

camus's life

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

During this period of time, Camus and Casarès break off their affair, as Francine meets Camus in Paris, gets pregnant shortly thereafter, and gives birth to twins (Catherine and Jean) the following year. In the meantime, beyond the mechanics of putting out a paper, Camus is struggling with a variety of knotty policy questions at *Combat*, two of which stand out. The first question, how France should deal with those who had collaborated with the Germans during the occupation, put him in a difficult position. Camus had always been opposed to capital punishment, but justice seemed to require that the most egregious collaborators, who were directly or indirectly responsible for the deaths of many members of the Resistance, should themselves be put to death. Camus, who was taking a strong stand on the need for retributive justice after the war, supported the use of the death penalty. As the post-War trials made clear, however, there were many ambiguous cases, and the practicalities of meting out justice to collaborators proved to be far more nettlesome than the abstract concept of doing so. With this issue at stake, Camus became embroiled in an ongoing debate with Françoise Mauriac, a staunchly Catholic artist, who had himself been involved in the Resistance but was arguing for mercy rather than justice. As time passed, and individuals of dubious guilt came to be charged, Camus moved closer to Mauriac's position. The second question, which dealt with the contours of the Post-War French political reality, was even more intransigent. Increasingly, the options seemed to be narrowing to two, either supporting the conservative war hero Charles de Gaulle (favored, for example, by Malraux) or supporting the French Communist Party (a position toward which Sartre was moving, although hesitantly). Camus's ideal, as was reflected by his continuing support for the Socialist Party, was some variant of democratic socialism, but this was not a viable political option, and Camus was beginning to feel boxed in.

The 1945–6 time frame already contains within it, in encapsulated form, the seeds of what will become full-blown preoccupations for Camus, preoccupations that will torment him for the rest of his life. In 1945, Camus spent a few months in Algeria, where Arab hostility toward French colonial rule was rapidly growing. After a demonstration in which some Europeans were killed, the French authorities machine-gunned thousands of Arabs from the air, an incident that Camus later reported on in *Combat*. Camus's articles on this incident reflect his more general ambivalence concerning French colonial rule, for while unequivocally condemning the French response, the Algerian-born Camus could not bring himself to acknowledge that such things were the inevitable result of colonial rule, much less to support Algerian independence. Camus was also becoming increasingly ambivalent toward his friends. In 1946, he was spending a good deal of time not only with Sartre but also with the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a friend

of Sartre's, and Arthur Koestler, a well-known novelist and journalist. At the time, Merleau-Ponty still supported the Soviet regime (although he would later come to reject it on various grounds, the more theoretical among them reflected in *Adventures of the Dialectic*), while Koestler had become a staunch anti-communist, having already published *Darkness at Noon*, a novel that highlighted how the Soviet Revolution had increasingly come to devour its own. The four would argue over drinks, and while Camus did not especially like the belligerent Koestler, it was Koestler's view of the Soviet Union for which Camus had the most sympathy. At a party, Camus lambasted Merleau-Ponty for his critical review of Koestler's new book, *The Yogi and the Commissar*, and Camus stormed out, breaking with Merleau-Ponty. This incident foreshadows his subsequent break with Sartre and de Beauvoir, and, indeed, much of the French intellectual left. Crucially, although Camus would have no truck with Soviet communism, he was not a fan of American capitalism either. In a trip to the United States earlier that year (at the invitation of Alfred Knopf, his American publisher), he was put off by its crass commercialism, and, with the exception of New York's Chinatown, its general lack of community, but he did find Americans to be friendly and was entertained by the New York night scene (as well as an American college student, Patricia Blake, with whom he had a brief affair).

