

**Albert Camus' Response to a War-Torn World:
The Embodiment of His Ethic in the Liberating Art of Drama**

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“In an absurd world, God is no longer available to provide order or comfort. Humans must interpret their sensory experiences, make decisions, live with both the consequences and limiting nature of those decisions.”

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Albert Camus never considered himself to be an existentialist, nor did he like to be labeled as a philosopher. As the renowned Camus critic Germaine Bree states, “Camus did not think of himself as a professional philosopher. He was not interested in building a coherent philosophical explanation of man’s situation in the world. In fact, he had a rational aversion toward all such systems. Perhaps because of his background he was much more interested in becoming, in a Socratic sense, a man with an ethic” (*Albert Camus* 10). This “man with an ethic” was not opposed, however, to the title of “writer,” for through his writing he struggled to explore his ethic. As Stephen Eric Bronner notes, “Camus was always concerned with the craft of writing, and the form is inextricably interwoven with the content. His writing crosses the boundaries between art, politics, and philosophy. It constitutes a single exercise in symbolic action” (163). The author of several novels and essays, including *The Stranger*, *The Plague*, *The Fall*, *The Rebel*, and *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus was recognized for his talent as a literary figure in 1957 when he received the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Of the various literary genres, Camus gravitated toward drama with a particular interest. As E. Freeman explains in *The Theater of Albert Camus*, “Above all, and more than for social and psychological reasons, Camus devoted himself to the theater throughout his life because he

believed it to be the greatest form of artistic expression” (3). From his early years as a passionate new member of the Communist Party in Algiers, where he founded Le Theatre du Travail (Worker’s Theater) in 1935, to the exciting years from 1944 to 1949 when his four plays were all performed professionally in Paris by some of the best talents in French theater, until his tragic death in 1960, at which time he was appointed to be the director of a state-subsidized experimental theater, Albert Camus’ constant devotion to the theater gives testimony to his great belief in the dramatic form. As a playwright Camus embodied many of his beliefs concerning his “ethic” on living—especially as it pertains to this unpredictable and violent world—through his four theatrical creations: *Caligula*, *The Misunderstanding*, *State of Siege*, and *The Just Assassins*.

Before considering Camus’ original dramatic art, which has been largely overlooked, an examination of his ethic for living is warranted. No work describes this ethic better than his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in which Camus begins by asking a fundamental human question that is central to liberal education: *Is life worth living, and if so, how?* Camus makes this question relevant as he goes on to describe the frequently mundane quality of human existence. Human beings find themselves constrained to daily habits that numb them from the truth about themselves and the world: rising...eating...working...eating...working...eating...sleeping—day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year. But then...one day, in an unexpected moment of consciousness, Camus observes that some of us realize our monotonous situation and ask *Why?* This heightened consciousness leads us to recognize that real meaning in life is ephemeral, and death is eminent. With these revelations, a terrible sense of alienation from the rest of society can result. As solitary creatures, we feel compelled to seek out meaning, despite the seeming impossibility of the task. Reason, the only tool to take on the task, proves to be too limited to adequately extract an answer from a world filled with complex incongruities,

including desire, power, and violence. As Amihud Gilead explains, “Our reason cannot explain and understand everything” (336). Human beings, by their nature, *need* meaning to exist; nevertheless, the world, by its nature, resists answers: this represents the condition Camus describes as *absurdity*. “The absurd,” explains Camus, “is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 28). Absurdity, then, is not simply defined as the external state of chaos in the world; rather, it is the internal dilemma within humans, arising out of our inability to *know* reality with certainty. The absurd, seemingly dark and pessimistic, can bring human beings to the verge of nihilism and despair.

