hence, the evidence I offer to you to prove that I truly believe in the absurd is my very act of living. Thus, I tell you, living not only keeps the absurd alive, it is also necessary in order to keep protest alive. A dead body cannot protest. A dead body might be used to display protest. I could hold a child's body in my arms, killed as a result of war, and say, 'Look, war is hell.' And, in that sense, a dead body protests. But, in the context of the absurd, a dead body cannot protest against the absurd. If you will allow me, living is our protest. Thus, I ask you this final question: Can one doubt that one is living? If you answer 'no,' then I say to you I cannot doubt that I am protesting against the absurd. This follows because you have agreed that one cannot doubt one is living, and, secondly, living is protesting against the absurd, as I have used that term in my argument in The Myth of Sisyphus."

Hence, we can see how Camus arrives at the concept of rebellion, of protest by examining the absurd itself. And, thus, with the birth of

this new concept we are able to go beyond the absurd. Thus, Camus writes that we must examine rebellion ". . .in order to learn how to act,"<sup>9</sup> since, as Camus has shown, the contradictions in the absurd show clearly that the absurd is not the place to look for a principle upon which we could base a code of conduct. Again, the absurd is beneficial, but only insofar as it gives birth to rebellion. It has reached its limits, but we must go on.

In light of Camus' discussion so far, we can say that even though he has not answered the question of murder, except for saying that murder destroys the absurd encounter, at least he has pointed a way to which we might look. As he writes, "Perhaps we may discover in its (rebellion's) achievements the rule of action that the absurd has not been able to give us. . .," which is, "an indication. . .about the right or the duty to kill and. . .hope for a new creation."<sup>10</sup> But, where will we look for rebellion's achievements? To this Camus answers, "The astonishing history. . .the history of European pride."<sup>11</sup> In short, the history of Europe in the last two hundred years or so.

Just one more word before we begin Camus' discussion of the "history of European pride." Up to now, we have spent our time with Camus' philosophical thought and rightly so. Basics are needed before any building can take place. But now with the introduction of history, Camus lets us know that the rest of his discussion will be more factual than philosophical. Though we must not forget that Camus, in launching into this discussion, is still looking for a principle upon which to base a code of conduct. And, though that may be philosophical in nature, we are at least ready to touch the surface of Camus' political comments. Because

most of the history Camus covers in The Rebel is the history of politics. Hence, a rule of behavior adduced from analyzing rebellion's role in the arena of politics can perhaps be labelled a political principle. Suffice it to say, our discussion of Camus from now on will center on what he has to say when philosophy is writ large. More simply put, when thought turns to action. Let us now turn to Camus' discussion of this "astounding history," hoping to find in it the principle of how we ought to act and, thus, the limits to "all is permitted."

### The Slave Rebel

For Camus the man in revolt has reached a point wherein he recognizes limits. Basically, he has said to himself that he accepts everything up to a point, but beyond that point "no." This implies, according to Camus, both an area man does accept and one he does not. Hence, Camus argues that the area man does accept is the one he recognizes as right, while the one he rebels against he recognizes as wrong. But, of course, there is more to man in revolt than simple recognition. The man in revolt has further established, through the act of revolt, the value of himself. Up to this point, his silence has been understood as a tacit acceptance of everything that has happened to him. But, once he talks, once he acts, once he revolts, he asserts himself. But, not only does he assert himself, in a sense, he asserts all men. For Camus argues that the value for which one man revolts is seen by that one man as a value for all men. This leads Camus to assert that, as opposed to those who argue that values come after action,<sup>12</sup> the man who revolts bases his revolt on values that existed prior to his action of revolt. As Camus states, "Why rebel if there is nothing permanent in oneself worth

preserving?"<sup>13</sup> Camus asserts there are two arguments that support this observation, even though the worth does not have to be in oneself for it might be worth one sees in others. But, of course, the result is the same, viz., awareness of community.

First, though we might be inclined to say that rebellion is egoistic, that is not always the case, though in some cases it might be. However, the way it is not is that man in revolt asserts himself, which is egoistic, but only to that point, or from that point, wherein he feels community with other men. And, that is not egoistic revolt, but community revolt.<sup>14</sup> The Greeks had a word for it. They called it "agape." Which only goes to show the truth of the French saying, "Plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose."<sup>15</sup>

Next, with respect to worth in others, Camus argues that those who revolt because of injustice done to others do so, not because of shared interests in a narrow sense, but because of shared interests in a broad, humanitarian sense. Camus' comment, "Injustice done to men whom we consider enemies can. . . be profoundly repugnant to us," states this point precisely.<sup>16</sup> Hence, at its base either singular revolt or group revolt is an act of preserving a worth in oneself or in others that culminates in an all-encompassing worth Camus calls community. The one means as much to the many as the many means to the one. Human solidarity is not divisible. Camus' comment, "I rebel-- therefore we exist," sums it up completely.

One last word before going on. In the last section we posed the question of limits to "all is permitted" by asking what are these limits. In this section Camus has very explicitly said there are limits, but he

has refrained from an explicit description of what they are. So, in a sense, he has laid the groundwork for answering this question by telling us that, at least, they exist. And, while this is somewhat satisfactory, it does not quite fulfill our needs. Let us move on, then, to Camus' discussion of metaphysical rebellion. For, it is in this section that Camus gives us real substance as to the consequences of revolt. But, even more, as to what revolt really implies beyond mere awareness and a simple "no."

### The Metaphysical Rebel

"Metaphysical rebellion," writes Camus, "is the movement by which man protests against his condition and against the whole of creation."<sup>17</sup> This is not a mere "no," but a "no" said or written with a vengeance that only a Prometheus, or a Sade, or a Nietzsche, to use Camus' examples, is capable of. In all its power and meaning it is a protest of the strongest kind. Nietzsche's statement that he put in the mouth of a madman, when he had him say, "God is dead," shows this clearly. Though, of course, we must recognize one important thing about this statement, the man who said it, and the man who wrote it. As Camus writes, "Nietzsche did not form a project to kill God. He found Him dead in the soul of his contemporaries."<sup>18</sup> This is profoundly different than an atheist making the same statement. Specifically, it is the difference between a man who has the courage to speak the truth, as he sees it, and the man who doesn't believe at all that something existed, so how could it be dead? This may sound like the same thing, but courage makes all the difference in the world.

And, indeed, to continue, what I have just said about the atheist's

mentality is not to be understood as an example of Camus' rebel. For, Camus makes it clear that for the rebel, denial of God's existence is not what the rebel asserts. Prometheus did not deny the existence of the gods, nor did Epicurus or Lucretius, nor did Nietzsche for that matter. Rather, what each of these individuals did was to rebel against the power of their god. They did not want to destroy their god. They wanted to conquer him. Hence, with this step, the metaphysical rebel goes far beyond the slave rebel. The slave rebel only wants to conquer his master--another human being. But, the metaphysical rebel wants to conquer God so as to replace Him with himself. There is no compromise with the metaphysical rebel. He wants All, and will not settle for Nothing.

