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Preface

A committed atheist who, like Albert Camus, believed there is no after-life, that life ends completely, might be expected to hold there were no further questions to solve about the idea of death. Yet his novels are permeated by thoughts about death from beginning to end.

His first-written though posthumously published novel was *A Happy Death*, about the thoughts of a young man faced with the imminent likelihood of dying of tuberculosis, as Camus himself was. His preferred solution was to be as happy as one could manage while alive, and expect after that to be like a stone warmed by the sun and cooled by the rain. Of course he will not be able to feel those sensations.

The anti-hero of *The Outsider* goes to the guillotine hoping that the spectators, whom he already despises, will greet him with cries of hatred.

The Plague of course is all about death and the problem of why a benevolent and omnipotent deity allows it to strike down guilty and innocent alike.

The cynical, self-doubting, self-appointed judge narrating *The Fall* suspects he would fail any second chance to rescue a drowning woman. It would be too much trouble for too little gain.

Lastly, in *The First Man* Camus seems in imagination to have endowed himself with immortality, in the self-creating role of wishfully being his own father.

I extend thanks to as many as possible of the people who have kindly welcomed and commented on readings of the successive chapters, principally members of the Graduate Psychoanalytic Theory seminar in the University of Sydney, especially its leader, Olga Katchan, also to Professor Margaret Sankey-Sutcliffe for her insights into French literature, and finally but always foremost Rachael Henry, my wife, whose understanding of complicated personalities has always – fortunately! – been much greater than mine.

CHAPTER 1

Origins of an Anti-Moralist

It is ironic that in many quarters Albert Camus was regarded, during the period of his maturity, as one of the major moral arbiters of his time, yet when he examined his own behaviour he could not find any credible moral basis for it.

His reputation as 'the conscience of his epoch' began to develop from his work as a journalist on the underground Resistance newspaper *Combat.* After the liberation of Paris from German occupation in 1944, *Combat* became an above-ground journal of opinion, with Camus as its editor-in-chief. In a *Combat* editorial written a few days after the liberation, Camus wrote: 'We have decided to suppress politics and replace it with morality,' which meant roughly that the paper would not support parties either of the right or left, but would judge their policies and actions independently. This reputation as public moralist was consolidated by his major work of social theory, *The Rebel (L'Homme Révolté)*,[1] published in 1951, at the height of the Cold War, although as with everyone who offers opinions on matters of intense ideological feeling, he had as many detractors as supporters.

It was a time of intense dispute between intellectuals in Paris, as well as of concern throughout the greater part of the world's population. China had intervened in the Korean War in direct conflict with the USA. French intellectuals believed that the USSR might take this as an opportunity to strike against Western Europe and invade France. Camus's book contained a clearly defined stance against Stalinism, and therefore began to receive favorable reviews from con-

1 Albert Camus, *The Rebel.* Translated by Anthony Bower, with a foreword by Sir Herbert Read. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, UK: Penguin, (1951) 1962.

servatives and anti-Communists of every kind, which Camus, a left-wing liberal, did not welcome. What many reviewers and readers missed, or chose to ignore, was that Camus was also firmly opposed to unconditional alliance with the USA and its allies. He considered that the USA's policies were inimical to freedom of thought and to movements of legitimate protest against oppression in the West, even though their methods of coercion were vastly different from those employed in the Soviet Union. This independent viewpoint did attract understanding and praise, particularly from liberal-minded thinkers in Britain, for example, the philosopher Richard Wollheim,[2] but the fact that Camus refused to take either side meant eventually that he was disowned by both.

What repelled him was the fact that each side in the opposition between Russia and the USA claimed that their policies were all on the side of the good, and those of their opponents all made for evil. Beliefs about good and evil, he held, were not about matters of fact, although they pretended to be so. They were social inventions designed to limit what persons can do, even what they can think, in trying to gratify their needs. Their binding quality arose in the first place because they were imposed on children even before they learned to talk and before critical thought became possible. We become aware of such strictures just from the parents' looks that would say, if we had language, 'disgusting!' and 'how dare you!' and 'I don't love you!' In later life these seminal beliefs may become unconscious because they were born in fear and shame; they become disguised by increasingly sophisticated rationalizations, but they are still there nevertheless, constraining thought and action.

What kind of childhood, then, could a person have had who fought against and threw off those mental constrictions preventing his or her self-realisation?

Camus's infancy and childhood were just such as to leave empty spaces in his perception of social rules and a latent desire for an

2 Richard Wollheim, "Review of *L'Homme Révolté* by Albert Camus." *Cambridge Journal,* 1952.

authority figure to supply them. He was born on November 7, 1913, the son of a French Algerian, Lucien Auguste Camus, and Catherine Hélène Camus (formerly Sintès), also born in Algeria to a family of Spanish extraction which had come to Algeria from the Balearic island of Minorca. The father was a twenty-eight years old vineyard foreman and cellarman employed on the Saint Paul Farm near the city of Mondovi in Algeria. He had been orphaned at one year of age and placed in a Protestant orphanage. He received virtually no education, did not learn to read or write until adulthood and even then in a limited way, and indeed none of the members of Albert's immediate family were literate, apart from Albert himself.