Nihilism, however, is not a valid response for the man who encounters the absurd, according to Camus. As Robert Zaretsky points out, “Camus insisted that absurdity does not lead to a nihilistic life. On the contrary, the very ability to acknowledge the absurd requires a moral effort” (6). Flirting with nihilism as a young man, Camus came to realize its dehumanizing effects. As Phillip H. Rhein observes, “Camus felt that the nihilism responsible for having brought the Nazis into power was now threatening the entire world” (*Albert Camus* 67). Similarly, Camus believed despair, suicide, and metaphysical hope to be invalid options. Despair, like nihilism, turns human potential towards a destructive end. A weak choice for a bleak existence, despair lacks defiant energy, and therefore is unacceptable to Camus. Suicide, though certainly more decisive, is a similar response to despair in that it does not confront or resolve the absurd. Killing one’s self only gives in to the absurd; it is the illogical conclusion to the belief that a life without ultimate metaphysical meaning is not worth living. Similar to suicide, hope is an escape from the reality of the physical world. A form of intellectual suicide, taking the leap of faith, as Kierkegaard did, violates the premise of facing life on the basis of what one can know for certain. Metaphysical hope is synonymous with faith to Camus, and faith

is nothing but illusion. Despair, suicide, and hope—all, to a lesser or greater degree, deny the essence of humanity—our ability to survive through reason—and consequently cannot be ultimately satisfying options.

The only option left for a human being in the face of the absurd is to live life to its fullest, despite the world's refusal in providing reasonable meaning. This option Camus terms as "revolt." It is bold defiance against the absurd. Revolt as Camus clarifies, "is the constant confrontation between man and his own obscurity" (*Myth 54*). Revolt requires lucidity: the maintained ability to see oneself and the world honestly. Only with honesty can one engage the truth of mortality, realizing immanent temporality, which ironically is liberating. "The absurd enlightens me on this point: there is no future. Henceforth this is the reason for my inner freedom" (*Myth 58*). Revolt is the only viable option for Camus because it allows the honest exercise of reason—"To an absurd mind reason is useless and there is nothing beyond reason" (*Myth 58*)—while concomitantly providing freedom and a sense of resolute inviability—"He enjoys a freedom with regard to common rules" (*Myth 59*). Man must persevere in spite of his absurd existence, like Sisyphus, condemned by the gods to push a huge rock up the side of a mountain, only to have it endlessly fall back down, to be pushed up the mountain again and again. Yet, Camus believes that man is the master of his own fate, just as Sisyphus was, as well, by the mere fact that he chose to go back down the mountain after the rock and begin again. Camus exalts, "I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again... but Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises the rocks. He concludes that all is well... the struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (*Myth 123*).

Camus' theory of art naturally stems from his ethic of living. Once again *The Myth of Sisyphus* is invaluable for understanding the relationship Camus sees between art and the absurd. The importance of art to Camus is understood best when he quotes Nietzsche. "'Art is nothing but art,' said Nietzsche, 'we have art in order not to die of the truth'" (*Myth* 93). Camus' appropriation of the Nietzsche quotation should not be misunderstood to mean that art prevents man from engaging the truth. This would be in direct opposition to Camus' belief in lucidity. Instead, Camus recognizes, with Nietzsche, that art has the power to convey the truth of life, with all of man's absurdity, and in so doing it becomes a source of lucidity. Lucidity is essential for survival because without it man becomes blind to his situation, and subject to falling back into numb routine. "So it is with the work of art," maintains Camus. "If the commandments of the absurd are not respected, if the work does not illustrate divorce and revolt, if it sacrifices to illusions and arouses hope, it ceases to be gratuitous" (*Myth* 102). Art must not affirm the numbness of society's habits. It must not support illusion in an attempt to comfort. As Camus argues in *Resistance, Rebellion and Death*, "If it adapts itself to what the majority of our society wants, art will be a meaningless recreation" (253). The artist, then, must not deny the truth of existence. On the contrary, it is the artist's responsibility to exist in ambiguity, "...incapable of negating the real and yet eternally unfinished aspects..." (*Rebellion* 264). The role of the artist, then, is to create dangerously, providing lucidity through the medium in which he works, and promoting the freedom—the freedom that comes from engaging one's mortality—in an effort to encourage revolt to his audience.