But, what does the metaphysical rebel inherit with this act of conquest? This is the terrible truth that he must live with or be destroyed by it. What he inherits, what he takes into his own hands is the responsibility for his own actions. God is no longer the excuse for the metaphysical rebel to fall back on to explain what happens in the world. With God deposed the suffering in the world hangs on the metaphysical rebel's conscience. Carried to its ultimate end, all men become guilty for the world's ills. And, with this inheritance of responsibility also comes freedom, total imposing freedom, but freedom with a burden. Hence, we must ask ourselves what this really means.

Total freedom implies no restrictions, no limits. Hence, the word "total" freedom can have no meaning. Because freedom only makes sense if we can do some things, while others are off limits, so to speak. This causes Camus to say that, at this point, "freedom becomes a voluntary prison."<sup>19</sup> This argument, then, shows that man cannot handle, or know,



total freedom. But, even more, he refuses total freedom. As opposed to the metaphysical rebel, the common man prefers, in fact begs for, servility and the futile hope of the heavenly hereafter.

However, maybe there is a moral in all this discussion about the metaphysical rebel. Whereas Ivan Karamazov allowed his father's death and his own life to end in madness, as did Nietzsche's, the man who does not revolt lives his life in quiet solitude with dreams of hope fogging his brain. Thus, the question this raises is: Which is better, to see the truth and follow it to madness, or to live with one's hopes and die peacefully, but deluded? So far, Camus has presented us no alternative to this all-or-nothing dilemma. Rather, what he has presented is the problem of nihilism, which he says Nietzsche practiced, not through "methodical doubt," but through "methodical negation." And, we do see where this led, not only Nietzsche, but also those who practiced or tried to implement, with their own particular twists and turns, some of Nietzsche's concepts-- their accent on breeding a pure race (a Superman perhaps?)-- viz., the Nazis. Though this is certainly too complex an association to sketch in detail in this paper. Sometimes logical conclusions on paper are only coincidental conclusions in history. It is too easy to make associations where, in fact, no basis exists. This certainly may be one of those times.

In any case, what conclusions can we draw from Camus' discussion of those who practiced metaphysical revolt? First, as Camus presents it, metaphysical revolt and its logical conclusion nihilism presents us with no code of conduct that is not self-destructive. As Camus writes, "Those who rejected for the sake of the world they had just created, all other

principles but desire and power, have rushed to suicide or madness and have proclaimed the apocalypse."<sup>20</sup> While, the rest, he adds, ". . .who wanted to create their own principles. . .have chosen pomp and ceremony, the world of appearances, or banality, or again murder and destruction."<sup>21</sup>

Also, with the metaphysical rebel's revolt against evil comes his demand for clarity, for unity, for principles that would justify human suffering. But, of course, he will never find these principles. For, it is suffering that he revolts against in the first place. Simply said, he would never accept, as valid, principles which justify suffering and evil. As Camus states, "Even if God existed, Ivan (Karamazov) would never surrender to Him in the face of the injustice done to man."<sup>22</sup> Hence, the rebel, by his cast of mind, has placed himself in an intractable position. All at the same time, he hates God for allowing the suffering he cannot accept, but has not the ability to accept the responsibility for the suffering in the world, if he accepts the position that God does not exist and he is now God. Camus writes of this position, "Hatred of the creator can turn to hatred of creation or to exclusive and defiant love of what exists. But in both cases it ends in murder and loses the right to be called rebellion."<sup>23</sup>

Another indication of the metaphysical rebel's condition, this time vis-a-vis the slave rebel, is the consequences of his thought. The slave rebel only wants to conquer his own existence-- slavery-- and maintain it in the face of his master, another human being. The metaphysical rebel is another case entirely. Beyond conquering his existence, he wants to "(drive) God from His heaven."<sup>24</sup> But, in so doing, he adopts reason as a weapon, which does not fit with his irrational claim for freedom.

Finally, with God dead, though, all that is left is mankind. In the end what has happened is that the force of nihilism, which has "smothered the force of creation"<sup>25</sup> stands ready in the hands of the metaphysical rebel to justify every act that nihilism is capable of. Thus, argues Camus, what, up to now, was thought reflecting on itself now becomes the product of thought, viz., historical rebellion-- the offspring of the metaphysical rebel's revolt carried into the world. It is this to which we now turn.

#### The Historical Rebel

"We do not want to condemn the King, we want to kill him."<sup>26</sup> That surely is the statement of the nihilist-- the metaphysical rebel-- introduced into history. Finally, argues Camus, with the execution of Louis XVI, if not God, then surely God's surrogate is put to death. And, what better way for the frustrated nihilist, who cannot kill God, only condemn Him, to carry out his fantasies, but to kill God's representative on earth-- viz., the King who believes in his own divinity and his own ultimate infallibility as God's earthly oracle. But, if we, for a moment, think this is a precipitous act with no plan, then we are badly mistaken. Behind every upheaval in history lies a theoretical foundation. Which only goes to show that whatever man does he can always find reasons for justifying his actions. In light of this, who would ever argue that reason has only been the handmaiden of good will? Two thousand years of history, bolstered by the logic of the guillotine and gas ovens prove this wrong. Both the saint and the executioner have their reasons.

It is though with Rousseau and his Social Contract that the seeds of the King's death are sown. When the King's divinity is questioned, especially in the face of human suffering and regal apathy, his hold on

his throne becomes tenuous, to say the least. And, what better way to question the King's divinity, if not by introducing a new divinity-- the divinity of reason, earthly bound to man. Writes Camus, "A new God is born."<sup>27</sup> What this says, then, of God's role in man's destiny is clear. Quite precisely, it does not exist. With the King dead, God's link with man is removed. This, then, is rebellion in the strongest sense. The phrase "out of sight, out of mind" is more than a cliché. What Rousseau made clear history ever since has only re-emphasized. Divine grace and earthly justice cannot live together. As Camus puts it, "From the moment they conflict, they fight to the death."<sup>28</sup>

Thus, with the death of the King and divine grace, a vacuum is created, but only for an instant. Into this vacuum rushes, as we have seen, the divinity of reason that consecrates the new pact that men have made among themselves-- the social contract. Instantly, we can see that faith is the issue. And, of course, the difference between faith and reason is negligible for we are still talking about religion. It's just that our reference points have changed. So really what the issue is now is a new faith. But, that was what it was all along. To paraphrase what Nietzsche once wrote, men will believe in nothing, rather than not believe at all.

Hence, when this new faith manifests itself, it "becomes dogmatic." As a result, "(It) erects its own altars and demands unconditional adoration."<sup>29</sup> But this cannot last. Its birth must be celebrated. Thus, writes Camus, "(The) scaffolds reappear. . .and the feasts of Reason" give way to the Masses, who celebrate with blood. Finally, at this point, the logic of the guillotine is complete. And, we are left mumbling the

words the Marquis de Sade wrote, "Virtue and vice are indistinguishable in the tomb,"<sup>30</sup> as we watch Louis XVI's head roll into the wicker basket. Fittingly, Camus writes, "The murder of the King-priest. . .sanctions the new age. . .which endures to this day."<sup>31</sup>

But, Louis XVI was not the only one to ascend the scaffold only once. The Reign of Terror that followed in Louis' footsteps went, as does the human heart, according to Camus, "from nature to violence, from violence to morality." Thus, what starts out as a blood bath turns, in the end, after disgust, to a "Republic of law and order." What started out as consecration of reason ends up as the desecration of man in the name of reason. Hence, we really have to ask ourselves how far, basically, we have come. Sure, we killed a King, who was apathetic to human suffering. But, in turn, our history ever since has been filled with killing and misery, not because of apathetic kings, but because of the way we have used reason to justify our acts. In the end all we have done is replace one God with another, and both have witnessed the same results. Which is more justifiable: To allow misery in the name of God, or to justify killing in the name of reason? As I stated before, the issue is still one of religion. And, the principle that would guide us and that we have looked for still evades us.

