Contemporary Literary Criticism

CLC 124

ISSN 0091-3421

Volume 124

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and Other Creative Writers

Jeffrey W. Hunter
EDITOR

Jennie Cromie
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Justin Karr
Linda Pavlovski
ASSISTANT EDITORS

GALE GROUP

Detroit
New York
San Francisco
London
Boston
Woodbridge, CT

STAFF

Jeffrey W. Hunter, *Editor*

Jenny Cromie, Timothy J. White, *Associate Editors*
Justin Karr, Linda Pavlovski, *Assistant Editors*

Josh Lauer, *Contributing Editor*

Maria Franklin, *Permissions Manager*
Kimberly F. Smilay, *Permissions Specialist*
Kelly Quin, *Permissions Associate*
Erin Bealmear and Sandy Gore, *Permissions Assistants*

Victoria B. Cariappa, *Research Manager*
Corrine Boland, Wendy Festerling, Tamara Nott, Tracie A. Richardson, *Research Associates*
Tim Lehnerer, Patricia Love, *Research Assistants*

Mary Beth Trimper, *Production Director*
Cindy Range, *Production Assistants*

Barbara J. Yarrow, *Graphic Services Manager*
Sherrell Hobbs, *Macintosh Artist*
Randy Bassett, *Image Database Supervisor*
Robert Duncan and Mikal Ansari, *Scanner Operators*
Pamela Reed, *Imaging Coordinator*

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 76-46132
ISBN 0-7876-3199-X
ISSN 0091-3421

Printed in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Preface

A Comprehensive Information Source on Contemporary Literature

Named "one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years" by *Reference Quarterly,* the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC,* therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today's reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC presents significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered by *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign writers, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Format of the Book

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author's career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author's works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

Features

A *CLC* author entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the author's name in the form under which the author has most commonly published, followed by birth date, and death date when applicable. Uncertainty as to a birth or death date is indicated by a question mark.

- A **Portrait** of the author is included when available.

- A brief **Biographical and Critical Introduction** to the author and his or her work precedes the criticism. The first line of the introduction provides the author's full name, pseudonyms (if applicable), nationality, and a listing of genres in which the author has written. To provide users with easier access to information, the biographical and critical essay included in each author entry is divided into four categories: "Introduction," "Biographical Information," "Major Works," and "Critical Reception." The introductions to single-work entries—entries that focus on well known and frequently studied books, short stories, and poems—are similarly organized to quickly provide readers with information on the plot and major characters of the work being discussed, its major themes, and its critical reception. Previous volumes of *CLC* in which the author has been featured are also listed in the introduction.

- A list of **Principal Works** notes the most important writings by the author. When foreign-language works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets.

- The **Criticism** represents various kinds of critical writing, ranging in form from the brief review to the scholarly exegesis. Essays are selected by the editors to reflect the spectrum of opinion about a specific work or about an author's literary career in general. The critical and biographical materials are presented chronologically, adding a useful perspective to the entry. All titles by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type, which enables the reader to easily identify the works being discussed. Publication information (such as publisher names and book prices) and parenthetical numerical references (such as footnotes or page and line references to specific editions of a work) have been deleted at the editor's discretion to provide smoother reading of the text.

- Critical essays are prefaced by **Explanatory Notes** as an additional aid to readers. These notes may provide several types of valuable information, including: the reputation of the critic, the importance of the work of criticism, the commentator's approach to the author's work, the purpose of the criticism, and changes in critical trends regarding the author.

- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** designed to help the user find the original essay or book precedes each critical piece.

- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.

- A concise **Further Reading** section appears at the end of entries on authors for whom a significant amount of criticism exists in addition to the pieces reprinted in *CLC*. Each citation in this section is accompanied by a descriptive annotation describing the content of that article. Materials included in this section are grouped under various headings (e.g., Biography, Bibliography, Criticism, and Interviews) to aid users in their search for additional information. Cross-references to other useful sources published by The Gale Group in which the author has appeared are also included: *Authors in the News, Black Writers, Children's Literature Review, Contemporary Authors, Dictionary of Literary Biography, DISCovering Authors, Drama Criticism, Hispanic Literature Criticism, Hispanic Writers, Native North American Literature, Poetry Criticism, Something about the Author, Short Story Criticism, Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series,* and *Something about the Author Autobiography Series.*

Other Features

CLC also includes the following features:

- An **Acknowledgments** section lists the copyright holders who have granted permission to reprint material in this volume of *CLC*. It does not, however, list every book or periodical reprinted or consulted during the preparation of the volume.

