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Individuals crave for happiness beneath the senseless burden of existence: With special reference to Camus' selected works

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Reduced to its simplest expression, Camus' thought is contained in a single question: What value abides in the eyes of the man condemned to death who refuses the consolation of the supernatural? Camus cannot take his mind off this question. He is concerned with the intellectual, political, and moral climate in which we live. He questions traditional values, the future of mankind, and explores at great length the conditions necessary for human living today. 'What meaning can be salvaged from the world?' is the restless question that runs through Camus' plays, novels, essays, and journalistic writings.

> We are at the extremities now at the end of this tunnel of darkness, however, there is inevitably a light, which we already divine and for which we have only to fight to ensure its coming. All of us, among the ruins, are preparing a renaissance beyond the limits of nihilism. (Camus, *The Rebel*, 314).

It was between 1936 and 1937 that Camus' first essays appeared, in two volumes: *L'Envers et /'endroit* (Betwixt and Between) and *Noces* (Nuptials). There is in these essays a kind of proud

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and somber Hellenism. Camus celebrates the espousals of man with the flowers, the sea, and 'all the light of the world'. He expresses a sensual romantic happiness that is strangely tempered with a note of tragedy, an awareness of the discord between man and the world.

Albert Camus (1913-1960), novelist, essayist, dramatist, and recipient of the 1957 Nobel Prize for Literature, is esteemed as one of the finest philosophical writers of modern France. The French existentialist philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre wrote about him as "the latest example of that long line of *moralistes* whose works constitute perhaps the most original element in French letters."(173). Camus' literary legacy includes three novels, namely *L'Etranger* (*The Stranger*) of 1942, *La Peste* (*The Plague*) of 1947, and *La Chute* (*The Fall*) of 1957, and a fourth unfinished one that was posthumously published as *The First Man* in 1995. Camus' works both intensively and extensively explored the theme that was prevalent in the intellectual climate of the post-World War II Europe, the absurdity of human existence together with the notions of alienation and disillusionment, and speculated beyond the crushing pessimism a glimmering faith on human dignity and brotherhood. These concerns, no matter how well ingrained they may be in the European history of ideas, would prove to be too cognitively remote for a contemporary Filipino reader.

While the young author sang a pagan song of deliverance, abandoned himself to the 'happy lassitude of my nuptials with the world', felt the poetic luxuriance of things and perceived the duty of happiness, there was already a hint of anguish and absurdity in his work. Camus's thought then gravitates toward the other pole of his universe, toward the conscious certitude of a death without hope. Between 1937 and 1942 Camus spent much time in a sanatorium. The shock of physical sickness had a brutal effect upon his sensibility. The note of death detected in his youthful essays swells to a loud protest against the treachery of life. A life that had only wanted to sing was now forced to contend with absurdity. What meaning could such a life have? This personal crisis found expression in the short play Caligula which was written in 1938, a fierce and unique picture not only of one man's tragedy but of the tragedy of the modern world.

In *The Stranger* (1942) and *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Camus attempts to conciliate his obsession with the absurd and his mystique of sensual happiness. These works are primarily concerned with the crisis of the individual, with man as a lonely exile struggling for happiness and meaningfulness beneath the immense and senseless burden of existence. The *Myth of Sisyphus,* the first of Camus' two important philosophical essays, reveals a new depth in Camus' own thinking. The question raised in the beginning of this book is: how can a life that has no meaning best be lived? Camus considers the possibility of suicide and writes that 'it is the only truly philosophical problem.' In the context of this discussion he examines what he calls the 'absurd walls' within which the drama of our human condition is played out. The sentiment of the absurd is 'a light without radiance,' which can strike anywhere at any moment. The banality of daily life is quite as effective in bringing about its emergence as the disaster of global warfare. The rhythm of abstract, depersonalized, uncreative activities crumbles into absurd chaos before the question: what does it all mean?