If Rousseau showed how reason could be used to change history, then surely Hegel displayed the place of reason in history as, in fact, a motive force of history. Any man who could write "the real is rational," as Napoleon's armies bombarded the city in which he was teaching, has made the ultimate commitment in enthroning reason in the heavenly firmament brought to earth. Hence, it is with Hegel, argues Camus, that a

philosophy of the world based upon the idea that the world and history are but the manifestation of Reason unfolding in these two realms finally comes into being. Never before had events of history become so natural, so accepted as when Hegel deified Reason. As Roland Stromberg writes, quoting Hegel on the role of Reason in history, "The historical process is the 'march of God through the world.'"<sup>32</sup> Hegel's world view, thus, becomes a religion, but more than that. It becomes a religion of optimism, wherein every man could believe that whatever happened and whatever he did could be justified.

However, pushed to its ultimate end Hegel's philosophy implied the concept of determinism. Also, because of the highly abstract nature of Hegel's philosophy, it seemed to overlook the human aspect. It treated men as mere automatons, acting and reacting to the Spirit behind the world and history. This eventually got Hegel into deep water with, for example, an obscure (in the nineteenth century, at least) Danish theologian-philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard.

Kierkegaard attacked Hegel's system (and it was a system) for being too much beyond the ken of human experience, for being too rarefied. Kierkegaard said that one could not stand back and judge history like Hegel had done, because one was a part of history. For, in truth, that is what Hegel had done. He had wrung human history dry of humanity. All that was left, and for that matter, all that Hegel cared about, was history-- glowing, shining, sterile-- an admixture of dry, lifeless principles that dictated the future. And, what was more, was that it was so accurate in its prediction that whatever was, Hegel argued, had to be-- just couldn't be otherwise. For, if the world was rational, how could

one for a minute think of something irrational happening? Out of the question, to say the least. For easily an Hegelian could counter if something happened, it was supposed to. Thus, we are left with the statement "the irrational is rational." And, that sounds too much like Orwellian language for us to take seriously. In a sense, 1984 has always been with us.

But, to carry this Hegelian mentality a step further. There is a curious relationship between rebellion against God and rebellion against Hegel's thought. Whereas we saw that the metaphysical rebel could not accept the suffering on the earth of his fellow beings when he began to question God's role in human destiny, so, too, rebellion results against Hegel's system. Which may only go to show that man cannot live with Gods, whatever their nature, wherever they reside. But again, I must stress the point that man must believe in something, even if that something is nothing. For, as we have seen, even when God's representative, the King, is killed another "king" must take his place. There are no vacuums in history. That is an essential lesson that every day is re-emphasized.

To sharpen this point even more, let us look at the reaction to Hegel that Camus presents. For, it is in this reaction that Camus shows us the true value of rebellion and, more specifically, the true value of the rebel.

## II

In the early 1900s (1905) in Russia there lived a group of individuals Camus refers to as the "fastidious assassins." They owed much of their thought, though, to another individual, who lived during the 1830s and 1840s, by the name of Bielinsky. According to Camus, Bielinsky at

first accepted the Hegelian view. He was intrigued by the ability of the Hegelian system to explain the world with its accent on order and rationality-- in short, the tightness of the logic. But, as he studied it more, he began to see the implications of it. Bielinsky sees, according to Camus, that if everything is logical, then everything is justified. This meant to Bielinsky that to accept the world was to accept the misery in it. This Bielinsky could do for himself. But, what gnawed at him and finally proved to be his act of rebellion against Hegel's system was that it allowed suffering for others. (How closely Bielinsky is to that famous Russian character out of fiction, Ivan Karamazov.) This Bielinsky could not accept. Hence, he rebelled against the reasonableness of the world in toto because he could not accept it in toto. As we have seen before, it is All or Nothing for the rebel. There is no ground for compromise. (No moderation in their stance toward what the world presents to them and what they feel in their heart-- the key word with Camus, we will find.) In the end, Bielinsky writes in his protest contra Hegel:

With all the esteem due to your philistine philosophy, I have the honor to inform you that even if I had the opportunity of climbing to the very top of the ladder of evolution, I should still ask you to account for all the victims of life and history.<sup>33</sup>

And he adds, with all the determination and fury his protest is capable of, "I do not want happiness, even gratuitous happiness, if my mind is not at rest concerning all my blood brothers."<sup>34</sup> (One can be assured that this "straw in the wind" protest really bothered the autocratic German philosopher!) Says Camus, in describing the mental state of Bielinsky, "These are the conclusions of individualism in revolt. The



individual cannot accept history as it is."<sup>35</sup> Thus, Camus adds, "He must destroy reality, not collaborate with it, in order to affirm his own existence."<sup>36</sup> At this point, Rousseau's remark, "Nothing on this earth is worth buying at the price of human blood,"<sup>37</sup> should be inscribed on Bielinsky's grave stone, when he dies in 1848, for all future terrorists to read. But, if that inscription deserves a place, so does the inscription implied by what Camus has said, viz., "all is permitted." However, if that is the case, this is surely a contradiction. But, of course, as we have seen, the rebel's life is one long contradiction filled with the tension between his hatred of human misery and his conviction to eradicate it, while at the same time he holds an utter love for the sanctity of human life. Hence, it is this tension and this contradiction that sums up the life of the rebel completely. This is why, as we have seen, one of the results of the rebel's life has been madness. Therefore, only the man who can understand the statement "Let me kill in order to obtain God's kingdom on earth", in all its meaning, can really understand the mind of the rebel. And, furthermore, only he can understand the madness the rebel suffers.

Roll on, thou deep and dark blue ocean-- roll!  
 Ten thousand fleets sweep over thee in vain;  
 Man marks the earth with ruin-- his control  
 Stops with the shore; -- upon the watery plain  
 The wrecks are all thy deed, nor doth remain  
 A shadow of man's revenge, save his own,  
 When, for a moment, like a drop of rain,  
 He sinks into thy depths with bubbling groan--  
 Without a grave-- unknelled, uncoffined, and unknown.<sup>38</sup>

Only in Romantic poetry is there approximate thought. Man is not "unknelled, uncoffined, and unknown" for light reasons. As Nietzsche says in a moment of supreme fury, "O, God, grant me madness!. . .that I. . .

may believe in myself! . . . Prove to me . . . that I am one of you-- nothing but madness will prove it to me."<sup>39</sup> The Gods, kind as they are, obliged. Thus proving what Longfellow wrote, "Whom the Gods would destroy they first make mad."<sup>40</sup>

### III

Those who die for justice, throughout history have always been called "brothers." Violence, for every one of them is directed against the enemy, in the service of the community of the oppressed. But if the revolution is the only positive value, it has a right to claim everything. . .<sup>41</sup>

With this Camus sets the stage for the appearance of his "fastidious assassins." But, he also adds, in an attempt to show the state of minds of these individuals, ". . . violence will be directed against one and all, in the service of an abstract idea."<sup>42</sup> And, in conclusion Camus writes, "In the universe of total negation, these young disciples try . . . to escape from contradiction and to create the values they lack."<sup>43</sup> But, argues Camus, there is a difference between these "fastidious assassins" and history's common terrorists. As Camus writes, "History offers few examples of fanatics who have suffered from scruples, even in action."<sup>44</sup> In short, Camus argues, they doubted to the very end. But, as Roy Pierce points out in his study of Camus, ". . . doubt does not mean paralysis; it implies caution about others."<sup>45</sup> And, he further adds:

The rebel must remember that he is not God even if he denied him, and that however noble the goal which it is his intention to achieve, it will not be salvation and there will be a price.<sup>46</sup>

And that price is death. But, what we are interested in is their mentality prior to their death.