By early 1947, *Combat* was largely spent, as both political and personal tensions within the paper grew, which, in turn, undermined the coherence of the paper's editorial positions. Pia, who was friendly with Malraux and appeared to be moving toward the Gaullist position, left the paper, breaking his friendship with Camus in the process, and a few months afterward Camus left the paper as well. (Camus continued to support himself as a reader at Gallimard, a position that he would hold for the rest of his life, and played a role in facilitating the careers of some younger writers.) Later that year, *The Plague* was published, and the book, which became more popular than *The Stranger* (perhaps because it was less morally ambiguous), brought Camus even greater fame. Camus followed up his publication of *The Plague* with *State of Siege* in 1948, but the play received mixed reviews at best. Shortly thereafter, Camus rekindled his romance with Casarès by virtue of a chance encounter in the street, and the affair became for him a second marriage of sorts, although it did not preclude him from pursuing a fair number of more fleeting affairs. So, too, he met the poet René Char, who had been a revered participant in the French Resistance, and the two became fast friends. Toward the end of the year, a time during which the Cold War was firmly establishing itself, Camus engaged in a number of fleeting political activities. Along with Sartre, as well as a host of others, he spoke at the Revolutionary Democratic Union, and around this time he also helped to co-found the Group for International Liaisons in the Revolutionary

Union Movement, which was committed to criticizing both the United States and Soviet Union in the name of the working class. In 1949, Camus produced his play *The Just*, which received strong reviews, and spent roughly three months lecturing throughout South America, but the year ended badly for him, as he suffered another severe bout of tuberculosis.

While continuing to carry a relatively heavy workload at Gallimard, Camus poured himself into *The Rebel* at the start of the 1950s, and the book was published in the fall of 1951. Although *The Rebel* extols neither the United States nor western-style capitalism, by virtue of its attack on the Soviet Union and communism, more generally, it received mixed reviews from right-wing commentators, and thus had the effect of painting Camus into a corner. Camus had no sympathy for the right, which did not particularly like him either, but the scattered support that the book received in its quarters exacerbated the hostility with which it was received by the French left, and it had the effect of politically isolating Camus. This process culminated in mid-1952, when the book was reviewed by *Les Temps Modernes*, which was under Sartre's editorship. The review itself was written by Francis Jeanson, who had previously published a well-respected book on Sartre's philosophy, but Camus took the criticisms to be Sartre's. Refusing to respond to Jeanson, Camus fired over his head at Sartre, who, in turn, nastily responded, thus bringing their friendship to an end. To make matters worse, the fight was not confined to the intellectual community but was sensationalized by the general press, and the wide-ranging consensus (even amongst Camus's friends) was that Sartre had gotten the better of the exchange. In response, Camus basically retreated from the political arena, although he did take part in a protest against Spain's admission to Unesco in late 1952.

Camus's withdrawal from public life over the next year or so was also attributable to the fact that Francine had plunged into a severe depression, which necessitated an extended period of hospitalization, during which she was given electroshock therapy on multiple occasions. Feeling guilty about the part that he had played in her illness by virtue of his highly publicized affair with Casarès, as well as his more general domestic failures, Camus himself also fell into a depression (albeit one that was much less severe than Francine's). Nevertheless, during this period of time, he was able to work on a collection of essays that (like *The Wrong Side and the Right Side* and *Nuptials*) harkened back to his life in Algeria, and in 1954 these essays were published under the book title *Summer*. These nostalgic essays, as events would soon make abundantly clear, bore very little resemblance to the realities that were in the process of overtaking Camus's Algeria.

In November 1954, the Algerian revolution began, and Camus was again fundamentally torn. He fully recognized the injustices of French colonial rule, as well as the deeply ingrained prejudices of the *pièd-noir*

community from which he hailed, but he could not bring himself to support Algerian independence, much less the violent means that the FLN (Front for National Liberation) was using to secure it. Camus was largely sympathetic to the policies of the French government, which, under Pierre Mendès-France, intended to significantly improve the plight of the Arabs under colonial rule, but the Mendès-France government fell in early 1955 and the third way that Camus favored fell with it. Shortly thereafter, Camus joined the newspaper *L'Express*, which was committed to Mendès-France's policies, and, for the better part of the following year, contributed articles dealing with the crisis. In early 1956, Camus traveled to Algeria, where he proposed a truce to the parties, but his efforts were singularly unsuccessful. On the one hand, the Arabs to whom Camus spoke were overwhelmingly unsympathetic, for they believed that he was naïve with respect to the political realities of Algeria, which included the use of torture by the French forces. On the other hand, many of the *pièds-noirs* to whom Camus spoke were hostile, for they saw him as a traitor, and at one meeting some of them clamored for his death. Camus's own hopes for Algeria revolved around a federal scheme within which the various groups would freely associate, but, the merits of this position aside, it was not politically viable.