No medium was more able to embody Camus' theory of art than the play written for production. On the stage men and women—living flesh and blood—could act, speak, grow old, wonder, fear, doubt, and most of all, question, all in a span of fleeting time amazingly analogous

to the span of one's own lifetime. Like Hamlet, Camus saw the play as the thing wherein to "catch the conscience" of the audience, jolting it toward a poignant glimpse of reality. "The actor has three hours to be Iago or Alceste, Phaedre or Gloucester," asserts Camus. "In that short space of time he makes them come to life and die on fifty square yards of boards. Never has the absurd been so well illustrated or at such length" (*Myth* 78). The Stage therefore accomplished essentially two closely related things for Camus: 1) it was a vehicle through which the Socratic statement "The unexamined life is not worth living" could be incarnated, thereby confronting his audience with lucidity; 2) it was also the means by which he fulfilled his own revolt in the face of the absurd, thereby presenting elements of his own ethic of living powerfully through drama.

Before pointing out some of Camus' unique contributions to dramatic style, it is important to note that Camus, in common with such dramatists as Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Gabriel Marcel, "used the theater primarily as a medium for expression and dramatization of serious ideas" during a time when France was experiencing great turbulence (Cruikshank Introduction 20). The years just previous to World War II, politically, socially, ideologically, and artistically, were frenzied with nervous energy. There was a need to rethink the world and man's place in it, especially with the brutal memories of World War I still fresh, and the impending sense of World War II's horror on the horizon. It was within this tension-filled milieu that Camus, largely through the theater, shaped his ethic of life, attempting, like his contemporaries, to deal with the topsy-turvy world in which he lived. This great sense of urgency amongst the dramatists of pre-World War II France to redefine meaning in life was the beginning of an era of superb artistic creativity in the theater. "In the decade before the First World War the French theater was at its lowest ebb. Twenty-five years later, on the eve of the Second World War, it

was in the process of becoming better than it had ever been since the seventeenth century... unsurpassed in theatrical brilliance and philosophical insight” (Freeman 1).

Aware that the French theater was rejuvenating in the 1930s, and giving direction to society, Camus gave great consideration to the means by which he would achieve his purposes upon the stage. Influenced by the Greeks and Nietzsche, Camus saw tragedy as the most appropriate form of drama for the twentieth century. With its Apollo-Dionysus opposition, tragedy, as Bree articulates, “is born out of the conflict between two equally strong, equally valid antagonistic forces, man’s passionate assertion of his freedom and will to live, and the irreducible natural order to which he must submit” (*Camus* 147). Unlike almost every other great French dramatist of the 1930s, including Anouilh and Cocteau, who went to the Greeks at least once for a myth relating to the dilemma of the modern age, Camus rejected such a trend, attempting, except for *Caligula*, to create a truly modern brand of tragedy with modern themes and struggles. To enhance this modern tragic form, Camus worked carefully to craft a style of dialog that is a mixture between classical and modern French, giving the audience a feel of fragmented familiarity, thus enhancing the sense of the absurd. Yet, Camus did not believe in using shock tactics or deep psychological probing to convey a sense of the absurd. In keeping with his emphasis upon reasoning and of a “theater of ideas,” Camus states in the preface to his four original plays, “I have little regard for an art that deliberately aims to shock because it is unable to convince” (*Caligula and Three Other Plays* vi). Such drama possesses rhetorical force, locating the audience members within a performative context of artistic persuasion. Camus’ theater, then, as Sartre would agree, is a theater of situation rather than deep psychological penetration. The characters are portrayed, not for their intrinsic value, but to embody ideas and act within moral constraints, portraying more the human condition rather than a particular human

being's condition. Engaging the audience's intellect, more than its emotions, and moving it to conclusive results, Camus stylistically seeks to change people's minds more than their hearts.