In keeping with our remarks about "suffering from scruples," Camus writes:

(That their) degree of self-abnegation, accompanied by such profound consideration for the lives of others allows the supposition that these fastidious assassins lived out the rebel destiny in its most contradictory form.<sup>47</sup>

This leads one of them to say, "If Dubassov is accompanied by his wife I shall not throw the bomb."<sup>48</sup> However, Camus argues, in the face of this terrible contradiction, rather than weakening, as others might do, they follow it to its ultimate end. But, in doing so, they go a step further by declaring that there is no human life more worthy of living than any other. Thus, they are willing, not only to kill, but to offer their own lives in return. As Camus writes in making this point, "He who kills is guilty only if he consents to go on living or if, to remain alive, he betrays his comrades. To die, on the other hand, cancels out both the guilt and the crime itself."<sup>49</sup> That states precisely the value of the "fastidious assassins." However, we shall see that the first statement is correct, while the second is incorrect. Hence, this needs further explanation.

First, these "fastidious assassins" were atheists. They did not believe in Christian values. Hence, in their act of rebellion, they attempt to create their own values. But, it is not so much the values they create that deserves our admiration, rather it is their conduct that is exemplary. For, it is significant that they are willing to offer their lives for the life they have taken. In fact, as one of them says, "I consider my death as a supreme protest against a world of blood and tears."<sup>50</sup> And, furthermore, it is also significant that they refuse to accept the crucifix as they ascend the gallows. As one of them answers, when offered the crucifix, "I have already told you that I have finished with life and that I am prepared for death."<sup>51</sup> This statement means more

than it is capable of saying.

First, it shows that they want to die. In a strange sense, murder, for them, is a form of suicide. But really it is more than wanting to die. It borders on a demand for death. For, in all its significance, the "fastidious assassins" endow life with meaning that hitherto it did not have. And, they do this by doing two things: First, by offering their lives in return for the life taken. And secondly, and of equal importance, by refusing the crucifix. This last act needs more explanation.

To accept the crucifix is to accept forgiveness for one's sins. Thus, the "fastidious assassins" in denying the crucifix showed to the whole world that acts of murder and violence are to be condemned, rather than forgiven. (Also, for them to accept the crucifix is to deny their disbelief in God. These assassins followed their logic to the bitter end. They were not hypocrites in the face of death-- an easy place to be a hypocrite, I might add. In short, the phrase "To thine ownself be true" explains them perfectly.) For, in that act of condemnation, the value of life is born. Because to condemn murder, and not to accept forgiveness for it, is to give life its value by implying that life is too precious to ever forgive the taking of it.

But, upon saying this last statement, let us back up for a moment and examine what exactly we have said. In no small way it stretches the imagination to believe that the man who takes life, even though he does willingly offer his own life in return, does, indeed, advance or establish the value of life. There is reason to believe that not taking life in the first place is more the mark of a man who values life. In purely mathematical terms alone, given the view that life is the greatest good,

a life taken must always in the end reduce life by two-- one, the life taken, and two, the life in return. Hence, what I am saying is that Camus seems to be saying that life can gain value through murder, but only if the murderer demands his own death and refuses the crucifix. However, I just don't want to say that life can gain any value whatsoever because of murder. Any man who commits murder, even though he had all the doubt in the world, still committed murder. And, thus, when we start saying murder isn't as bad as it might be, if one doubts, then, indeed, we have lifted the first spadefull of earth for the grave of the principle that supports the sanctity of life. At this point, mankind is in jeopardy. And, our prisons become safer than our churches.

However, before pushing Camus too far in one direction we must realize the only real appeal the "fastidious assassins" have for Camus. And, that is, as opposed to all other assassins in his presentation-- and really we should not narrow our scope to include only political assassins-- the "fastidious assassins" gave their lives. For, as Camus has shown us, much blood has been spilled, but how many have been willing, indeed, have demanded their own death in return for the lives taken? Nobody, except these assassins have so dearly and so willingly paid the ultimate price for the blood they shed. Did Stalin rush to the gas chamber after the first life was taken during his purges? Did Robespierre run to the scaffold yelling "My life! My life! I must pay with my life. Don't offer me that!" for those whom he put under the knife? Indeed, this is why Camus admires the "fastidious assassins." Though, let it not be forgotten that Camus, I think, would find their initial behavior-- murder-- just another example of the despicable type of excess that has been

practiced in the name of rebellion, and, thus, to the detriment of true rebellion.

But, in the behavior of the "fastidious assassins" Camus might be offering us the only example of men, who in killing, demand consequences that no leaders in history have had the courage to demand of their peers. What, in short, I am saying is this: Camus' initial maxim surrounding this entire issue is "avoid bloodshed." However, he would add, if that can't be done, then demand the ultimate price for your deed. The "fastidious assassins" did not flinch in the eye of this counsel. Whereas, what I want to say is that leaders from Caesar down to American presidents have, giving them the greatest benefit of doubt, killed-- distance is no defense, bomb throwers and decision-makers are equally guilty-- but have not demanded the firing squad. They have, instead, evaded the consequences of their actions. And, how beautifully they have done it. The rhetoric of victors parading down Fifth Avenue or marching along the Champs-Elysees is, in a very real sense, more terrifying than words mumbled in the backroom of a dry goods store. When the leaders of a nation feel that abstractions must be purchased at any cost, then all life trembles in their hands. And, any virtue they might have had is now like a puff of dust in the wind.

What I am, then, saying is that the "fastidious assassins" refused to hide what they had done behind the rhetoric of virtue. Murder to them was murder. And, they demanded appropriate consequences. While all the rest, even to this day, have hid behind their own empty rhetoric. And, we the people let them do it. All men are either victims or accomplices in political murder. In the world of politics and history fence

straddling is a myth we all practice, but not very well.

What I am really getting at, then, is the mentality of the political murderer and Camus' "fastidious assassins." One destroys life and goes on living, justifying what he did as being, if not right, then at least "needed" (in some phony abstract sense!); while the other destroys life, knows he is wrong-- detests any justification for any purpose of what he did, and, hence, refuses to go on living. In short, one accepts murder through justification and especially through his refusal to die (I have done no wrong! Democracy was at stake!); the other condemns it by refusing any justification, and demands his death. One lives, thus proving how much life really means to him; the other dies in order to prove that life has so much value that taking it should never be forgiven.