- Each new volume of *CLC* includes a **Cumulative Topic Index,** which lists all literary topics treated in *CLC, NCLC, TCLC,* and *LC 1400-1800.*

- A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all the authors who have appeared in the various literary criticism series published by The Gale Group, with cross-references to Gale's biographical and autobiographical series. A full listing of the series referenced there appears on the first page of the indexes of this volume. Readers will welcome this cumulated author index as a useful tool for locating an author within the various series. The index, which lists birth and death dates when available, will be particularly valuable for those authors who are identified with a certain period but whose death dates cause them to be placed in another, or for those authors whose careers span two periods. For example, Ernest Hemingway is found in *CLC,* yet F. Scott Fitzgerald, a writer often associated with him, is found in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism.*

- A **Cumulative Nationality Index** alphabetically lists all authors featured in *CLC* by nationality, followed by numbers corresponding to the volumes in which the authors appear.

- An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC.* Listings are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, novellas, dramas, films, record albums, and poetry, short story, and essay collections are printed in italics, while all individual poems, short stories, essays, and songs are printed in roman type within quotation marks; when published separately (e.g., T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land),* the titles of long poems are printed in italics.

- In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale has also produced a **Special Paperbound Edition** of the *CLC* title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of the index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index: it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

Citing *Contemporary Literary Criticism*

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume in the Literary Criticism Series may use the following general forms to footnote reprinted criticism. The first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted in books:

[1]Alfred Cismaru, "Making the Best of It," *The New Republic,* 207, No. 24, (December 7, 1992), 30, 32; excerpted and reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism,* Vol. 85, ed. Christopher Giroux (Detroit: Gale, 1995), pp. 73-4.

[2]Yvor Winters, *The Post-Symbolist Methods* (Allen Swallow, 1967); excerpted and reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism,* Vol. 85, ed. Christopher Giroux (Detroit: Gale, 1995), pp. 223-26.

Suggestions Are Welcome

The editors hope that readers will find *CLC* a useful reference tool and welcome comments about the work. Send comments and suggestions to: Editors, *Contemporary Literary Criticism,* The Gale Group, 27500 Drake Rd., Farmington Hills, MI 48333-3535.

Acknowledgments

The editors wish to thank the copyright holders of the excerpted criticism included in this volume and the permissions managers of many book and magazine publishing companies for assisting us in securing reproduction rights. We are also grateful to the staffs of the Detroit Public Library, the Library of Congress, the University of Detroit Mercy Library, Wayne State University Purdy/Kresge Library Complex, and the University of Michigan Libraries for making their resources available to us. Following is a list of the copyright holders who have granted us permission to reproduce material in this volume of CLC. Every effort has been made to trace copyright, but if omissions have been made, please let us know.

COPYRIGHTED MATERIALS IN *CLC*, VOLUME 124, WERE REPRODUCED FROM THE FOLLOWING PERIODICALS:

American Literature, v. 63, December, 1991. Copyright © 1991 Duke University Press, Durham, NC. Reproduced by permission.—**Boundary 2**, v. 19, Spring, 1992. Copyright © 1992 by Duke University Press, Durham, NC. Reproduced by permission.—**Chicago Review**, v. 32, Spring, 1981. Copyright © 1981 by Chicago Review. Reproduced by permission.—**Christianity Today**, September 7, 1998 for "Still Surprised by Lewis" by J. I. Packer. © 1998 by Christianity Today, Inc. Reproduced by permission of the author.—**Commonweal**, December 9, 1977. Copyright © 1977 Commonweal Publishing Co., Inc. Reproduced by permission of Commonweal Foundation.—**Contemporary Review**, v. 260, March, 1992. Reproduced by permission.—**Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction**, v. XXXI, Spring, 1990. Copyright © 1990 Helen Dwight Reid Educational Foundation. Reproduced with permission of the Helen Dwight Reid Educational Foundation, published by Heldref Publications, 119 18th Street, N. W., Washington, DC 20036-1802.—**Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction**, v. XXVIII, Summer, 1987. Copyright © 1987 Helen Dwight Reid Educational Foundation. Reproduced with permission of the Helen Dwight Reid Educational Foundation, published by Heldref Publications, 119 18th Street, N. W., Washington, DC 20036-1802.—**The Dalhousie Review**, v. 60, Winter, 1980-81 for "Robert Lowell: The Problems and Power of Allusion" by Lauriat Lane, Jr. Reproduced by permission of the publisher and the author.—**First Things**, no. 85, August-September, 1998. Reproduced by permission.—**French Cultural Studies**, v. 8, February, 1997. Reproduced by permission.—**The French Review**, v. 60, October, 1986. Copyright 1986 by the American Association of Teachers of French. Reproduced by permission.—**L'Esprit Créateur**, v. XXXIII, Spring, 1993. Copyright © 1993 by L'Esprit Créateur. Reproduced by permission.—**Literature and Psychology**, v. XVII, 1967. © Editor 1967. Reproduced by permission of the publisher.—**The Massachusetts Review**, v. XVII, Autumn, 1976. © 1976. Reproduced from The Massachusetts Review, The Massachusetts Review, Inc. by permission.—**The Minnesota Review**, v. VIII, 1968 for "The Way Down to Wisdom of Louis-Ferdinand Céline" by Kingsley Widmer. © 1968 The Minnesota Review. Reproduced by permission of the author.—**MLN**, v. 107, September, 1992. © copyright 1992 by The Johns Hopkins University Press. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.—**Modern Age**, v. 33, Summer, 1991. Reproduced by permission.—**Modern Fiction Studies**, v. XVII, Spring, 1971; v. 32, Spring, 1986. Copyright © 1971, 1986 by Purdue Research Foundation, West Lafayette, IN 47907. All rights reserved. Both reproduced by permission of The Johns Hopkins University.—**Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature**, v. XVII, Summer, 1984; v. XIX, Fall, 1986. © Mosaic 1984, 1986. Acknowledgment of previous publication is herewith made.—**The Nation**, New York, April 11, 1987; October 2, 1995. © 1987, 1995 The Nation magazine/ The Nation Company, Inc. Both reproduced by permission.—**The New Criterion**, v. 11, March, 1993 for "Camus Today" by Renee Winegarten. Copyright © 1993 by The Foundation for Cultural Review. Reproduced by permission of the author.—**The New England Quarterly**, v. LXVII, March, 1994 for "'One Gallant Rush': The Writing of Robert Lowell's 'For the Union Dead'" by William Doreski. Copyright 1994 by The New England Quarterly. Reproduced by permission of the publisher and the author.—**New England Review**, v. LXVIII, March, 1995 for "Surviving the Marketplace: Robert Lowell and the Sixties" by Hilene Flanzbaum; v. 16, Winter, 1996 for "Robert Lowell's Day by Day: 'Until the Wristwatch is Taken From the Wrist'" by Richard Tillinghast. Copyright © 1995, 1996 by Middlebury College. Both reproduced by permission of the respective authors.—**The New York Times Book Review**, July 28, 1968. Copyright © 1968 by The New York