Recognizing that his own positions could not find any meaningful expression, given the prevailing political climate, Camus refrained from taking public political stances on his return to France. On a variety of occasions, however, he quietly intervened on behalf of the victims of French repression, which was becoming increasingly arbitrary and severe in response to the Arab revolt, and he did come out publicly on behalf of the Hungarians, whose own revolution against Soviet domination had been brutally put down by the Soviet army. For the most part, however, Camus threw himself into the theater, mostly adapting and directing the production of foreign plays (such as William Faulkner's *Requiem for a Nun*). In the spring of 1956, Camus's classic novel *The Fall* was published, and, in 1957, a collection of essays assembled under the title *Exile and the Kingdom* was published. So, too, in 1957, Camus published an essay titled "Reflections on the Guillotine," in which he lays out his opposition to the death penalty. In this essay, Camus tells a story about his father, about whom he otherwise knew very little. A supporter of the death penalty, Camus's father attended the execution of a man who had been convicted of an especially heinous crime. After viewing the execution, he returned home, went to lie down, and then began to vomit. Camus's father never discussed the incident, but from that point forward he opposed capital punishment.

In late 1957, Camus was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. He believed that he had been selected for political reasons (he was neither a Gaullist like Malraux nor a Communist like a number of other writers

who had been in the running), and, in any event, that he was too young for such an award, which is generally given in the twilight of one's career. Still, although Camus felt burdened by his selection, he accepted the award (unlike Sartre, who refused it when selected in 1964). Camus attended the induction ceremonies with Francine, from whom he had been separated for roughly a year, his children, a few close friends, and the Gallimard family. In his acceptance speech, he declared that rather than serve "those who make history" the writer should serve "those who are subject to it,"² but what came to be most remembered about his appearance was his impromptu response to an Arab nationalist who had extemporaneously confronted him. When the Arab reproached Camus for not supporting the FLN, he responded that if confronted with a choice between defending justice and defending his mother he would defend his mother. Camus's off-the-cuff reply was neither vapid nor the manifestation of a deeply ingrained colonial attitude, as many critics took it to be. More charitably, he should be interpreted as saying that any concept of justice that could justify a terrorist act killing his mother is no concept of justice or, alternatively, that he was being put in the untenable position of having to choose between justice and his mother (and, indeed, what exactly would we think of someone who sacrificed his own mother for even a lofty concept of justice).

At the beginning of 1958, Camus suffered from another severe bout with tuberculosis, which caused him no small amount of despair, but the symptoms gradually subsided and he was able to resume working. He threw himself back into the theater, producing an adaption of *The Possessed*, a novel by Dostoyevsky. The play, which opened in early 1959, received mixed reviews. In the meantime, Camus bought a home in Lourmarin, a town located in the Provence region of southern France. By moving to Lourmarin, he hoped to benefit both his lungs and his temperament, neither of which was faring particularly well in Paris. During 1959, Camus worked diligently on an autobiographical novel, *The First Man*, which was to be dedicated to his mother: "To you, who can never read this book." On January 3, 1960, Camus set off for Paris with the family of Michel Gallimard, but on the following day, January 4, the car spun out of control and slammed into a tree. Camus, who was in the passenger seat, was killed instantly.

notes

- 1 Jean-Paul Sartre, "Albert Camus," in *Situations*, trans. Benita Eisler (New York: Fawcett Publications, 1965), p. 79.
- 2 Albert Camus, "Nobel Prize Address," reproduced in David Sprintzen, *Camus: A Critical Examination* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), p. vii.

further reading

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Todd, Olivier, *Albert Camus: A Life*, trans. Benjamin Ivry (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997).

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