But, of course, both are wrong because they commit murder in the first place. Thus, Camus is wrong in saying that ". . .dying. . .cancels out both the guilt and the crime itself." Dying might ease our judgment, but in the end two people are still dead, and the sum total of evil has been reduced by not one infinitesimal speck. And, if we are to hold intensely to the view that life is the greatest good (it keeps the absurd alive!), then it bothers one terribly that life gains value through the act of murder and the associated execution of the murderer. Why, we want to ask, do two lives have to be taken to prove that life has value?

But, of course, what is at issue here is not judgment of the value of life. But judgment of the value of actions and on two levels. First, both the political murderer and the "fastidious assassins" are wrong because they commit murder, all "suffering from scruples" aside. Their actions are just plain wrong. For one thing, they both destroy life--

the one side of the equation, and thus also destroy the absurd-- the other side of the equation. And, though Camus has shown us that the absurd can offer us no principle, nonetheless, it does give value to life. And, since life is now destroyed, the absurd is destroyed. Really it is the absurd encounter that is destroyed, but only for one life, not for all life. Hence, both assassins are wrong. No amount of "doubting" relieves our judgment of their initial actions.

At a second level, however, things change. The political murderer tries to justify his actions; the "fastidious assassins" do not. The political murderer wants forgiveness. He might even feel that what he did was for a greater good. (A nervous man on the gallows can think of hundreds of reasons.) The "fastidious assassins" condemn any offering of forgiveness. Furthermore, they know what they did was wrong. They want to be punished-- now! In fact, the worst thing that could happen to them would be to be driven through the streets of Moscow and given a hero's parade, such as is given returning war heroes. (Society praises men for the most paradoxical reasons.) Hence, we can see it is at this second level that the conduct of the "fastidious assassins" becomes exemplary, as opposed to the conduct of all other assassins. Of course, we can see that only through comparison could we make this distinction, and, hence, point out the value of the conduct of Camus' "fastidious assassins."

Really, then, the conclusion is that life does not gain value from murder. It gains value through the conduct of the "fastidious assassins" when viewed at the second level. And, indeed, only from them and only at that level. Their act of murder is wrong. But how they conduct themselves after that is what is of value to us.



Hence, the critics are wrong for attacking Camus' logic.<sup>52</sup> For, they argue that Camus in the beginning argues that murder is wrong because it destroys the absurd for the other man; while now Camus is arguing that murder is right, if one doubts what one does is legitimate to the point of offering one's life in retribution. But, as we have seen, Camus is not saying murder is now right. He doesn't admire murder, only the conduct of the "fastidious assassins" viewed on the second level, as opposed to all others who have committed political murder.

Also, I think the critics are wrong for not looking past Camus' logic. Camus is not trying to build a logical system. He is only trying to show the amount of blood that has been spilled and the human suffering that has resulted from those who consecrated their acts of violence in the name of logic. To destroy the world in the name of passion is abominable, but to destroy the world in the name of reason is legitimate, and, due to our age of nihilism, totally accepted. Which only goes to show how much change has taken place since the days of the French Revolution. As the Marquis de Sade wrote, according to Camus:

To kill a man in a paroxysm of passion is understandable. To have him killed by someone else after calm and serious meditation and on the pretext of duty honorably discharged is incomprehensible.<sup>53</sup>

The rule used to state that murder was based on passion alone. The rule has been changed. Today, it reads that murder is based on reason alone. Camus' statement, "Each day at dawn, assassins in judges' robes slip into some cell: murder is the problem today. . ."<sup>54</sup> can have no other meaning. And, Hegelian absolutes, filtered through Marxian eyes, and applied in Stalinist Russia only bolsters this even more by giving the rule earthly relevance. (Don't think, though, that Stalin is the

only ogre in history. Many live in other countries as well. The phrase "Uncle Sam needs you" proves this.) At last, the State can kill and get away with it. Thus proving that we are living in the midst of legalized murder. And that the last "fastidious assassins" appeared on the earth in 1905; whereas, all the rest are with us even today, if not in the flesh, then certainly in the spirit. We are great inheritors. One hundred seventy five years of history show that clearly.

"Bombs away!" the pilot says, as we march off to yet another victory in the name of the Father-- Hegel, the Son-- Marx, and the Holy Ghost-- Reason. . .Gloria in excelsis Deo, et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis. Laudamus te, benedicimus te, adoramus te, glorificamus te. Gratias agimus tibi propter magnam gloriam tuam. Domine Deus, rex coelestis, Deus Pater omnipotens! Domine Fili unigenite, Jesu Christe, altissime! Domine Deus, agnus Dei, Filius Patris<sup>55</sup>. . .nada, y pues nada<sup>56</sup>. . .

#### IV

It is time to sum up what we have learned from Camus' discussion of "the astonishing history. . .of European pride." First, if we have learned anything at all, we have learned that we cannot look to history for a code of how man ought to act. Camus makes this very clear when he writes:

Those who rush blindly to history in the name of the irrational, proclaiming that it is meaningless, encounter servitude and terror and finally emerge into the universe of concentration camps.<sup>57</sup>

While likewise, he argues:

Those who launch themselves into it (history) preaching its absolute rationality (also) encounter servitude and terror and emerge into the universe of concentration camps.<sup>58</sup>

Hence, according to Camus, those who look to history come up with the same conclusion-- "servitude and terror." In this sense, rebellion has lost its claim to virtue, and so cannot be called pure rebellion. As practiced in the past, rebellion has either liberated a few by subjugating the rest, or it has liberated all by enslaving all. In either case, it has failed to live up to the standards it preached.

Secondly, those who have tried to live up to rebellion's standards have, in the end, embraced either death or madness and then death. Living out rebellion's logic has left them with no other alternative. As Camus has shown us, any kind of morality that would kill in order to impose its doctrines on a society is no morality at all. "I want to destroy my enemies in order to improve the world" is the statement of the rebel living beyond his intent. Hence, the rebel by definition is always an extremist, especially when he begins to believe in the righteousness of his own cause. The rebel will always be willing to destroy in order to improve. And, that is no improvement at all.

Furthermore, the mind of the rebel is such that he will never accept misery or hypocrisy. Thus, he will always live in a perpetual state of madness. Since he cannot accept limits, he will continually suffer from the tension between wanting to improve the world, yet not wanting to destroy it to do so. Being a rebel is constantly living in madness with only one question on his mind-- "Why?"