Contents

Albert Camus
1913-1960

French-Algerian novelist, dramatist, essayist, short story writer, journalist, and critic.

The following entry presents an overview of Camus's career through 1997. For further information on his life and works, see *CLC,* Volumes 1, 2, 4, 9, 11, 14, 32, 63, and 69.

INTRODUCTION

A celebrated novelist and postwar intellectual, Albert Camus is considered one of the most important writers of the twentieth century. His short novel *L'etranger* (1942; *The Stranger*) and existentialist treatise *Le mythe de Sisyphe* (1942; *The Myth of Sisyphus*) are regarded as seminal works of "absurdism," a literary philosophy founded on the belief that human existence is inherently meaningless and futile. The long essay *L'homme révolté* (1951; *The Rebel*) and subsequent novels *La peste* (1947; *The Plague*) and *La chute* (1956; *The Fall*) fortified Camus's reputation as a formidable independent thinker and uncompromising artist. Public and critical interest in his work was renewed by the posthumous publication of his unfinished novel *Le premier homme* (1994; *The First Man*). His Nobel prize-winning novels, essays, and plays evince his commitment to social justice and the possibility of moral integrity in the modern world. Once hailed as the conscience of France, Camus is an internationally renowned literary figure whose poignant metaphysical concerns and arresting prose style exert a profound influence on contemporary letters.

Biographical Information

Born in Mondovi, Algeria, a French colony in North Africa until 1962, Camus was raised in poverty by his illiterate Spanish mother. His father, an itinerant laborer of French descent, was fatally wounded in the First World War before Camus reached his first birthday. In 1914 Camus moved with his brother and emotionally detached mother into a small apartment in Algiers which they shared with his uncle and grandmother. The adverse circumstances of his upbringing forged a lasting respect for his hardworking mother and the plight of the underprivileged. With the encouragement of Louis Germain, an elementary school teacher who early recognized Camus's abilities, he won a competitive grant to enter the Grand Lycée in Paris in 1924. At the Grand Lycée, Camus's intellectual mentor was philosophy teacher Jean Grenier, whom he later studied under at the University of Algiers. Shortly before enrolling at the University of Algiers at age sixteen, Camus suffered a near fatal bout with tuberculosis, a chronic illness whose physical and emotional effects haunted him for the remainder of his life. After a period of convalescence, he began studies in philosophy and literature at the University of Algiers, from which he graduated in 1936. While still a student, Camus married briefly and divorced; he remarried Francine Faure in 1940. Camus became increasingly involved in political activities during the 1930s. He joined the Communist Party in 1935, though resigned his membership in 1937 over ideological differences. He published his first two books, *L'envers et l'endroit* (1937; *The Right Side and the Wrong Side*) and *Noces* (1937; *Nuptials*), the same year. He also wrote and abandoned his first novel *La morte heureuse* (1971; *A Happy Death*). Between 1935 and 1938, Camus was active as an actor, writer, and producer with Theatre du travail (Labor Theater), renamed Theatre de l'equipe (Team Theater) after he abandoned the Communist Party. During the Second World War, Camus wrote *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Stranger* while living in France and Algeria. He also wrote for *Combat,* the clandestine newspaper of the French Resistance, through which he met existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. Upon the Allied liberation of Paris in 1944, Camus