When Albert was only eight months old his father was drafted into the French army right at the time of Germany's declaration of war on France, on August 3, 1914. Very soon his regiment, the First Zouaves with their bold red and blue uniforms, were sent to France. Within months they were in action and Lucien Camus was one of the first French soldiers wounded at the Battle of the Marne, sustaining a shrapnel wound in the head, of which he soon died.

Both Albert and his mother were infected with some undiagnosed fever in the first few months of Albert's life. This fever may have played some part in the fact that Albert's mother suffered an obscure mental defect. She was inclined to be very passive and remote; further, her hearing was poor and her verbal ability limited. Thus, despite her loving nature her intercourse with the growing Albert suffered from serious deficiencies in communication, a crucial factor in infantile development. However, there was another mother-figure who figured very large in Albert's infancy and youth, and that was his mother's mother, a woman of iron will and a stern disciplinarian, at least in Albert's perception. After the father's death she took over the entire management of the family, relegating Albert's mother Catherine to a very subordinate role.

It seems plain that she was the author of whatever moral lessons Albert learned in infancy, but his resentment of her domination, over both him and his desperately loved mother, meant that this rudimentary conscience was felt as alien and oppressive; it was not

internalized. The grandmother played a large part in provoking the young Camus's readiness to despise and reject orthodox social morality, and indeed any morality which threatened his critical faculties and his freedom of action. Both these mother-figures emerge powerfully if to some extent unconsciously in the subtext of his novels.

Camus's indirect satirizing of public morality can be found in all his major works. The irony of this reputation as public conscience was that Camus, an atheist and freethinker, could find no satisfactory intellectual basis for any morality. In various places in his journals and in his posthumous work *The First Man* he wrote that he had been brought up without a morality and had to find his own rules to live by, but he was never able to believe that his preferred ways were *right*, rather than merely what he preferred. That was his sticking point. He knew from bitter experience that some individuals and some social movements demanded that certain policies be followed, but he could never see that any actions or policies were demanded in their own nature, despite the rationalizations of those that claimed them as embodying inexorable laws.

The Rebel was essentially an examination of the ideology and psychology of totalitarianism, and implicitly an exhortation to resist such ideologies and resist the imposition of coercive power – an exhortation to abhor injustice and demand justice. 'Neither an executioner nor a victim' was his slogan. Do not join the executioners and do not humbly admit their right to violence under the pretence of *realpolitik* necessity. Yet although the whole book is about justice one can search it in vain for a definition or even an informative description of what that term means. It is as if Camus, despite his intellectual reservations, had come to believe that the question of what is just in any particular case is a plain, objective matter to any one whose eyes are not closed by prejudice.

In fact it is a highly subjective matter, not to be decided by appeal to some final authority, such as the law of the land, and certainly not, in Camus's own view, the supposed law of God. In *The Plague*, as we shall see, the agnostic Dr. Rieux disputes with Father Paneloux the

justice of God's will in decreeing that innocent children should die in agony of the plague.[3] In a non-theological context, the common notion that justice can for example be defined as ensuring that like cases be treated alike is altogether too simple if one begins to ask whether and in what way the cases are alike, and whether 'the same treatment' will have the same effect in each case.

Camus made no claim to being a philosopher, and even if he had been one he might well have flinched away from trying to offer a general rule which would enable us to determine where justice lies in any particular matter, but he seems to dismiss the idea that there is a problem there. As Serge Doubrovsky says:

> In re-reading Camus, we are struck by the repetition of a certain number of terms that seem to have come out of a course on ethics: justice, happiness, revolt, etc. [...] In his personal and philosophical essays they are constant themes of meditation, focal points of his thought. [...] Yet, and this is remarkable, these key words are never rigorously examined and really given a definition.[4]

Nevertheless, the passion with which Camus argues in the *The Rebel,* and which invests episodes of life, death, and injustice in his creative literary works, suggests that he has a powerful conviction as to the bedrock of justice against injustice, and it is not far to seek. The very essence of injustice, for him, was the imposition of the death penalty. Inarticulate convictions of that kind – 'the essence of evil is ...' – held as if they were unarguable truths which every decent human being must accept, are of course very common. Their distinguishing mark is that they are felt to be absolute, needing no supporting argument other than that circular one about 'every decent human being,' though this may be elaborated as 'every true Christian,' 'every true Moslem,' and so on. As they are held to be absolutely convincing in their own right,

3 Albert Camus, *The Plague*. Translated from the French by Stuart Gilbert. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, UK: Penguin, (1947) 1976.