With Camus' ethic of living now explained, though certainly not exhaustively so, an exploration for some of these ideas that constitute this ethic, as they are manifest in his plays, is now at hand.

Camus' first play, *Caligula*, was written in 1938. More than any of his other plays, *Caligula* displays the various stages a man may experience in the process toward revolt: a revolt in this case that is invalid to Camus. Based on Suetonius' *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, the plot unfolds in the first act with young Prince Caligula agonizing over the sudden death of his sister, and mistress, Drusilla. This encounter with mortality shakes Caligula's comfortable regal life, and as a result he alienates himself, running out into the wilderness to think, far away from his faithful friend Helicon, his second mistress Caesonia, his patricians, and the rest of the citizens of his kingdom. When Caligula finally returns to his palace three days later, he is all covered with mud and damp from the rain. While peering into a full-length mirror at his disheveled body, Helicon walks on stage and kindly asks where he has been. Caligula responds by saying that he has been searching for the moon. "I'm not mad," says the prince, "in fact I've never felt so lucid... Really this world of ours, the scheme of things as they call it, is quite intolerable. That's why I want the moon or happiness, or eternal life—something, in fact, that may sound crazy, but which isn't of this world" (*Caligula* 40). Caligula goes on to tell Helicon that while he has been away he has discovered a truth: "Men die; and they are not happy" (*Caligula* 40). This statement serves as a clear sign that lucidity has crashed in upon Caligula, requiring him to battle with his own sense of absurdity.

After an initial period of despair in Act I, Acts II and III portray Caligula's decision to revolt against his absurd dilemma by attempting to make the impossible possible. The moon, a symbol of the impossible, is Caligula's obsession, and he makes Helicon promise to do his best to obtain it. "All I want, Helicon, is—the moon. For the rest, I've always known what will kill me" (*Caligula* 77). Caligula, having already come to terms with his own mortality vicariously, through Drusilla's death, is free from restraints. Boldly daring to exercise his freedom to the extreme, justified by a sense of perverse logic, Caligula causes chaos in his kingdom, indiscriminately executing citizens, publicly engaging in sexual relations with the wife of one of his patricians, opening "Caligula's National Brothel" and awarding "the Badge of Civic Merit" to the citizen who patronizes there the most, and declaring a national famine. He becomes for Camus, as Phillip Thody notes, "what Undershaft was for Shaw—a figure who is horribly right because things as they are are horribly wrong" (16). As Caligula states himself, "One is always free at someone else's expense. Absurd perhaps, but so it is" (*Caligula* 60). Caligula takes nihilism to its extreme in his attempt to revolt. His indulgence of freedom only serves to worsen the world, making it more ugly and destructive for his people than it was for him when he considered the metaphysical meaning of Drusilla's death. Rather than constructively revolting, Caligula ironically aids the very evil he despises, perpetuating a misery for which he must pay dearly.

In the final act, Caligula looks in the mirror as he did just prior to the beginning of his tirade in the first act. Then pondering what he should do, now he reflects on what he has done. "My time is short...I shant have the moon. Never, never, never!...I have chosen a wrong path, a path that leads to nothing. My freedom isn't the right one" (*Caligula* 103). Camus shows here that the exercise of freedom without a sense of human dignity and sanctity of life is nothing

better than cruel despotism. On this point, John Cruickshank sees there are striking similarities between “the megalomania of Caligula and of Hitler, between Caligula’s attitude of mind and that revealed by some Nazi theorists, between Caligula’s action and those of Hitler, between Caligula’s attitude of mind and that revealed by some Nazi theorists, between Caligula’s action and those of Hitler, between Caligula’s suicidal death and Hitler’s self-immolation in the Berlin bunker” (*Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt* 198-99). In this light, Camus ironically seems to make two statements through Caligula’s violent death of being stabbed in the face with daggers. First, revolt with no sense of moral code is unacceptable. Second, absurdity perpetuated by people like Caligula will continue to exist in the world, as symbolically implied by Caligula’s last words, “I’m still alive!”

