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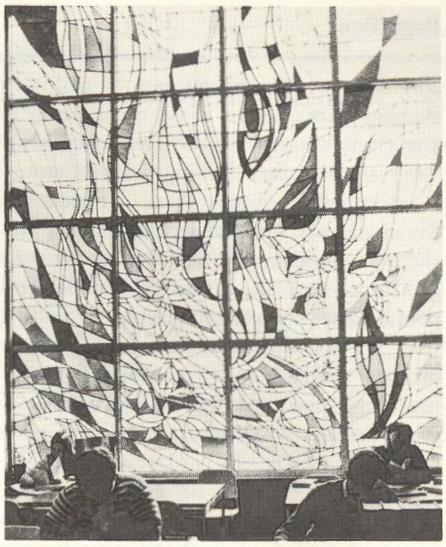

# THE "INVINCIBLE SUN" IN CAMUS' THOUGHT


James Woelfel


"At the center of my work," Albert Camus says in a 1951 interview, "there is an invincible sun." (1:452) The dazzling and dominant Mediterranean sun under which Camus lives out the first half of his life symbolizes his sober but vital optimism about the human situation. As its symbol suggests, it is an optimism grounded in those constants of the human condition which transcend the vicissitudes of history: our natural environment and the solidarity we share with one another simply by virtue of being human. These enduring realities are earthly and not supranatural ones, and therefore Camus' is an optimism this side of death. He looks with hope to the possibility, not of ultimate salvation, but of some amelioration of the plagues that oppress human beings. He is content to struggle to help make possible those little human kingdoms of personal happiness; the kingdom of God he knows nothing about.

It is a decidedly realistic, considered optimism which Camus cherishes. In the 1951 interview he speaks of a "comfortable optimism" which in today's world is a kind of "bad joke." But he cannot embrace the other extreme of viewing the Cold War-atomic era as the apocalypse, "the final collapse of our civilization." Camus nurtures a cautious hope, characterized by "reasonable illusions," that renewal and renascence are possible for Western culture. (1:351) In other places he can speak grimly enough about the cataclysmic dangers of the East-West split and nuclear power, and he realizes full well that the direction the future takes will be a combination of human decision and the momentum of events. But Camus has faith that in such a time of crisis those qualities of ordinary sanity and decency which he admires in human beings may assert themselves.

One cannot help but wonder what the state of Camus' optimism would be today. Since the 1950's the threat of nuclear holocaust has been "domesticated," although the continued stock-piling by the Soviet Union and the United States and the proliferation of nuclear weapons to an increasing number of countries continue to pose a grave danger. The East-West conflict has also become in a way "domesticated," or at least more complex, with the emergence of China, changes of leadership in the Kremlin, revolutions in the Eastern and Western hemispheres that are related in interesting ways to Soviet and Chinese communism, the American débâcle in Vietnam, and attempts at détente between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. Yet even on this issue the Middle East remains potentially a point of disastrous encounter. Perhaps more urgently to the fore in current doomsaying are the global problems of population control, food distribution, and environmental rehabilitation—enormous problems which even at the time of Camus' death in 1960 were generally unrecognized except by a few prophetic voices. I suspect that Camus would be speaking out on these newer plagues as well as continuing to speak out on the others. What he might say specifically we cannot of course know, but we can safely assume that he would still be appealing to us urgently on behalf of human life, justice, and freedom. His optimism might well survive too: a cautious faith and hope that intelligence combined with humane values just might succeed in stabilizing things and preserving a habitable planet.

## Optimist or Pessimist?

Camus' deep-seated optimism about human beings is sharpened and highlighted by the fact that he frequently had to reply to the charge that his view of reality and human life was pessimistic and even nihilistic. In the years following World War II Christian critics on the one hand and Marxists on the other accused Camus' "absurdism" and Sartre's existentialism of being "philosophies of despair." In a *Combat* editorial of 1945 Camus defends the existentialists and himself by pointing out that they are articulating a crucial dilemma of our whole epoch: whether it is possible to affirm human values in a world without any apparent ultimate meaning.

Camus' emphasis on the absurdity of the human condition relative to the world and Sartre's exploration of the sheer


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contingency or gratuitousness of reality are indeed "nihilistic" starting-points in the sense of rejecting or remaining agnostic about any ultimate coherence, unity, and clarity to the world. They are necessary starting-points, Camus believes, because that is where increasing numbers of Europeans find themselves. "If the epoch has suffered from nihilism, we cannot remain ignorant of nihilism and still achieve the moral code we need." Nihilism—and this is Camus' central theme—is only a starting-point; taken as a total perspective it is fruitless and destructive. It must be transcended, and Camus believes that the logic of both thought and life demand going beyond it. "But we must first posit negation and absurdity because they are what our generation has encountered and what we must take into account." (4:45) It is characteristic of Camus' career from beginning to end that he seeks to immerse himself in, to identify himself with, the special agencies and problems of his historical period while at the same time attempting to uncover through those agonies and problems what he believes to be universal and enduring truths about man.