Ignorance, *infirmity,* irrationality, nostalgia, the impossibility of distinguishing the true from the false, our radical inability to know ourselves or others, the implacable mystery of the world, these are some of the elements of the absurd as Camus envisioned it at this time. It was the sum of all the antinomies and contradictions man is heir to, compounded by the conditions of World War II and Camus' personal experiences. Reason can do very little to introduce motives of hope, unity, and harmony. Religion is even more impotent. The logic of absurdity concludes to the necessity for suicide. But at this point Camus revealed his positive genius. To take one's life would be, in the final analysis, an act of cowardice, of bad faith. We simplify the problem by avoiding it. We must live if we wish to maintain-what we believe to be true. 'To live is to make the absurd live' says Camus, to make it live is, above all, to face it squarely. Thus, revolt is one of the few philosophical position is in this perspective that Camus introduces his courageous metaphor of Sisyphus. Like the mythical hero, man must accept the limitations of his condition. He must accept absurdity with lucidity and conquer it through sincerity and loyalty.

Camus reached a new level of development between 1942-44. In his four *Letters* to a *German Friend,* he proclaims: 'I continue to believe that this world has no superior meaning. But I know that something in it has meaning; it is man, because man is the sole being to insist upon having a meaning.' Camus' vision now expands to include the suffering and unhappiness of all

mankind. This sense of universality goes considerably beyond the struggle of the individual Sisyphian character in *The Plague* (1947) and *The Rebel* (1951), another fiction-philosophical combination at a new level of significance. In these two powerful works the values of justice, loyalty, and courage appear much more positively on the frontiers of the absurd, values that are as indisputably authentic as they are adamantly anti-Christian. Camus has never wavered in his atheism. Christianity has always appeared to him as another of the pointless ideologies in the name of which men are subjugated and massacred. He has excluded it from his vision as a matter of principle.

The Plague permits of several interpretations. It is first of all the record of a physical epidemic, of a city besieged by some uncontrollable disease which strikes down the innocent and outflanks all efforts made to curb it. In another sense, it is a chronicle of World War II, the war of the occupation and imprisonment of some two million Europeans. The tragedy of Europe is transplanted to Oran and reduced to artistically manageable proportions. At still another level, *The Plague* reaches a note of impressive depth in its concern with the presence of evil in the world. There is, finally, a moral dimension something new in Camus is introduced in the person of Tarrou. With him, the theme of moral evil, the evil that men inflict upon each other, reaches its greatest intensity. Through Tarrou, Camus' own ideas of commitment, dedication to the plight of others, and courageous stand against violence and injustice are made clear.

The *Myth of Sisyphus* was concerned with the problem of suicide. In *The Plague* Camus substitutes this problem for that of a strange form of martyrdom, a kind of religion of happiness through atheistic sanctity. The problem of absurdity is reduced to Tarrou's question: "Can one be a saint without God? That is the only concrete problem I know of today"(196). But there is in this new emphasis an, undeniable deepening of Camus' thought. He has gone beyond the exterior manifestations of absurdity to recognize the reality of spiritual death in the world. The root of absurdity is within us. When Tarrou dies in the presence of Dr.Rieux, we witness an outstanding example of disinterested love, one of the high points of modern literature. Here Camus realizes that there is no harm in being happy. It is only being happy alone that cannot be justified. This

sense of solidarity, based upon sacrifice and personal responsibility for the world, is the price of happiness.

The Rebel, Camus' second philosophical essay, furthers the line of thought adumbrated in *The Plague*. Revolt, in Camus' mind, is a creative effort that makes absurdity meaningful, or rather enables us to transcend absurdity, by protesting against it; it postulates a human nature that must be respected, a terrestrial brotherhood that must be defended; and it creates a moral value rooted in the idea of moderation and the respect for limits. The idea of revolt is at the very heart of Camus' thinking. It is the key at once to his notion of happiness and the meaning of life as well as the purpose of social action and artistic creation. Camus is not unique in his preoccupation with the absurd. What makes him unique, and what stirs sentiments of admiration in those who read him, is the courage and logic with which he refuses to compromise the dignity of man.