Whereas *Caligula* explored the implications of one man’s actions in response to the absurd, *The Misunderstanding* considers more intensely the nature of “man’s condition: one of sterility, exile and death in a world governed by the absurd” (Freeman 60). Criticized by many as being a “gloomy” play, Camus never denied this charge. He wrote it when he was a member of the French Resistance, hiding from the Nazis in the mountains of Central France during the occupation. Alone, confined, cut off from his wife, friends, and relatives, Camus’ own sense of claustrophobia was transferred into the play while he wrote it in 1943. “It is true that its atmosphere is suffocating,” he acknowledged. “But we were all out of breath at that time” (Preface to *Caligula and Three Other Plays* vii). The setting of the play, a small, quiet inn in a remote, dreary, rainy, little town in Czechoslovakia, provides a natural environment in which lack of communication, blind action, and pain can occur. While *Caligula* is a tragedy of a man decisively acting in the wrong ways, *The Misunderstanding* is a tragedy of characters unable to fully act, overwhelmed by the hostility of the world.

The plot, similar to the story found on a piece of newspaper under Mersault's mattress in *The Stranger*, is a tragic variation of the parable of the prodigal son. A son, after twenty years away from his family, comes back home to his family's inn, now a wealthy man, only to be unrecognized by his sister and mother and murdered by them in the night for monetary gain. Jan, the son, is compelled to leave his country of "endless sunshine beside the sea" and find a sense of belonging again. His wife, Maria, who comes to the town with Jan, is put up in another hotel so that Jan can experience the anticipated reunion unencumbered by the need to immediately explain his wife. As Jan tells Maria before he leaves her, "One can't remain a stranger all one's life. It is quite true man needs happiness, but he also needs to find his true place in the world. And I believe that coming back to my country, making the happiness of those I love, will help me to do this" (*Cross Purpose* 117). Indeed, ironically Jan is received by his mother and sister as the anticipated source of "happiness," for as they believe, after years of systematically murdering wealthy guests, only one more murder is needed to provide them with enough money to flee from their miserable existence at the inn. The mother, continually saying "I'm tired," and "what I need is a long rest," represents a person worn down by the routines of hard work, vaguely aware of her need for change—for revolt. The daughter, Martha, is bitter over her cloistered life, letting her anger motivate her determination to murder Jan, with the help of her mother. "Once we have enough money in hand," Martha excitedly tells her mother, "and I can escape from this inn and this dreary town where it's always raining; once we've forgotten this land of shadows—ah then, when my dream has come true, and we're living beside the sea, then you will see me smile" (*Cross Purpose* 109). Happiness is the ultimate end for Martha and her mother, as well as for Jan. Their desire for contentment rises out of their dissatisfaction with their individual lives, their experience of the world, and the lack of meaning it provides.

In the last act, Camus shows the characters to be what they truly are: victims of their own desperately absurd circumstances. When Maria comes to the inn to find her husband, the morning after he is drugged and thrown into the river, the truth is revealed to all. The tragedy then concludes: the mother drowns herself; Martha hangs herself; and Maria begs God for help through a prayer, to which, when she finishes, the old deaf manservant responds with a sardonic “No,” ending the play. Jan’s reluctance to tell his mother and sister who he actually is, his inability to be honest, prevents lucidity for everyone, and precludes authentic revolt for all. However, the play’s message does not seem to say, “If only Jan had given his true identity, they all would have lived happily ever after.” This would be too optimistic for Camus. The play does not expose people who wear masks, showing the need for these people to remove them, as is a common theme in Pirandello’s plays. *The Misunderstanding*, like the title itself hints, depicts what one is to expect from life on this earth: lack of comprehension. With this being the case, there is little natural cause for happiness. Just as it is impossible for Vladimir and Estragon to escape their situation in *Waiting for Godot*, it is doubtful that Jan, even if he had been clear about his identity, could have made his dreams, or the dreams of his mother and sister, come true. Camus does not see the pursuit of happiness as a possible option in a world where the abnormal is normal. The best that one can do, as this play reveals, is to strive to exist honestly.