was awarded the Medal of the Liberation. Acclaim for *The Stranger* and his contributions to *Combat,* which he presided over as editor until 1947, quickly established Camus as a foremost French writer and intellectual of the postwar period. Over the next decade he produced *The Plague, The Rebel,* and dramatic works including *Caligula* (1944), *Le malentendu* (1944; *The Misunderstanding*), *L'etat de siege* (1948; *The State of Siege*), and *Les justes* (1949; *The Just Assassins*). During the 1950s, Camus's disdain for Soviet communism precipitated his highly publicized estrangement from Sartre and other Left Bank intellectuals. Camus's passivity during the Algerian struggle for independence also drew heavy criticism that damaged his reputation and plunged him into depression and writer's block. Despite such setbacks, he produced *The Fall,* the collection of essays *L'eté* (1954; *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*), and the volume of short stories *L'exil et le royaume* (1957; *Exile and the Kingdom*). Camus was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957. Three years later he was killed in an automobile accident near Paris. The manuscript for *The First Man* was found in his briefcase at the site of the wreck.

Major Works

Camus's fiction, discursive writings, and dramatic works revolve around the central themes of existential alienation, moral dilemma, and revolt. His first novel, *A Happy Death,* and early autobiographic essays in *The Right Side and the Wrong Side* and *Nuptials* adumbrate the lucidity, irony, and lyrical quality of his subsequent works. *The Right Side and the Wrong Side,* considered a pivotal early text, sheds light on Camus's experience with poverty and his relationship with his silent mother. His most important works are contained in two triptychs, each comprised of a novel, essay, and play. The first grouping, often referred to as the "cycle of the absurd," includes *The Myth of Sisyphus, The Stranger,* and *Caligula.* In the philosophical essay *The Myth of Sisyphus,* Camus examines the fundamental paradoxes of the human condition as evidence of the absurd. The title refers to Sisyphus of Greek legend who was condemned to repeatedly roll a massive stone up a hill only to roll it back down after reaching the crest. Dismissing suicide as a viable response to such futility, Camus suggests that consciousness of the absurd and vigilant resistance to its terms may facilitate the formation of personal identity and value. *The Stranger,* a novel set in Camus's native Algeria, features protagonist Meursault, a French-Algerian youth who impulsively guns down an Arab man on the beach while overcome by the blinding sun. Arrested, jailed, tried, and sentenced to death, Meursault begins to reflect on his actions and the absurdity of his situation. Emotionless over the recent death of his mother and unrepentant for the murder, Meursault welcomes his fate and resigns himself to his execution in open defiance of society and its imposed morality. In the play *Caligula,* Camus portrays the eponymous Roman emperor's tyrannical quest for unbridled individual freedom. Stunned at the death of his sister, who is also his lover, Caligula becomes cognizant of the absurdity of life, whereupon he initiates an orgy of random rapes, murders, and punishments to act out his disillusionment. In *The Misunderstanding,* another significant play from this period, Camus presents a variation of the Oedipus myth in which a man is mistakenly murdered by his mother and sister. Camus's second major triad, unified by the theme of revolt, includes *The Plague, The Just Assassins,* and *The Rebel. The Plague* recounts the impact of a fictitious epidemic on the populace of Oran, a city in Algeria. The protagonist and narrator is Dr. Bernard Rieux, a secular physician committed to the systematic treatment of the afflicted. His spiritual foil is Father Paneloux, a Jesuit priest who appeals to divine intervention and the promise of salvation. Though the pestilence is eventually brought under control by a medical, or human, solution, their cooperative effort suggests the importance of fraternity and courage in the face of oppression. Regarded as a allegory of the Nazi Occupation of France during the Second World War, the novel illustrates the imperative of revolt against agents of persecution. *The Just Assassins* dramatizes the human cost of political violence in the service of ideology or expediency. The play centers upon Kalayiev, an idealistic poet and revolutionary who volunteers to throw a bomb at the Grand Duke in a planned assassination. However, when he notices the Duke's niece and nephew beside him in the carriage, he changes his mind, realizing that for this act he would be a murderer rather than a "just assassin." Camus elucidates the history and varieties of revolution in *The Rebel,* an extended essay in which he attempts to formulate the ethical conditions for revolt free of murder or malefaction. Opposing the nihilistic, violent tendencies of mass revolutions, Camus concludes that the individual must revolt against injustice by simply refusing to be a part of it. Camus's last novels, though extensions of earlier investigations, reveal a new vitality and theological interest. The novel *The Fall* presents the enigmatic, hypocritical confessions of Jean-Baptiste Clamence, a successful trial lawyer who, through rambling, self-mocking conversation with an interlocutor, excoriates himself for his perversity and numerous transgressions. The title refers to his guilt at having once failed to rescue a drowning woman. In his unfinished novel *The First Man,* Camus began to reconstruct the story of his life in the experiences of autobiographic protagonist Jacques Cormery. The existing narrative, a fragmentary account of Jacques's childhood, reveals Camus's deeply personal search for self-identity and connection with his prematurely deceased father.