As Camus' focus shifts from absurdity to revolt his references to nihilism shift from metaphysical to ethical connotations. In the 1950 essay "The Enigma" he is again defending his notion of absurdity against the charge of nihilism. He points out that total nihilism in the realms of both knowledge and value is self-contradictory: I cannot say that everything is nonsense without having thereby made one meaningful statement; nor can I go on continuing to live without at least implicitly affirming at least one relative value, my life. But then Camus goes on to describe nihilism in terms of the "murder, injustice, and violence" which have dominated European history since the First World War. What he calls "real pessimism"—true nihilism—is all the human attitudes and actions which have created and continue to add to such oppression. Camus comes to identify nihilism with human life-denial in all its forms. He clearly links ethical to metaphysical nihilism in the history of modern Europe: the totalitarian assumption that human life and freedom and the ordinary demands of justice are dispensable works out a particular logic from the modern meaning-vacuum produced by the "death of God"—a vacuum and a logic prophesied so unnervingly by Nietzsche.

Camus dedicates his career to arguing that the logic of murder and injustice is the wrong logic even in a world without ultimate meaning. "I have sought only reasons to transcend our darkest nihilism." He claims no special virtue or vision in this task; only "an instinctive fidelity to a light in which I was born, and in which for thousands of years men have learned to welcome life even in suffering." That light is the "inexhaustible sun" which symbolizes Camus' faith and hope born of the enduring characteristics and values of the human condition in the world. It is a Mediterranean sun, but it is more particularly the sun that bathes ancient Greece, that civilization of which Camus considers himself one of "the unworthy but nonetheless stubborn sons." (1:160)

## Admiration for Classical Culture

Camus' admiration for ancient Greek culture begins during his student days and runs throughout his writings to the end of his life. He is about to embark on a kind of personal pilgrimage to Greece when the Second World War breaks out, and he does not finally get there until after the war. In the 1951 interview Camus remarks that "I feel closer to the values of the classical world than to those of Christianity. Unfortunately, I cannot go to Delphi to be initiated!" (1:357)

Interestingly, in his writings Camus never says anything in detail but speaks only in generalities when referring to ancient Greece. Toward the end of *The Rebel,* where we might expect him to elaborate on the Greek contribution to the principle of limits or moderation, he says virtually nothing. It is in a 1948 essay, "Helen's Exile," that Camus seems to come the closest to spelling things out.

"Helen's Exile" is a brief preliminary discussion of the Greek idea of moderation and how it has been "exiled" by modern Europe's devotion to excess. (1:148-153) "Greek thought," Camus writes, "was always based on the idea of limits. Nothing was carried to extremes, neither religion nor reason, because Greek thought denied nothing, neither reason nor religion. It gave everything its share, balancing light with shade." (1:148-149) The Greek idea of justice was not absolutist but relative: it always presupposed the concept of limits. The ancient Greeks deeply appreciated nature and man's place in it; they did not worship history. Very importantly, they reasoned that there was a universal human nature and certain universal values inhering in it, values which "marked out the exact limits of every action." (1:151) Camus refers specifically only to Socrates and Plato. Characteristically, he praises Socrates for his "ignorance," for not presuming to know what he did not know. He commends Plato for the rich catholicity of his thought, in contrast to the narrowness and one-sidedness of many modern philosophers. Camus concludes "Helen's Exile" with a recalling of his fellow Europeans to their Greek heritage which is also a personal *credo:* "It is by acknowledging our ignorance, refusing to be fanatics, recognizing the world's limits and man's, through the faces of those we love, in short, by means of beauty—this is how we may rejoin the Greeks." (1:153)

Camus' generalized references to ancient Greece make it clear that for this man who so immersed in the life of literary imagination Greece is as much primal symbol as it is historical reality. As a matter of fact, Camus uses the two closely-related symbols "Greek" and "Mediterranean" interchangeably to represent the vision of man and human values which he sets forth in the philosophy of revolt. It is "Mediterranean" values which he sets over against those European excesses which are largely the result of what he calls "German ideology" coming from Hegel and Marx. (3:298-300) Mediterranean values are of course the Greek values of moderation grounded in a belief in a permanent human nature, and their symbol is the brilliant light of the Mediterranean sun.