In *State of Siege*, written in 1948, Camus experiments stylistically to achieve a new dramatic effect. Theatrically, Camus mingles “all the different forms of dramatic expression, from a lyrical monologue to a collective theatre, through dumb show, straightforward dialogue, farce, and the use of chorus” (Thody 40). The play was received very poorly in Paris. As Camus himself said, “Truly, few plays have ever enjoyed such a unanimous slashing” (*Caligula and Three Other Plays*, Preface vii).

State of Siege begins with an omen comet in the sky, and the coming of The Plague, a symbolic character representing the absurd, who arrives in the city of Cadiz, overthrows the established government, and starts a random extermination of the inhabitants. The people of Cadiz are stricken with fear, and they wonder what they have done to bring on such a catastrophe. Their sin, as conveyed through the Governor's speech prior to The Plague's coming, is that they have become enraptured with their own comfortable existence. "Worthy townsfolk, your Governor wishes you a good day. He is pleased to see you gathered here as usual and carrying on with the activities that ensure the peace and prosperity of Cadiz. I am glad to see that nothing's changed, for that is as it should be. I like my habits, and change is the one thing I detest" (*State of Siege* 150). The people of Cadiz, bureaucratically manipulated by their self-seeking city officials, are victims of their own malaise, and prime candidates for encountering the truth of their mortality through The Plague. It is because the government functions in such an anesthetized way that it is unable to resist The Plague's invasion and subsequent havoc. Here Camus verges on the mode of allegory, as E. Freeman clarifies: "The dictatorship [of The Plague] is a synthesis of Stalinism, Nazism and Italian and Spanish Fascism" (77). In this play Camus scolds fascism and, even more, the ineffective governments that allow it to develop. It is because people and governments become numb and unaware that fascism of Hitler's brand ever comes to be. And with fascism, liberty, of any kind, cannot exist.

Rising out of the mass of terrified citizens, Diego, the young hero of the play, after considering his own mortality, becomes free from his fear of death and challenges The Plague. Inciting rebellion, Diego shouts to his fellow men, "Stand up I tell you and act like men! Tear up your certificates, smash the windows of their offices, and shout your freedom to the four winds of heaven! (211). It is because Diego loses his fear of death, and shows the town they can

loosen their fear too, that Cadiz becomes immune to the evil power that The Plague once had upon them. The Plague, only able to control those who fear him, realizes he has lost the battle. Yet, in his last attempt to gain control, he strikes a bargain with Diego. Having already infected Diego's fiancé, Victoria, with the disease, The Plague offers her to Diego in exchange for the city. Diego refuses the offer, instead substituting his own life as a sacrifice for the city and Victoria. By this Camus shows that revolts must take the value of human life into account; human life, absurd as it may seem, is the only thing truly of any value.

The value of human life and the limitations of revolt are examined in relation to each other in Camus' last play, *The Just Assassins*, written in 1949. The play is set in revolutionary Russia in the year 1905. *The Just Assassins* begins with great tension in the apartment of the revolutionaries, where they are waiting to hear the news as to whether or not Kaliayev has accomplished his mission and thrown a bomb into the passing carriage of the corrupt Grand Duke. When Kaliayev arrives, all distraught and shaken, his friends learn that he could not throw the bomb due to the fact that the Dukes' young niece and nephew were in the carriage with him. Despite taunting accusations of a lack of commitment to the cause by the young revolutionary Stephen, Kaliayev insists that he did the right thing. "I was going to have to throw it at them . . . just like that . . . straight at them . . . Oh, no! . . . I just couldn't do it!" (*The Just* 183) The conflict of ideologies between Stephen, who has already been hardened by suffering in a prison under the Duke's order, and Kaliayev, who is still sensitive and committed to the value of human life, presents two paths that Camus sees one can take in regard to violent revolt. For Stephen, the acquisition of "a land of liberty that will finally cover the whole world" is easily worth the execution of two innocent children. Such disregard for just violence is detestable to Dora, Kaliayev's devoted lover, who sees the day coming when men like Stephen will dominate the

world, lacking the scruples of an assassin like Kaliayev. When Dora speaks her mind to Stephen, saying, “Even destruction has a right and a wrong way, and there are limits . . . ,” Stephen cuts her off: “There are no limits. What it really means is that you don’t believe in the revolution!” (187)