Critical Reception

Camus is widely recognized as one of the most provocative and enduring literary figures of the postwar period. He is consistently praised for his perceptive evocation of meta-

physical despair, the stark intensity and natural imagery of his lyrical prose, and his unequivocal condemnation of political tyranny. A preeminent absurdist writer who captured the moral climate of his generation, Camus defined the philosophical and artistic sensibility of many contemporary authors, especially those affiliated with the Theatre of the Absurd during the 1950s and 1960s. His popular association with existentialism, a classification that he dismissed, is traced to the philosophical legacy of Fydor Dostoyevsky, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Soren Kierkegaard. While *The Stranger* and *The Myth of Sisyphus* are viewed as his greatest accomplishments, Camus is also highly regarded for *The Plague, The Fall,* and his examination of revolution in *The Rebel.* Critics note that *The First Man,* though incomplete, is further evidence of Camus's remarkable sensitivity and narrative gifts. *Caligula* and *The Misunderstanding* are generally considered Camus's most effective plays, however, his dramatic works as a whole are typically viewed as secondary to his novels and essays. *The Stranger,* his best known work and a brilliant study of modern alienation, continues to attract rigorous critical scrutiny directed at the moral and psychological motivations of its protagonist, particularly as informed by Camus's aversion to capital punishment and his relationship with his mother. Critics frequently comment on the significance of Camus's early poverty and the Algerian landscape in this and all his writings. Though Camus enjoyed a mercurial rise, he became the subject of ridicule following his notorious break with Sartre, intensified by his neutrality during the Franco-Algerian war. Camus's detractors, especially those allied with Sartre, cite egregious elements of political naivete, moral intransigence, and philosophical amateurism in his writing. Despite such criticism, Camus's literary reputation rests largely upon the power of his prose, his unshakable commitment to his art, and his compelling effort to fashion meaning out the absurd.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

L'envers et l'endroit [*The Wrong Side and the Right Side*] (essays) 1937
Noces [*Nuptials*] (essays) 1937
Le mythe de Sisyphe: Essai sur l'absurde [*The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*] (essays) 1942
L'etranger [*The Stranger;* also published as *The Outsider*] (novel) 1942
Caligula (drama) 1944
Le malentendu [*The Misunderstanding;* also translated as *Cross Purpose*] (drama) 1944
La peste [*The Plague*] (novel) 1947
L'etat de siege [*The State of Siege*] (drama) 1948
Les justes [*The Just Assassins*] (drama) 1949
L'homme révolté [*The Rebel*] (essays) 1951
L'eté [*Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*] (essays) 1954
La chute [*The Fall*] (novel) 1956
Requiem pour une nonne [adaptor; from the novel *Requiem for a Nun* by William Faulkner] (drama) 1956
L'exil et le royaume [*Exile and the Kingdom*] (short stories) 1957
Caligula and Three Other Plays [contains *Caligula, Le Malentendu, L'Etat de Siege,* and *Les Justes*] (drama) 1958
Les possédés [adaptor; from the novel *The Possessed* by Fydor Dostoyevsky] (drama) 1959
Lyrical and Critical Essays [includes *L'envers et l'endroit* and *Noces*] (essays) 1967
La mort heureuse [*A Happy Death*] (novel) 1971
Le premier homme [*The First Man*] (unfinished novel) 1994

CRITICISM

Alan W. Woolfolk (essay date Summer 1984)

SOURCE: "The Dangers of *Engagement:* Camus' Political Esthetics," in *Mosaic,* Vol. XVII, No. 3, Summer, 1984, pp. 59-70.

[*In the following essay, Woolfolk discusses Camus's political sympathies and overriding artistic ideals. According to Woolfolk, Camus resisted participation in revolutionary causes due to his belief that political ideology limits the artist's experience and creative vision.*]

"True artists," Camus stated in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, "force themselves to understand instead of judging." In this respect, he is not unlike his character Tarrou, the former political revolutionary in ***The Plague,*** who admits:

> For many years I've been ashamed, mortally ashamed, of having been, even with the best intentions, even at many removes, a murderer in my turn. As time went on I merely learned that even those who were better than the rest could not keep themselves nowadays from killing or letting others kill, because such is the logic by which they live; and that we can't stir a finger in this world without the risk of bringing death to somebody. Yes, I've been ashamed ever since; I have realized that we all have plague, and I have lost my peace. And today I am still trying to find it; still trying to understand all those others and not to be the mortal enemy of anyone. . . . I leave it to others to make history. I know, too, that I'm not qualified to pass judgment on those others.