4 Serge Doubrovsky, "The Ethics of Albert Camus." In Germaine Bree, *Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays.* Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall, 1962, p. 72.

there can be no need, or at least no felt need, to derive them by argument from some more general principle.[5]

Speculation about the psychodynamic basis of morality leads one to examine Camus's opposition to the death penalty, to see how, if at all, he rationalizes it, what prompted it, and what is the early-acquired bodily fear that may have energized his outrage at this central threat.[6] The death penalty, or legalized murder, is the only such specific mentioned in *The Rebel*, and it is given explicit analysis as an instrument of terror in several of his imaginative works, most prominently in his first published novel, *The Outsider*.[7]

In following the paths of association that underlie Camus's ethical stance, I will deal with his imaginative literary works more or less in chronological order. It is difficult to preserve this order strictly because there is a certain amount of overlap between works considerably removed from each other in time. His early essays and his notebooks contain passages that reappear almost unchanged in novels written years later. Nevertheless, there is a progression in the unconscious material from one book to another. It seems to me it is not uncommon for serious writers to use their literary work, perhaps without realizing it, as a means of giving expression to unconscious wishes and fears that are striving for recognition, and that the authors make ground step by step in this pursuit as their work progresses. What usually appears is that writers are struggling against the unsupported moral convictions that were imposed on them and which are now felt as barriers to their self-realisation. That is not to say that they wish to break through repression in order to plunge into kinds of behavior the world regards as evil. The point is rather that they want to claim that those wishes are *not* 'evil,' but are a legitimate part of human nature. In repression one is continually denying the reality of

5 J. R. Maze, "The Concept of Attitude." *Inquiry*, 1973, 16, 168–205.

6 Here, as in many other places throughout this book, I am deeply indebted to Herbert Lottman's *Albert Camus: A Biography*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1979.

7 Albert Camus, *The Outsider*. Translated from the French by Joseph Laredo. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, UK: Penguin, (1942) 2000.

parts of oneself, of impulses that one really at some level knows are there. This is a fundamental form of self-alienation, leading to feelings of emotional aridity and inauthenticity. The person who is capable of insight, of intuiting the disguised motivations in others' behavior and hence also in his or her own impulses, can make ground in recognizing and to some extent analyzing away the barriers to self-knowledge, and so ridding himself or herself of the deadening feeling of self-deception.

None of the foregoing is to be taken as suggesting that a work of art is nothing but a disguised and distorted expression of neurotic complexes remote from consciousness, as if the work were to be thought of as comparable to a neurotic symptom. That sort of denigration may sometimes be justly applicable to works of pornography, or sentimentally romantic pulp fiction. But in serious and valuable literary endeavor, one can expect to find the author consciously engaging with universal problems in psychological development and in the individual's engagement with conflicting social demands and limitations. This, as I said, will be some of the best work of the author's conscious mind, based on personal experience as well as on accumulated knowledge of social process.

It is hardly surprising that in seriously contemplating and intuiting what a character's response to certain pressures would be, related themes conscious *and unconscious* in the author's mental life would be enlisted and find representation in the developing work. One might say that, in the main, the unconscious processes provide the passion and the images, while conscious reflection works over them to bring out relevancies and discard inconsistencies. As Elizabeth Dalton expresses the matter:

> A good psychoanalytic reading [...] ought to demonstrate the continuity and dialectical tension between what is apparent and what is hidden, to show how the lines of meaning lead back and forth across the frontier of consciousness, so

that the explicit meaning of the text is enriched rather than diminished by the understanding of unconscious elements.[8]

Psychological analysis finds work to do where rationalization fails of its intended effect, where a character's action is implausible, where something is allowed into the text without any logical connection with the plot, where someone who seems a disguised parent-figure arouses extreme emotions in another character. In interpreting such an instance as having a particular unconscious meaning, the literary analyst should always seek to find some corroborating detail occurring independently in the work, or conceivably in something else the author has written which touches on similar material. That is, two or more different chains of association converge on the same unconscious theme.

Following up the line of thought developed above concerning the role of the parents in laying down the framework of an individual's sense of guilt, and its relation to justice and injustice, one should look for any specific events that may have started this process. Albert would have heard of his father's death only some years after it had occurred. Such accounts established the image of his father in the world of myth, a greater-than-life status that most fathers gradually lose in the banality of everyday life. The solitary specific conscience-forming legacy that Albert had from him came by way of a family reminiscence. His father had been morally outraged by a farm worker's murder of his employer's family, and had risen early one morning in order to go and witness the condemned man's execution by guillotine. He returned visibly shaken, vomited repeatedly and lay down on his bed.

8 Elizabeth Dalton, *Unconscious Structure in* The Idiot: *A Study in Literature and Psychoanalysis.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979, p. 33. See also discussion by Agnes Petocz, *Freud, Psychoanalysis and Symbolism.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 188, 189.