Thus, the world being what it is, the only peace for the rebel is death. In short, we may say that the rebel suffers from the worst disease imaginable-- Manicheism. Hence, he will never find a code of conduct. All rebels, then, are essentially Captain Ahab-- destined to

suffer and destined to die, in a different sense than other men, though. There will always be White whales-- at least the rebel has convinced himself such-- and he hates that fact with all his being.<sup>59</sup> For the rebel there is no sense of degrees. As we have seen, it is All or Nothing. Hence, the ultimate conclusion of the rebel's part in history has been "either police rule or insanity." Therefore, Camus states, ". . .history alone offers no hope."<sup>60</sup>

Where, then, can we look if we cannot look to history? To this question Camus answers that there is only one place and that is "artistic creation." For, only in this realm does pure rebellion exist. And, by this Camus means a rebellion that looks not to the future for its rewards, but one that looks for value in itself. As Camus writes, "(It is a rebellion (that) adds that instead of killing and dying in order to produce the being that we are not, we have to live and let live in order to create what we are."<sup>61</sup> In short, pure rebellion is rebellion realizing itself daily in the realm of art. No society can exist without its artists. This is the fundamental premise upon which Camus bases his discussion of pure rebellion. And, it is that to which we now turn to find the principle we have searched for. "Society needs its deviants. . . don't take my words away" only underscores the artist's role in society even more. And, Lenny Bruce was right to protest, though, of course, any society will accuse its rebels of protesting too much. Beauty and hypocrisy are always easier to accept than reality. "Avert your faces!" and we, a nation of sheep, obey.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Camus, The Rebel, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., pp. 8-9.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>It is on this point that Camus differs from the existentialists, e.g., Sartre, who argues that man establishes values after acting. Thus, whereas Camus argues essentially that "essence precedes existence," Sartre argues that "existence precedes essence." Because of this distinction, there is reason to believe Camus when he says he is not an existentialist.

<sup>13</sup>The Rebel, p. 16.

<sup>14</sup>Richard Wollheim asserts that at this point the flavor of Camus' argument is very Kantian, i.e., refers to Kant's Categorical Imperative, which states that one should so act so as to be able to deem his action as a universal law. See Wollheim, "The Political Philosophy of Existentialism," Cambridge Journal, 7(October, 1953): 12.

<sup>15</sup>"The more things change, the more they remain the same."

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 117.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 117.

<sup>32</sup>Stromberg, An Intellectual History, p. 248.

<sup>33</sup>The Rebel, p. 152.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>38</sup>"Child Harold's Pilgrimage," Canto IV, stanza 179, lines 1-9.

<sup>39</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Dawn of Day," in The Philosophy of Nietzsche, ed. and Introduction by Geoffrey Clive, trans. J. M. Kennedy (New York: Mentor Books, 1965), pp. 377-378.

<sup>40</sup>Henry W. Longfellow, "The Masque of Pandora," in The Complete Poetical Works of Longfellow (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1922), act VI, line 78.

<sup>41</sup>The Rebel, p. 161.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 165.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. 167.

<sup>45</sup>Roy Pierce, Contemporary French Political Thought (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 141.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>The Rebel, p. 169.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p. 171.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p. 172.

<sup>52</sup>See Pierce, Contemporary French Thought, esp. pp. 141-143. See also John Cruickshank, Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), esp. pp. 106-108.

<sup>53</sup>The Rebel, p. 40.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>55</sup>Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace to men of good will (Chorus)./We praise Thee; we bless Thee; we adore Thee; we glorify Thee (Aria)./We give thanks to Thee for Thy great glory (Chorus)./O Lord God, heavenly King, God the Father almighty. O Lord the only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. O Lord God, lamb of God, Son of thy Father (Duet). Johann Sebastian Bach, "Gloria," in Mass in B-minor, section 1, part 2, movements 4-7.

<sup>56</sup>. . .nothing, and then nothing. . . Ernest Hemingway, "A Clean Well-Lighted Place," in The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 481.

<sup>57</sup>The Rebel, p. 246.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid.

<sup>59</sup>For an excellent discussion of the rebel, as he has appeared in literature, and hence more elaborate than my own see Maurice Friedman, Problematic Rebel: Melville, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Camus (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970).

<sup>60</sup>The Rebel, p. 249.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p. 252.

## CHAPTER III

### The Artist and Rebellion

I said in the last section that society cannot exist without its artists. I think it is also fair to say that society cannot tolerate its artists. This statement needs to be qualified. Napoleon loved David. England lionized Turner. But, on the other hand, Athenians persecuted and finally put to death Socrates. Russia hounded Solzhenitsyn. England was stung by Dickens. Norway balked at Ibsen. In short, the distinction I want to make is between literary artists and other artists.<sup>1</sup> And, it is this distinction, for our purposes, that means the most for our discussion of Camus. For, as Camus states in quoting Nietzsche, "No artist tolerates reality." Precisely at this point, society and the artist are at loggerheads. Society wants to avert its eyes. The artist will not let it. Thus, society either kills or tries to ignore him, which, in the end, it cannot do. Mainly, because it cannot tolerate the reflection it sees in the artist's mirror. And, of course, this reflection is society itself. And, if we liken society to Hemingway's comment about the world that ". . .it breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave-- impartially,"<sup>2</sup> we can see this relationship even clearer.

Hence, all societies hate mirrors and mirror holders-- artists. We might almost say that all societies hate themselves, or, more precisely, hate to look at themselves.<sup>3</sup> Of course, then, this is why they hate artists. Living in front of a mirror is no fun. Admittedly, sometimes they lionize them. But secretly, inwardly they wish they would go away,



or at the very least, be silent. Solzhenitsyn's remark, ". . .no regime has ever loved great writers, only minor ones" can have no other meaning.<sup>4</sup>

However, I have carried this too far for real understanding. Let us now look at Camus for this understanding. Hopefully, then, what I have said will be meaningful.

### The Merits of the Artist

In the introduction of this chapter I quoted Nietzsche's remark about artists and reality. And, further, I pointed out that this was a crucial point for conflict between the artist and society. Let us, then, expand upon this.

When Camus makes this point, essentially he is arguing that the artist does not accept the conditions-- political, social, economic-- in which he lives. In this sense, he is surely like all the other rebels that have crossed these pages. But, with him there is a difference. In a sense, we might say that the artist, in rejecting what he sees around him, may be dreaming dreams and saying "Why not?" as opposed to Ivan Karamazov who doesn't dream and asks "Why?" Therefore, one distinction we can make between the artist, who rebels, and all others, who rebel, is that the former rejects what is given, but offers a plan to take its place, while the latter just plain rejects with no plan. It is because of this that Camus has called the latter, nihilists, while in the former he sees hope. To further emphasize this point, Camus writes, "Artistic creation is a demand for unity and a rejection of the world."<sup>5</sup> "But," he adds, and this is important, ". . .it (artistic creation) rejects the world on account of what it lacks. . ." <sup>6</sup> and not, we can add, because of what it has. In truth, we can see that both reject the world. But, the

former says, "Rather than killing the King, let us introduce a plan that doesn't include the king." While the other says, "Kill the King, and then let us see what we should do." One tries to improve the system by adding to it, while the other argues that destruction of the system is the only way to improve it. Simply said, one is a system builder; the other is a system destroyer. To put it in political terms, one believes in the logic of Rousseau; the other believes in the logic of Nietzsche carried beyond limits that even Nietzsche might condone. In this context, one believes in something, while the other believes in nothing. One recognizes limits; the other recognizes no limits.