Similarly, the title of the novel itself suggests Camus' critical attitude toward judgment, the "plague" being the ancient Biblical symbol of punishment for wrong-doing.

At the same time, however, Camus also sensed that understanding had its limits, and that it was necessary to preserve the ability to deny, to say *No* to experience, to judge or condemn those who committed violence in the name of history. And it is this recognition that is the key to his attitude toward the writer's role in society.

Despite Camus' unquestioned sympathy for the victims of social injustice and political exploitation, art did not encompass for him, as it did for many of his contemporaries, an overwhelming involvement in politics. Art might be required to limit politics, but never should politics limit art. Political commitment or *engagement* was for him an entanglement which led to contemporary nihilism. Accordingly, rather than the expression *engagement,* Camus chose with a note of irony the term *embarqué* to indicate his deep reluctance at finding himself, almost against his will, compelled to address political concerns. I say *almost* because Camus was anything but unmoved by "history's woes." For instance, his early and consistent theme of passionate indignation over the miseries of poverty was perhaps most openly expressed in his 1939 reporting for the leftist newspaper *Alger Républicain,* in a series entitled "*Misère de la Kabylie.*" Later, this indignation was overshadowed by his unflagging resistance to political violence and terror enacted in the name of abolishing such impoverishment in Algeria and elsewhere. In both cases his passionate rejection of misery precluded political commitment: "The only *really* committed artist is he who, without refusing to take part in the combat, at least refuses to join the regular armies and remains a freelance." Camus found that he could no more side with left-wing militants than with right-wing militarists, since both groups were prepared to engage in violent acts that would destroy art and ultimately all civilization.

At nearly the same time that Camus began writing during the early 1930s, the image of the *engagé* intellectual became popular in French culture. According to the leftist Catholic, Emmanuel Mounier, who was one of the first to reintroduce the idea to the educated French public after the Dreyfus case, "to be viable one's action must have both a will to be efficacious and a spiritual ingredient. It is a double polarity, prophetic and political, and a constant tension between the two poles must exist." Despite a brief membership in the Communist Party and two years of anti-government newspaper reporting, which resulted in his being evicted from Algeria, as a young man Camus rejected, albeit ambivalently, the criterion of political efficacy. In a prewar review of communist Paul Nizan's *La Conspiration,* he stated that "Nizan requires an *engagement* in which a man relinquishes himself, and with himself his prejudices and choices. . . . We cannot follow him on that terrain." Camus' reluctant attitude toward judgment, however, immediately moved him to equivocate: "But, all things considered, it is as futile a problem as that of immortality, an affair that a man solves for himself and upon which one should not pass judgment." He concluded, on this occasion, that in the case of the writer his work must serve as evidence for judging the effect of *engagement.*

Building upon this criterion in his later writings, Camus grew to oppose political commitment precisely because it threatened to overwhelm the higher discipline that art represented in the distracting immediacies of the struggle for power. It was not simply a matter, as he wrote nearly twenty years after the Nizan review, of art being "threatened by the powers of the state." It was "more complex, more serious too," as soon as it became "apparent that the battle is waged within the artist himself." Art loses from such a "constant obligation." It loses that "ease, to begin with, and that divine liberty so apparent in the work of Mozart." Camus thought it obvious "why we have more journalists than creative writers, more boyscouts of painting than Cézannes, and why sentimental tales or detective novels have taken the place of *War and Peace* or *The Charterhouse of Parma.*" Implicitly, he understood that all genuine art, as higher culture, lives only if it can successfully discipline the momentary imperative to become engaged.

Camus did not escape unscathed from the conflict between politics and art. His statement on the occasion of accepting the Nobel Prize that "to create today is to create dangerously" reflects his recognition that the literary imagination had come loose from its traditional forms and was opening itself to dangerous creative possibilities. Elsewhere, too, he stated that "if we bring ourselves as artists into the positions we take up as men the experience will, in an unseen but powerful way, weaken our power of speech." In his role as artist, he recognized the danger of incoherence first of all within himself. Yet, like Marx and Engels in nineteenth-century London and the revolutionaries of eighteenth-century Paris, Camus found it impossible to avert his eyes from the misery and unhappiness of the masses: "What characterizes our time, indeed," he stated, "is the way the masses and their wretched condition have burst upon contemporary sensibilities."

