

## The Two Sides of Albert Camus

**Resistance, Rebellion, and Death** by Albert Camus. Translated by Justin O'Brien. Alfred A. Knopf. 272 pp. \$4.

by Tom F. Driver

Certainly, as the Nobel citation said, Albert Camus "illuminates the problems of the human conscience in our times." But his intellectual response to those problems was in many respects not typical of his contemporaries. His identification with us was accompanied by a withdrawal and an assertion of something alien to us, and this combination of contraries was what we listened to.

In *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death* (twenty-three essays chosen by the author before he died and published in English posthumously) we see the two sides of Camus. On one side we see the man whose confidence in reason cannot be shaken, however often he sees it betrayed and however much he believes that historical existence is absurd. Though this man goes out of his way to dissociate himself from, "the humanitarian idylls of the eighteenth century," and though he wants none of the illusions about human goodness that possessed "the age of enlightenment," he retains in himself something akin to the idealism of that age, its sense of how much better things *could* be because it is so obvious that they *ought* to be.

On the other side we see what I should like to call, taking my cue from the title affixed to two of the essays, the man of "flesh." That is, the man who is defined for us not by his rational thought but by his first-hand knowledge of both the ills and the beatitudes of existence.

This book opens with four "Letters to a German Friend."

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They were written between July 1943 and July 1944 and are an attempt to define the true cause of the French Resistance. As I read them I was reminded of Tom Paine. I put the thought out of my mind: there are so many ways in which the pamphleteer of the American Revolution was different from the editorialist of the Resistance. But the further I read the more the thought came back.

Camus declares here over and over again that no cause is worth defending that does not have reason and intelligence in its camp. "You used to try," he writes to the German friend, "to urge me along the path you yourself had taken, where intelligence is ashamed of intelligence. . . . If nothing had any meaning, you would be right. But there is something that still has a meaning." Later: "My tradition has two aristocracies, that of intelligence and that of courage." Asked to speak to a meeting organized by L'Amitié Française, Camus delivers a "Defense of Intelligence." In his lecture at Uppsala in December 1957 he says, "I have always thought there were two kinds of intelligence — intelligent intelligence and a stupid intelligence." In an interview in *Demain*, October 24-30, 1957, he warns against the dangers lurking in the word "honor" because it is "an unreasonable virtue that takes the place of justice and reason. . . ." Writing of war in Algeria he says the role of the intellectual "must be merely to strive for pacification so that reason will again have a chance." To the Arabs and the French he makes "a final appeal to reason."

In his more guarded moments Camus maintains that reason and value lie within man, not outside him. "I continue to believe that this world has no ultimate meaning. But I know that something in it has a meaning and that is man, because he is the only creature to

insist on having one." "It is essential for us to know whether man, without the help either of the eternal or of rationalistic thought, can unaided create his own values."

At other times, however, Camus seems impelled to say that meaning and values transcend man. Writing about the Algerian war, and trying desperately to keep both the French and the Arabs from losing themselves in violence, he says: "If it is true that in history, at least, values . . . do not survive unless they have been fought for, the fight is not enough to justify them. The fight itself must rather be justified, and elucidated, by those values." And when he writes to Gabriel Marcel to justify the attack on Spanish totalitarianism in the play *State of Siege*, he knows that he must posit some principle of judgment that will apply not only to Spain but to all governments as well: "It is our whole political society that nauseates us. Hence there will be no salvation until all those who are still worth while have repudiated it utterly in order to find, *somewhere outside insoluble contradictions*, the way to a complete renewal." (italics mine.) He is capable of saying quite simply, "Truth needs witnesses."

In other words, Camus is far from holding a subjectivist notion of truth. At the least he acknowledges, and this explicitly, that truth is grounded in a universal called "man" (even though many men scorn truth). At most, and especially in the thick of controversy, Camus appeals to a "reason" that man *ought* to follow even when there is no inclination to do so.

An ardent case for freedom and justice is also to be found in the pages of this book. Let the subject of Spain come up, or the cause of labor, or a testimonial dinner for a newspaper publisher

exiled from Colombia, or the glory and shame of Budapest, and Camus is there to maintain that man discovers his true self only in the defense of freedom and justice.