Let us back up for a moment. We can see that Rousseau did offer a plan that did not include the King. And, in this sense, he would belong to the former group. But, as Camus makes clear, those who took part in the French Revolution went beyond what Rousseau would have accepted. (We can almost hear Rousseau's words now as he yells to the mob as they run to the scaffold with Louis XVI in their hands, "Nothing on earth is worth the price of human blood!" But, the roar of the mob is too great, and his words, perhaps spoken too late, fall on deaf, frenzied ears.) We might almost say that the French Revolution was a corruption of what Rousseau taught, just as Nazism was a corruption of what Nietzsche advocated. In fact, we might even say that all thought is corruption. Corruption, that is, in that man does too much talking off the top of his head, rather than speaking from the bottom of his heart. For, indeed, if Camus says anything, it is this.

But, of course, corruption of thought and purpose is what Camus has presented in The Rebel. That is, future generations are rarely true to

the tenets of the philosopher on whom they base their government. Again, this is why Camus rejects history as the place where we can look to find our code of conduct. And also why he argues that we must look to artistic creation for this code. As William Faulkner wrote in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, in talking about the role of the artist-- the writer:

(He must) leave no room in his workshop for anything but the old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed-- love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice.<sup>7</sup>

And, he adds:

Until he (the artist) does so, he labors under a curse. He writes not of love but of lust. . .not of the heart but of the glands.<sup>8</sup>

To which we can only remark that, as Camus has shown us, our history, too, has labored under a curse. There has been too much talk and action based on lust and our glands, and ever so little based on "the old verities" and "old universal truths" of which Faulkner so eloquently spoke. Let us then look at the workshop of artistic creation wherein Camus claims our principle is to be found.

#### The Workshop of the Artist

"The aim of great literature," writes Camus, "seems to be to create a closed universe or a perfect type."<sup>9</sup> Hence, it would seem that only in the art form known as the novel do we at last find a solution to the problem Camus posed back in The Myth of Sisyphus, viz., man's essential quest for unity in the face of a universe which remains silent to the ". . .wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart."<sup>10</sup> And, as we have seen, it is this call that, in part, gives rise to the Absurd. But in the novel, as an art form, this problem does not exist. All "wild longing(s) for clarity" can be answered, can be controlled. As

Camus writes, "The world of the novel is. . .a rectification of the world we live in, in pursuance of man's deepest wishes."<sup>11</sup> And, he remarks in another part, "The heroes (of literature, even though they) speak our language, have our weaknesses and our strengths. . .(yet) they complete things that we can never consummate."<sup>12</sup>

On the surface this may sound like escapism. If the world of man is the world of disunity, the domain of the Absurd, then any attempt at modeling, at controlling this disunity surely has the aroma of otherworldiness. But, many great works of literature that we can think of do not in any way remind us of otherworldiness. We can understand and relate to Captain Ahab, Ivan Karamazov, Stavrogin, Don Quixote, Raskolnikov, and many others who "live" in the world of fiction. In fact, everyone has that special character from this world that strikes the inner chord within each of us, whose resonance answers those wild calls in each of our hearts. In this sense, fiction is very much a part of this world.

Hence, it is this chord, this special vibration within each of us that gives the novel its unique appeal. And, even more, this is why the novel's unity and clarity cannot be labelled as escapism. Because, as Camus argues, the artist includes, rather than ignores, reality. But, the real clue to this is what the artist includes, i.e., his selection process, rather than what he ignores. Because, really, all thought, all action is selected thought. Beginning to think is beginning to select. Thus, the artist's true worth lies in his ability to select. And, his novel is, hence, a product of that selection process. Therefore, any judgment of this product is really a judgment of the artist. And, furthermore, a judgment of his work is a judgment about how much of the

world he accepts and/or rejects, with emphasis on acceptance, rather than rejection.

We might say, then, that Proust accepted the world as much as any artist, if not more. In this sense, Proust did not revolt against the world. (But, Proust did revolt against God. Mainly, because his fictional world was as close to perfect creation as humanly possible.) Whereas, the science fantasy writer totally rejects the world, but his rejection is escapism. Therefore, as I have presented it, we see that there is a necessary tension between form-- the unity of phenomena-- and content-- the amount of phenomena. Realistic literature is no answer to this tension because all it does is to try to recreate reality. In this sense, it gives it no order, no unity, in short, no form. While on the other hand, the novel that strives for complete unity, sacrifices reality and, thus, is as bad off as the other, but for different reasons. What we are after, then, is the artist who recognizes this tension and, thus, tries to realize it in his literature. In brief, we might say that all great literature is based on a tension that is conscious of limits and a rebellion that is aware of consequences. What this really says is that all tension is aware of rebellion. And, that all artists compete with God as creators. Camus, in quoting Stanislas Fumet, says the same thing when he writes, "Art, whatever its aims, is always in sinful competition with God."<sup>13</sup> Whoever thought that great artists could also be great sinners? Thus, according to Camus, it seems that all art is sin. And, that is why all artists are rebels. Although we could say that the greater the artist, the greater the rebellion, and, hence, the greater the sin. Thus, artists are sinful by degrees, but still sinful.

This, then, points to the one key characteristic that distinguishes the rebel from all other men. As we have seen, the rebel's revolt is directed against either God or creation-- the world as it is, and thus God again. Because the world, as it is, is God's creation. And, even though Van Gogh said, ". . . God must not be judged on earth (because) it is one of His sketches that. . . turned out badly,"<sup>14</sup> nonetheless, this remark does not assuage the rebel's judgment of this world and God's role in it. And since it does not, he revolts. But, he can't revolt against an abstraction. So, he revolts against society, even though it is still against God. And, that is why society hates, kills, or tries to ignore its artists. Society can't stand the reflection it sees in the artist's mirror, as I said before.

But, the rebel artist, as we have seen, recognizes limits, whereas all other rebels do not. The logic of artistic creation has one appealing quality. It does not lead to the guillotine. It does not demand the benediction of blood. It leaves no universal bones to grieve upon. Instead, it is an answer to the human heart looking for the clarity and the unity it does not find in the world. And, tension between form and content, as the two extremities of its bow, propels thought-- its arrow.

At last Camus has presented us with a principle. But, to say the least, he has couched it in very amorphous terms. It needs to be fleshed out. And besides, it needs to be related to real world activity. Any artist can practice pure rebellion within the stricture of the novel, i.e., in the world of fiction. But, as Marx said, "Philosophers have only interpreted the world. It is up to us to change the world."

Excellent advice, but only if we follow the example of the artist, who seeks every day to realize the tension Camus speaks of. Otherwise-- we have seen where the "otherwise" leads vis-a-vis Camus' discussion of historical rebellion. Let us, then, look at his discussion of how we can achieve the artist's standard in our daily lives. When we have done this, then rightfully we can say we have found a principle upon which to base a code of conduct that doesn't include murder.