In the course of his lifelong response to the social question, Camus developed a bold and perhaps fatal artistic strategy: he returned to the fundamental demands for justice underlying modern politics in its revolutionary form and swallowed them whole into his art, on the gamble that successful incorporation would allow for a more meaningful and less violent externalization of emotions. Thus, the imperative of responding to raw physical suffering and biological need witnessed in "*Misère de la Kabylie*" reappears again

and again in his writings. Prompted by what Hannah Arendt has called passion in its noblest form, "compassion," Camus stubbornly refused to let go of the theme of abject suffering. Implacable, he insisted on recruiting what he thought was the *raison d'être* of Marxist and socialist politics into the camp of literature rather than allowing them to subsume art: "We writers of the twentieth century . . . must know that we can never escape the common misery and that our only justification, if indeed there is a justification, is to speak up, insofar as we can, for those who cannot do so." Caught between the demands of his art and the demands of political commitment, Camus attempted to work out an apology for the relevance of art in the twentieth century. As in the case of the Christian apologists, the crucial question, from the perspective of all higher, ennobling culture, hinged on whether he could successfully close the abyss of possibilities that he dared to open.

There have been several notable attempts within European literature to broaden the imagination to the point where it might control or at least contain the involvement of thought and action in modern politics. George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is perhaps the best known example, but it is notable in particular because of Orwell's attitude of total acceptance toward the corruptions of political power. Winston Smith, after all, does not symbolically triumph over O'Brien. In the end Winston has moved beyond personal despair because he has been so completely emptied of any memory and the capacity for love that there is nothing left to do but consummate his totalitarian surrender and "love" Big Brother. Winston's acquiescence to the ultimate political regime imaginatively represents what Orwell elsewhere predicted in a mood of total despair: "The autonomous individual is going to be stamped out of existence. But this means that literature, in the form in which we know it, must suffer at least a temporary death."

Another political novel of the same era, Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon,* is almost as pessimistic in that it ends with the sacrifice of the old Bolshevik, Rubashov, to the totality of the Party. Yet it extends beyond what Orwell himself described as the unusual ability of a good political writer—"to imagine oneself as the victim"—to what Rubashov calls the evil of the Bolshevik mind: "We have thrown overboard all conventions, our sole guiding principle is that of consequent logic: we are sailing without ethical ballast." Ignazio Silone's *Bread and Wine* goes still further in its attempt to dominate and transform the meaning of political commitment. Just as Rubashov expresses his speculation about the nature of the Party evil in the privacy of his diary, so the committed Marxist Pietro Spina asks in the privacy of his jottings whether his denial of "petit bourgeois prejudices" is not the source of his error. But, as Camus once pointed out in a review of *Bread and Wine,* Silone's lesson represents a "return from an abstract philosophy of the revolution to the bread and wine of simplicity." In consequence, Silone stands closer to Camus' goals of assigning limits to revolutionary thought and establishing the supremacy of artistic insight.

These goals are most clearly expressed in Camus' own interpretation of Martin du Gard's *Les Thibault,* which he considered one of the first novels to have mastered the dangers of political commitment. Camus makes his case for the superiority of artistic over political meaning by arguing for the symbolic strength of the rebellious Antoine over his revolutionary socialist brother, Jacques. While both men are deeply moved enough by the existence of human misery to leave the narrowness of their private lives for a broader world of public purpose, Jacques' character transformation is "less significant," less profound, less persuasive because he adheres to the reason of revolutionary doctrine. In Camus' analysis, the unreality of revolutionary ideas introduces a shallow thought-world that uproots and destroys lives. Their emptiness is betrayed in the impatience of Jacques "who can be satisfied only by action" and who dies, finally, as a terrorist. In contrast, Antoine proves to be the "true hero" precisely because he is the deeper or "richer character" when compared with his politically committed brother. Politics does not consume his social relationships. The revulsion he feels at "the recognition of a common misery" extends beyond politics into his profession of medicine, which, Camus implies, helps both to deepen and to order his life. In the end Antoine is the more uncertain but stable, even when confronting death, for having rejected the ideological passions of political commitment.

Camus' rejection of political commitment, intellectually and emotionally, rests upon the argument that revolutionary doctrine corrupts the original feeling of indignation and revulsion over the perceived injustices of the world by narrowing their expression to the political realm alone. As to the desirability of having these feelings in the first place, Camus simply took this for granted, implicitly invoking the insights of the modern novel in particular. As he saw it, Dostoevsky had established beyond a doubt the justification for intense and passionate revolt in the face of human misery through the character of Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov.* Ivan's fault lay not in his revolt against creation but in the rationalization of his rebellion to the point of imagining that "everything is permitted." Intellectualization marked his fall into the political temptations expressed by the Grand Inquisitor.