## Christian-Marxist Complicity

The struggle between "German ideology" and "Mediterranean" values is a struggle between history and nature—between human reality reduced to historical process and destiny, and human reality defined in terms of our permanent condition as unique living beings in a natural environment. Significantly, on the issue of history *versus* nature Camus sees Christianity and modern historicist ideologies not as opponents but as "accomplices." "German ideology," he writes, "consummates twenty centuries of abortive struggle against nature, first in the name of a historic god and then of a deified history." (3:299)

If there is one theme that twentieth-century Christian theology has sounded tirelessly and exhaustively, it is the historical

character of the faith which is rooted in the biblical events. God reveals himself to man supremely in events of Israel's history and the historical person Jesus. God's purpose for mankind is centrally a historical purpose: the kingdom of God is the consummation of human history. Man is uniquely the creature who through memory and freedom creates a past and a future and thereby a history. History—human events—is the realm of the new, the unanticipated, in which all things are possible. Nature is more than anything else a backdrop, a context, for this historical drama. Christian theologians agree with Camus that Christianity and modern historicist ideologies such as Marxism are "accomplices," to the extent that these ideologies are in an important sense secularized versions of the Christian preoccupation with history and its fulfillment.

To a theological age which has been characterized by a robust recovery of Christianity's Hebraic roots Camus addresses a surprising and discordant word: Christianity would have been better off had it allowed itself to be more definitively shaped by the Hellenistic—that is to say, "Greek" or "Mediterranean"—influences of its early centuries. Classical Christian thought did of course assimilate important aspects of the Greek philosophical heritage of Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics. But as Camus sees it, Hebraism won out. Preoccupation with history has over-ruled admiration and contemplation of nature and the relative values they preserve. The omnipotent and inscrutable God of the Old Testament, directly related to and responsible for the state of the universe, has triumphed over the Greek principle of mediation with its hierarchy of powers of being intermediary between the perfection of ultimate reality and the decided imperfection of the world. (3:32-33, 298-300)

Summing up what he believes to be the attitude toward nature created by Christianity and consummated by "German ideology," Camus observes: "When nature ceases to be an object of contemplation and admiration, it can then be nothing more than material for an action that aims at transforming it." (3:299) But although dominated by this Christian- inspired historicist mentality, Europe is also heir to the ancient Mediterranean world and the light of nature by which it lived. The two forces, "darkness" and "light," still struggle for the soul of Europe. Waxing romantic and personal about the Greek-Mediterranean heritage as he does from time to time, Camus lyricizes about the conflict: "Thrown into the unworthy [!] melting pot of Europe, deprived of beauty and friendship, we Mediterraneans, the produest of races, live always by the same light. In the depths of the European night, solar thought, the civilization facing two ways awaits its dawn." (3:300)

### The Last Enemy Remains: Death

The vision of man and values which looks to a constant but perishable nature and human nature is not a vision that sees or hopes beyond death. Death is the great universal enemy. Our human revolt against the injustice of our condition must struggle with death, which is for Camus the finally unconquerable enemy. Our battles against death are skirmishes that can hold it off, beat it back temporarily; but to it belongs the inevitable victory. The Mediterranean sun may be invincible in lighting up the sum total of human generations; but so too is the death that claims every individual in every generation and will ultimately claim the entire species.

Accordingly the philosophy of revolt is a philosophy of amelioration, not salvation. In *The Plague* Father Paneloux, having witnessed with Bernard Rieux the death of the police magistrate's son, comments that both of them in their different ways are working for human salvation. Dr. Rieux replies, "Salvation's much too big a word for me. I don't aim so high. I'm concerned with man's health; and for me his health comes first." (2:197) In a conversation much earlier with Tarrou, Rieux has affirmed his commitment to struggling against death. Tarrou reminds him that his victories will never be lasting ones. Rieux acknowledges it, but expresses Camus' own commitment when he argues that "it's no reason for giving up the struggle." (2:118) The novel ends with the reminder that all our victories against plagues are partial ones. (2:278)

Camus' rejection of salvation as too exalted a goal relates of course to the Christian hope of an ultimate fulfillment of human life beyond death. But he also directs his concern for amelioration against modern futurist ideologies with their secular offers of collective salvation within history. The Christian hope at least has the advantage of offering a salvation that solves the individual problem of death. In modern man's utopias individuals and ultimately the whole species still die and that is the end of it. The "salvation" they proclaim is at best temporal and collective, built on the backs of countless individuals who labor and suffer without personal hope.