In *The Plague* he was interested primarily in serving men, not saving them. But in *The Fall* (1956) and his recent collection of stories, *Exile and the Kingdom*, he stresses the new values of penance and expiation. The themes of transcendence, the creative value of suffering and human solidarity are added to the Camuslan vision. It has been suggested that Camus is tending toward a religious conversion and the Catholic Church has been mentioned in this context. There are symbolisms: the reader is told by Camus to identify the canals of Amsterdam with the concentric circles of hell; the title of the book is essentially religious; the concern with man's guilt links it to the Mauriac-Greene tradition and it seems to be an authentic cry for salvation.

But it would not do to force this conclusion. We must bear in mind Camus' immense gifts of irony. In *The Fall* he could conceivably be satirizing the whole notion of guilt and protesting its being used as a weapon for enslaving men and deadening their creative powers for self-transcendence. In *The Stranger*, Camus wanted to show an alienated subjectivity by Jetting the character depict himself through acts which do not express him. The narrator has lost the key to his own secret: he has become a stranger to his own life. He holds only facts, and facts are nothing. Therefore, he cannot give his existence a meaning which would establish its unity. Having neither past nor future, he has only a present which is crumbling away and does not become memory. Time, until the final revolt, is nothing for him but a succession of distinct

moments. Camus has rendered admirably this fall of the present into insignificance through a paradoxical use of the first person narrative. The main character gives an account of the facts as they occurred in his life up to the eve of his execution, without the perspective of the immediate past, without extension and without resonance. Nothing is explained, but everything is revealed by the tone and the structure of the work, by the contrast of the two climaxes: the almost involuntary murder, where 'the red explosion' of the sun plays a more important role than the man, and which marks the culmination of fatality; the revolt which gives birth to freedom within the confines of a destiny narrowly bounded by death. Imprisoned, then condemned, it occurs to him that he might escape, but he does not dwell on the idea. A great individual does not begin his adventure anew, does not consent to repeat himself. Enlightened by his failure, Meursault reaches very different conclusions, and his modern revolt becomes clearly differentiated from the romantic revolt of which it is the heir: at the juncture he has reached, Meursault must consider the question of beginning anew. The curious impression *The Stranger* makes on the reader, a book without hope, or rather against hope, it ends on a promise. Meursault who seems to us from the very beginning inhumanly stripped of illusions, who tries only to put the world in the wrong by bringing its hatred and disapproval down on himself, extracts from defeat a grim acceptance of life. Such as he lived it, he deems it worth reliving.

Sentence of death is the central theme of his work, *The Plague*. It matters little here whether it is nature, fate, justice, or human cruelty which pronounces the sentence. We know that in his most diabolic inventions man only imitates the tortures of life. In principle, the act of inflicting death without accepting the risk of dying, insofar as it transforms a human being into a thing, lays the physical and metaphysical foundation of torture. His work represents the effort of a creative soul confronting his times and striving to bring as much of our actual situation as possible in to the light of expression and understanding. He has attempted to translate his own experience into a statement of some universal relevance and patch together, in his way, the pieces of a broken world. Camus is exploring these in accordance with his own talents. He has seen man caught in what is quite possibly the most absurd situation of history. Yet he has not lost his admiration for him. In a very concrete way, he has set himself the task of creating a climate

of values, a refuge from meaninglessness, a kind of salvation. He has realized, as he wrote in The Rebel that "real generosity toward the future lies in giving all to the present"(123). Rilkewrote in his *Book of Pilgrimage:* "I know that all paths lead arsenal of things where there is no life. Yet there is a great miracle in the world: I feel that all life is lived." That paradox quite adequately summarizes Camus' own pilgrimage through absurdity to a high sense of purpose.

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