Camus thought it quite clear that *not* "everything is permitted." But he was not about to appeal to a vision of sacred order to narrow the possibilities that the imperatives of suffering and misery raised. If any created order existed, it was created by men; hence, the importance of the artist. As an exemplary rebel, the artist represented a disciplining of cre-

ative energies, a tempering of experience, because of a loyalty to the very forms on which art depends. "Both the historical mind and the artist seek to remake the world," Camus wrote, "but the artist, through an obligation of his very nature, recognizes limits the historical mind ignores." As to where this "nature" came from, Camus, except on rare occasions, did not deign to ask.

Camus' case against Marxist thought repeats many familiar points concerning its questionable scientific basis, the inaccuracies of its economic-historical predictions, its bourgeois prejudice in favor of economic-technological development, and its similarity to certain aspects of Christian thought. But the crux of Camus objections pertains to the subordination of the personality to historical demands, especially the demands of faith. Since Marxism, like Christianity, places man within a historical rather than a natural universe, Camus sees Marxist doctrine as suppressing both the opportunity for spontaneous revolt and the achievement of self-limitation by the autonomous personality. It is only insofar as Marxism envisions a release from the demands of history that he is sympathetic: "the aims, the prophecies are generous and universal," Camus writes of Marxism, "but the doctrine is restrictive, and the reduction of every value to historical terms leads to the direst consequences." More specifically, these serious consequences result from the denial of "ethical demands that form the basis of the Marxist dream." According to Camus, Marx himself was a rebel: "he rebelled against the degradation of work to the level of a commodity and of the worker to the level of an object." He affirmed the natural dignity of man. But Marx corrupted his original ethical demands when rebellion against injustice gave way to prophetic demands, not so much the prophecy of release from history into the Communist community of true individuals, as the prophecy of a protracted historical development that places the meaning of history at its end. In Camus' terms, Marx was a "fatalist," for by accepting the necessity of class struggles and economic progress, Marx accepted the necessity of misery and violence, of punishment in the name of the future. It no longer matters that the Kingdom of Ends is established by dictatorship and violence, that suffering becomes merely provisional and will be forgotten. And even if the "New Jerusalem" is achieved, "echoing with the roar of miraculous machinery," Camus asks, "who will still remember the cry of the victim?"

Despite the fact that Marxism is built upon what Camus sees as the Hegelian destruction of transcendence, parallels between the Old Jerusalem and the New Jerusalem run throughout Camus' analysis. Behind the historical interpretation of social reality, Camus ultimately finds the demands of faith. The punishing consequences of the fatalistic acceptance of misery result from neither an economics nor a science of history but from a religion of history imposed by a doctrinal faith. While he finds much to criticize in Marx's economic predictions and his submission to "the economic imperative" in a world governed by "the cult of production," it is the subordination of economic and scientific reasoning to the prophecy of an end to history that turns reason toward the rationalization of terror and violence. Doctrinal faith, in the form of Marxism, repeats the mistake of Christianity, which subjected "living reason to dead faith and freedom of the intellect to the maintenance of temporal power." Intellectualization corrupts the original moral demands associated with the virtues of revolt and leads to the quest for power. Because Camus operates from the assumption that there are no final or religious answers to the misery of living, he links all doctrines proclaiming such saving answers to the tendency toward "intellectual Caesarism." All authority is seen as a consequence of this bad habit of intellectualizing, which, if it is not simply a mask for power, certainly is a metaphor for the same.

Camus' reading of Western cultural history responds with an acute sensitivity to the problem of legitimacy in the modern state that Max Weber most clearly identified. He simply could not accept an ordinary answer to the extraordinary problem of justifying the use of violence. But his sensitivity to the violence at the root of the modern state—which will not be resolved, as he grasped in his anguish, by the intellectual trick of equating authority with legitimate power—was complicated by his anarchistic revolt against any theory of public authority. Having pointed to the crippled capacity to distinguish right from wrong peculiar to our times, Camus proceeded to call into question all authoritative standards of judgment, traditional and otherwise, by suggesting that they are a "plague" without purpose. The terror of power asserts itself not merely through intellectual creeds but especially by means of the repressive judgments, the *thou shalt nots,* against the spontaneous expressions of the human spirit. Camus compounded a variety of irreconcilable theories of the decline of Christianity to arrive at the charge that it is the Judaic heritage in Western culture that has led to the punishing demands of history and to the destruction of the Greek concept that man lives in a natural universe. Frightened by the injustice of the modern state, Camus simply projected his sense of injustice backward into the Western traditions that he otherwise recognized as having been decisively rejected by modern revolutionaries, with the result that he accented the continuity of religious and revolutionary traditions at the same time that he questioned their unity.

Camus' confusion of religious and revolutionary motifs can be directly traced to his concept of the *sacred.* He assumes that "only two possible worlds can exist for the human mind: the sacred (or, to speak in Christian terms, the world of grace) and the world of rebellion." As a consequence, the revolutionary thought-world of Marxism is assimilated to the realm of the sacred. But under the category of the sacred he