Agnosticism about Christian salvation and rejection of its secular offsprings' absolute promises also reflect Camus' concern for alleviating what suffering and injustice we can here and now on behalf of living human beings. Revolt against plagues, as we have seen is a never-ending struggle, its victories always partial and tenuously maintained. "Even by his greatest effort man can only propose to diminish arithmetically the sufferings of the world. But the injustice and the suffering of the world will remain and, no matter how limited they are, they will not cease to be an outrage." (3:303)

The world is the context and horizon of all we know, and neither inside nor outside the world dare we hope for salvation. Yet Camus remains faithful to the light he believes we have: natural beauty, searching intelligence, human solidarity, relative justice, concrete happiness. To the Dominicans of Lautour-Maubourg he says, "If Christianity is pessimistic as to man, it is optimistic as to human destiny. Well, I can say that, pessimistic as to human destiny, I am optimistic as to man." (4:55) The fleeting but precious life we share as human beings, the values it makes possible and demands, the graces of natural beauty and bounty, the exiles we overcome and the loves we find, the happinesses we taste, the aspirations we work

## *Moses Statue Progress Report*

KU Professor and sculptor Elden Tefft reports that he is now refining the wax subform for the bronze Moses statue to be installed on the lawn at the entrance to the Irma I. Smith Hall, home of the Kansas School of Religion. He anticipates that the casting operation will be undertaken next year, locally, if that is possible.

When the statue is situated in relation to the celebrated library window depicting the burning bush, the completed ensemble will reproduce the design on the seal of Kansas University which features Moses and the burning bush.

Visitors are welcome to view the work in progress, now housed in Learned Hall, by making an appointment with Mr. Tefft.

to realize—all these, Camus believes, are enduring realities of man which will reassert themselves age after age. They are truths of our condition which in the final analysis we will continue to preserve despite all plagues. Eternity is unknown, perfection is unrealizable; but what truths and beauties and values are to be found in ourselves and our world are abundantly worth the struggle.

### Many Kingdoms of Happiness

"When I . . . happen to look for what is most fundamental in me, what I find is a taste for happiness." (1:351) Camus is not ashamed to plead for happiness as a proper end of man, an end quite worthy of our struggles against the unhappiness of injustices. What is happiness? No one seeks "happiness"; he seeks concrete and specific achievements, commitments, experiences, relationships, and meanings, the satisfaction of which brings him happiness. To Camus happiness is physical well-being, sports, sun and sea, friendship, love, the creativity and discipline of his art. There is also a humorous dimension of the things that make for Camus' happiness which the casual reader can easily miss, an affection for and delight in human eccentricities and a gentle irony about his own and other people's foibles. Every human being has his private kingdom of happiness, the elements of which are his own. At the same time, there are universal conditions and values which are vital to assuring the possibility of individual happiness, and they are of course the very elements revealed by revolt against unhappiness: life and its basic necessities, dignity, freedom, justice.

The many kingdoms of human happiness are by no means the kingdom of God; they are temporary and perishable. They return us from many forms of human exile, but we constantly find ourselves back in the far countries of our estrangement. For all that, Camus believes, the happy kingdoms our hearts pursue are all we have for sure, and they are rendered all the more precious by their perishability. They are proudly human kingdoms of our discovery and creation, and our sacrifices for them in rebellion against plagues are expressions of our proper sense for the things that make human life worth living and dying for.

### Notes

1. *Lyrical and Critical Essays,* ed. and with notes by Philip Thody, trans. by Ellen Conroy Kennedy, N.Y.: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968.
2. *The Plague,* trans. by Stuart Gilbert, N.Y.: Random House, 1948.
3. *The Rebel,* Foreword by Sir Herbert Read, revised and complete translation by Anthony Bower, N.Y.: Random House, 1956.
4. *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death,* trans. and with an introduction by Justin O'Brien, N.Y.: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960.

## *Courses Bring Religious Dimension To KU Bicentennial Celebration*

Supporting the University of Kansas program to develop its role as a "Bicentennial Campus," the Kansas School of Religion will be offering three courses in the spring semester of 1976 on the religious dimensions of American life. *Religion in American Life,* taught by Dr. Robert Shelton, will survey the development of religious institutions in America. Dr. John Macauley's *Supreme Court and Religious Issues* will investigate the constitutional dimensions of the American religious experience. Dr. Timothy Miller will teach *History of Religion in America.*

During the current semester, Dr. Miller is collaborating with Dr. Norman Yetman of American Studies and Dr. James Woelfel of the Kansas School of Religion faculty on a cross-disciplinary course *The American Experience in Religious Thought.*

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