Clearly Camus sides with Kaliayev, who differentiates between constructively revolting against a corrupt government, a concrete manifestation of the absurd, and simply adding to, and becoming a part of, the ataxia already present in the world. The differentiating factor for Kaliayev is his moral ethic, based on his high regard for all human life. The ethic not only informs him of his limits (not killing small children), it also makes him aware that he must be willing to sacrifice his life as just retribution for a life he takes. When Kaliayev eventually makes another attempt upon the Duke’s life, and succeeds, he knows he has done it in the spirit of his moral ethic. After he is caught, the Grand Duchess visits him in jail and asks him to speak about his crime. “What crime?,” he responds, “I remember only an act of justice . . . He (the Duke) was the living, human symbol of the supreme injustice which the Russian people have suffered for centuries! In return for that . . . he received only privileges! But I . . . even if I am wrong . . . my wages are prison and death” (*The Just* 212). Kaliayev accepts his own execution with dignity and dies, though only a peasant, more noble than the Duke; he dies according to his ethic.

Beginning with *Caligula* and ending with Kaliayev, Camus comes full circle in exploring his ethic of living as an authentic human being, and, in particular, the options of action, of revolt, available to the person who encounters the absurd. Interestingly enough, as Martin Esslin explains in *The Theatre of the Absurd*, though Camus is largely responsible for defining “the absurd,” his drama does not belong to the genre of the Theatre of the Absurd. “The Theatre of

the Absurd,” explains Esslin, “strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacies of the rational devices and discursive thought. While Sartre or Camus express the new content in the old convention, the Theatre of the Absurd goes a step further in trying to achieve a unity between its basic assumptions and the form in which these are expressed” (6). “The old convention” is clearly Camus’s insistence upon recognizing human reason as the essence of man, and flawed as it is, using that essence to make as much sense out of this nonsensical and violent world as possible. As has been discussed, Camus accomplishes this through words, more than action upon the stage. This emphasis upon words goes against Antonin Artaud’s theory that “words do not mean everything, and that by their nature and defining character, fixed once and for all, they arrest and paralyze thought instead of permitting it and fostering its development” (Esslin 335). Artaud’s statement corresponds with Eric Bentley’s major criticism of Camus’ drama, although Bentley sees a slightly different result of using too many words. “There are too many key speeches,” says Bentley, “speeches after which one can say Oho, so that’s what the play’s about,’ speeches that would not be necessary if the drama had been concentrated in the action and the characters” (*In Search of Theater* 47). As Bentley explains in *What is Theatre?*, “The diagnostic of a good drama is that the little it actually displays suggests, like the visible part of an iceberg, larger bulk beneath” (16). If Bentley is correct, as most critics would agree he is, then it seems Camus’ major flaw is that he *tells* too much about the iceberg, rarely being able to even *show* its tip. Camus’ tendency toward didactic wordiness about the absurd may account for his recognition as “existential philosopher,” rather than a “playwright.”

Nevertheless, the criticism of the theatrical nature of Camus’ plays on stage should not detract from their worth on paper. Without Camus’ sincerity in struggling with the world and his

own existence, and fleshing that struggle out, literally, through the dramatic form, theater would lack some of the great depth of insight it has into the human condition. “The real merit of Camus’ theater lies in the sphere of theme rather than form . . . Camus’ theater is unequalled for the probity and passion with which it defended human values during a decade in France when they had never been more fragile” (Freeman 164).

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