### The Principle of the Artist

"Thought that recognizes limits:" that, says Camus, "is the only system of thought (in which rebellion) is faithful to its origins."<sup>15</sup> And, he adds, ". . .if every thought, every action that goes beyond a certain point negates itself, there is. . .a measure by which to judge events and men."<sup>16</sup> Hence, Camus argues that the Greek goddess of moderation, Nemesis, should serve as our example if we are to remain faithful to rebellion's true nature. Because true rebellion, in Camus' mind, is moderation. And, if it is not, then it is extremism. Thus, in light of this, Camus asserts that in the realm of politics the one system that has followed the example of Nemesis is trade-unionism. It alone is responsible for "the enormously improved condition of the workers from the sixteen-hour day to the forty-hour week."<sup>17</sup> And, how it does this is by being true to the nature of rebellion. Rather than imposing an abstract doctrine on the world from above, so to speak, it has gone to the heart of the problem. It has started with the group, not with an entire society. Camus quotes Tolain to show the basis of trade-unionism, when he writes, "Human beings emancipate themselves on the basis of natural groups."<sup>18</sup>

Hence, we are shown how change can be accomplished without entailing the terrible consequences that Camus tells us have been the lot of rebellion's actions in history. In short, rebellion has practiced extremism, which is no rebellion at all, since moderation was absent. Therefore, in this sense, trade-unionism has remained faithful to the example of Nemesis. It has recognized limits and practiced moderation. In addition, it has not deified reality. It has instead looked to reality for its work. As Camus writes, "it relies primarily on the most concrete realities-- on occupation, on the village, where the living heart of things and of men is to be found."<sup>19</sup>

But, Camus also argues that trade-unionism cannot do it all. Thus, we are forced back on ourselves to look for the answers. And to this Camus offers this solution: the Mediterranean tradition. For, it is in this tradition, epitomized in the words of the oracle of Delphi-- "Nothing in excess," wherein man will find his principle, rather than in either the Christian tradition or in the Germanic (read northern European) tradition. The "Why?" is very simple.

The Christian tradition, according to Camus, offers man hope, but only in another world. And, what we know of Camus (his discussion in The Myth of Sisyphus, especially "Philosophical Suicide"), we can see that this is certainly no answer. While on the other hand, the Germanic tradition, in deifying history (read Hegel), allows no other conclusion than those we can draw from our history. And, again, what we have learned from Camus about history, we can see that this is no solution either. Finally, then, we are left with the Mediterranean tradition.

This should not surprise us. Camus' writings, beyond the two works I



have discussed in this essay, are filled with the motifs of light, of nature, of sensual beauty. His writing is filled, in short, with all those qualities we could perhaps associate with the Greek god, Pan. For Camus always will be a child of the Mediterranean-- a land, kissed by the sun, washed by blue waters, refreshed by cool, gentle night breezes, in which Western civilization reached such glorious heights over two thousand years ago. This is acutely the birthplace of Camus' mind. It is the area which nourished him and to which he returns again and again to draw intellectual sustenance. In sum, for Camus nature and the land of the Mediterranean will always offer the proper principle for life that he calls tension regulated by moderation.

We must, then, dedicate ourselves to the teachings of this tradition, asserts Camus. For, it is this tradition alone that teaches, by the example of Nemesis, "the dignity of mankind." And, furthermore, it teaches us that this earth, right now, not tomorrow, or the next day, or the next, is the place for our greatest dedication. Evil will still be with us tomorrow. And, no matter how much we work for the future, Ivan Karamazov's cry of "Why?" will ring in our hearts until the last man departs from this earth.

Hence, Camus' final statement in which he offers his ultimate principle for our conduct is: "learn to live and to die. . .in order to be a man, to refuse to be a god."<sup>20</sup> Finally, in the face of adversity, knowing that we will never diminish the sum total of evil, we can dedicate ourselves to today, living the tension that is at the base of the Mediterranean tradition; and, moreover, guiding our behavior in the direction of this tension that lives between "Why?" and "I am God," between nature

and history.

Thought as an arrow  
existing in a tension between;  
Not yet of flight  
living for that moment when;  
In a supreme gesture  
springing from its bow because;  
We have taken the step beyond.

In hominibus spec.

I can express Camus' position on rebellion's role in our life no more clearly.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>This distinction is at best a fragile one. Camus discusses for the most part literary artists. But he could, I feel, just as easily have made the same point with other artists. The work of Hogarth, Goya, Gericault, Delacroix, Daumier, Picasso, Pieter Brugel the Elder, and Bosch, to name only a few great artists, could easily serve the same purpose as Tolstoy, Cervantes, Proust, Racine, and Shakespeare do.

<sup>2</sup>Ernest Hemingway, A Farewell To Arms (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957), ch. 34.

<sup>3</sup>One might think this applies only to totalitarian societies. And, in most cases, this is correct. But the United States, which claims to be more "open" than any other, still practices censorship with respect to artists. Lenny Bruce is only a very obvious case. And, too, look what happened when artists (writers), such as James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence tried to get their respective works published in the U. S. "Open" societies are not so "open."

<sup>4</sup>Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, The First Circle, trans. Thomas P. Whitney (New York: Bantam Books, 1973), ch. 57.

<sup>5</sup>The Rebel, p. 253.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>William Faulkner, Nobel Prize Speech, December 10, 1950.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>The Rebel, p. 259.

<sup>10</sup>The Myth, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup>The Rebel, p. 263.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 259.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 256.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 294.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 297.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 298. Henri Tolain (1828-1897) was a French political and social theorist.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 306. In some sense this is Kantian in content, especially if we view this statement as a judgment of "means and ends," and attach to this Kant's statement about "means and ends:" So act as to use humanity, both in your own person and in the other person of every other, always at the same time as an end, never as a means.

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## VITA

Michael Blair Camillo was born in Salem, Oregon on January 1, 1944. He attended public schools in Salem, Oregon, graduating from South Salem High School, Salem, Oregon in 1962.

He entered Portland State University in Portland, Oregon in the Fall of 1966 and graduated in June, 1970, receiving a B. S. degree in History. Following which he enrolled in the University of Oregon in Eugene, Oregon in the Fall of 1970 from which he graduated with a B. A. degree in Political Science in June, 1973.

Thereupon, he entered the Master's program in Political Science at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in the Fall of 1973. While enrolled in this program, he worked as a graduate teaching assistant. He completed the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Political Science in June, 1975.

*Michael B. Camillo*

ALBERT CAMUS ON POLITICAL MURDER:  
A SIGN OF THE TIMES IN WHICH WE LIVE

by

Michael Blair Camillo

ABSTRACT

This essay is a study of Albert Camus' response to three questions that were especially relevant vis-a-vis the social and political chaos that prevailed in Europe during and after the two world wars. Though, indeed, these questions are in many respects timeless. Namely, the three questions this essay seeks to answer are the following: 1) Is suicide the answer to the absurd?; 2) In the context of the absurd is murder permitted?; and 3) Upon what principle can we build a code of conduct to which man ought to adhere in the arena of politics?

To answer these questions this essay concentrated on two of Camus' major works-- The Myth of Sisyphus and The Rebel. In doing so, no attempt was made to develop a concise system of political thought. Instead, emphasis was placed on developing an exposition of Camus' main thought and of his major arguments. In this sense, this essay seeks to present the thought of one man who was intimately involved in the social and political events that dominated Europe for a span of some thirty-five to forty years. And, one step further, this essay seeks to present his response to the despair and anguish that followed in the wake of the two world wars.

Since the overall thrust of this essay was directed at developing normative answers to questions, the extent to which they can or ought to



be applied is itself a normative question. In this sense, this essay came to no scientifically supportable conclusions. Nevertheless, the conclusions this essay does reach show clearly that the thought of Camus is one we ought not to overlook if we are to gain a better understanding of how men have acted and perhaps how they ought to act.