I would not have mentioned the eighteenth century in connection with Camus, however, if it were only a matter of his love of reason, justice, and freedom. The point only becomes worth noting when to these is added a certain idealism. I have already mentioned his desire to find a way to complete renewal "somewhere outside insoluble contradictions." Two other examples will suffice.

The four "Letters to a German Friend" that open the book are followed by two short pieces about "The Liberation of Paris" taken from *Combat*, August 24 and 25, 1944. One of them ends with these exultant words:

"The Paris that is fighting tonight intends to command tomorrow. Not for power, but for justice; not for politics, but for ethics; not for the domination of France, but for her grandeur. . . .

"This huge Paris, all black and warm in the summer night, with a storm of bombers overhead and a storm of snipers in the streets, seems to us more brightly lighted than the City of Light the whole world used to envy us. It is bursting with all the fires of hope and suffering, it has the flame of lucid courage and all the glow, not only of liberation, but of tomorrow's liberty."

It was, of course, a time to let hopes run high. Nevertheless, we read the passage today with an acute awareness of how history betrays our expectations. For all his insistence in other writings that history is absurd, in this book Camus does not move far away from the idealism of those moments of victory.

One reason he does not is that he gives little attention to the realities of power. He knows about them, of course, and he is always cognizant of the indigni-

ties suffered by those without power. Still, one puts down the book feeling that its ideals are somewhat out of touch with a world in which power is always seeking more power. We may forgive him for failing to mention, when addressing his comrades, that it took more than the courage of French patriots to drive the Germans from France, but we cannot so easily ignore the fact that in writing of later struggles — notably that in Algeria — he seems removed from the in-fighting of politics.

Appealing to both sides for a civilian truce in Algiers (February 1956) he declares, "our appeal has nothing to do with politics." Perhaps this statement may have been calculated at the time to calm troubled waters, but the whole forty-six pages on Algeria printed here strike the reader as too thin in their political content, too hopeful of being able to bring about a reconciliation without getting down to the specifics of what the contending parties want. Peace is never an abstract virtue. It is always the achievement of particular men, at particular times, acknowledging particular circumstances. It is no wonder that Camus must confess, "These reports are also the record of a failure." To be sure, all other efforts to bring peace to Algeria have also failed, but surely one reason is that all the parties, peacemakers as well as combatants, have preferred shibboleth to fact.

What I have written about Camus as a man of reason may appear more negative than I mean it to. This side of him, which I have dwelt upon because it is not often observed, is balanced by the man of flesh, and it is this man who wins our hearts.

The virtue of Camus must go by the simple name "human." We would like to say more. There was an extraordinary goodness in Camus, and since he himself reminds us that man is not good by nature, some of us would like to

say that goodness like his has a supra-human source. No doubt it does. But the notion, however true, does not serve to enhance our description of the man. He was in no sense a saint. One cannot imagine a sensual saint, or at any rate a saint who does not show his saintliness by fighting his sensuality. But the goodness of Camus was fulfilled through his sensuality. He speaks of human love as "the flesh in its noblest aspects." This is what we feel in his description of René Leynaud, the Christian man and Resistance fighter whom Camus loved and, in two short pieces here, makes us love also. I call it sensual not because there was any unseemly eroticism in it but because in the homely touches Camus includes in his description of his friend one becomes aware that the friendship included, in addition to mutual thoughts and values, mutual delight in knowing each other under the conditions of the sensate world. Camus loved the earth — its flowers, its waters, its heat from the sun, and its people. There is eros in this, but a modest eros—one capable of self-sacrifice.

The humanity of Camus speaks out in the most attractive pages of this book. We can feel the humanity in the tribute to a dead friend, in Camus' summons to Christians to be as forthright as other people in their condemnation of wrong, in the indignation evoked by the Russian brutality in Hungary, in the plea for abolition of the death penalty in France.

Camus possessed, and gave voice to, a conscience that would be rare in any time. That this conscience is not really at home in politics or philosophy is no matter. He never claimed it was, and it might be too much to seek it there. That it existed at all, and that it existed in our own time, is sufficient cause for us to say, as Camus said in Sweden in 1957, not thinking of himself, "Let us rejoice!"

