

# ***Albert Camus' Critique of Modernity* by Ronald D. Srigley**

Review by Simon Lea

*Albert Camus' Critique of Modernity* is a fascinating and provocative book, the arguments contained within are both compelling and convincing. Ronald Srigley has shown the direction future Camus Studies ought to be taking.

Albert Camus is, for Ronald Srigley, “an extremely talented young man whose initial promise is compromised by an almost twenty-year detour in which he lost his way but then struggled mightily to regain.”<sup>1</sup> *Albert Camus' Critique of Modernity* takes us through the initial promise of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the confusions of *The Rebel* and the recovery of *The Fall* in three long chapters, one for each book. In his conclusion, Srigley refers to *The First Man* in detail. There is no mention of Camus' other novels, although the author notes he could just as easily used *The Stranger* or *The Plague*<sup>2</sup>.

Srigley structures his chapters by first examining the approach taken by other commentators (David Sprintzen and Bruce Ward in first chapter, Georges Bataille and Eric Voegelin in the second, Tony Judt, Jean Onimus, Robert Solomon and David Ellison in the third) before unveiling his own, unusual, take on Camus. Srigley has taken great time and care to get exactly what Camus is trying to say and in my opinion he gets very close, closer certainly than any other commentator I've so far read. By no means do I mean to suggest that I am already there waiting for others to catch up! *Albert Camus' Critique of Modernity* (from now on, *ACCM*) is an exciting and inspiring read, unafraid to point out Camus' confusions and inconsistencies without apology.

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Camus' Critique of Modernity, p.142

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.15

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Albert Camus is typically misread in one of two ways. What you could call 'The Camus in the shadows of Sartre' approach attempts to show how, for example, *The Myth of Sisyphus* discusses the lack of transcendent good and meaning in the world that Sartre shows us in *Nausea* and *Being and Nothingness*. Here Camus is considered as 'one of the gang' and close friend of the leader until the quarrel over *The Rebel*. The consolation usually offered is that while Sartre was the better philosopher Camus was the better writer. A different take on Camus is that he was a pre-conversion Christian. Given the subject matter and that Christian themes run throughout Camus' work it is hardly surprising that he has attracted a Christian readership (for example: Adam, *the first man*, becomes *the rebel* and suffers *the Fall*). Obviously, how a reader approaches Camus will have a great effect on their understanding of his ideas. Someone who comes to Camus expecting to find good literature, weak philosophy and saintly moral approach will, unless they are very careful, believe they find that in Camus. Similarly, those who expect to find affirmation of modernity will not be disappointed and neither will those expecting to find modernity rejected. Christians wanting to find a man on the road to conversion will happily find that too, if they want to. All of this is more annoying than interesting; what is of interest is the extent to which Camus is at fault for these misunderstandings. We can not blame a writer for people reading into his work what they want to read but if there are confusions or inconsistencies in the work then these faults must be dealt with. If Camus is to blame, is it because he confused his readers or was confused himself?

I began this review with Srigley's claim that Camus was a talented writer who lost his way and this 'detour' is dealt with in chapter 2 of *ACCM*. This chapter, entitled 'A History of Rebellion', deals with Camus' most controversial work, *The Rebel*, a book Srigley finds 'admirable', 'penetrating' and 'uncompromising' but also 'very puzzling'<sup>3</sup>. What is puzzling is that Camus will both criticize and defend the same things at the same time. A few examples: he argues that metaphysical rebellion is inherently nihilistic but that it also has 'truth innate in its origins'; he claims that true rebellion does not involve the negation of God but also

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p.48

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says that the disappearance of one (rebellion or the sacred) is the equivalent to the appearance of the other; values that he claims pre-exist rebellion are later referred to as the product of rebellion. The problem, according to Srigley, is methodological. Camus wants to begin his investigation with a position he has already rejected as wrong. He forgets what he learnt writing *The Myth* and falls prey to the same confusion he discovers in those he is critiquing. Camus wants to begin, Cartesian-style, from a position of believing nothing but instead of arriving at where he left himself at the end of *The Myth*, he takes the existential position he rejected in that essay. Srigley writes:

The price Camus pays for his constant return to this spurious Cartesian reasoning is not small: it is the neglect of a careful and potentially fruitful analysis of the greater reality and the place of human beings in it that had been prepared for by his discussion of the absurd in favor of a series of weak, frequently sophistic arguments that at best posit hypothetically the existence of such an order by exposing the logical contradictions involved in all modern denials of it.<sup>4</sup>

Camus' method is an attempt to moderate rebellion by discovering its worst excesses and then critically examining the arguments justifying these excesses so that they can be rejected leaving only a naturally good and moderate revolt. Whether this is possible is doubtful. Bataille doubts that moderation can be extracted from rebellion at all and Voegelin, who interprets Camus as rebelling against the rebels by seeking a return to a Greek understanding of human life, doubts that this is enough to stave off modern extremes. While sympathetic with Voegelin (whom he clearly admires) Srigley disagrees that the contradictions in Camus' account are down to his desire to return to the Greeks but rather his 'unwillingness to return to [the Greeks] and to something like the understanding of human life it entails more completely.'<sup>5</sup>

We have already looked at two ways in which Camus is misread, that is as endorsing something similar to Sartrean

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p.51

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.58

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existentialism or as some kind of pre-conversion Christian struggling to come to terms with God's existence. Srigley's analysis of *The Myth* in the first Chapter of *ACCM* reveals Camus' true position, one that rejects both existentialist and Christian accounts of the absurd. In brief, Camus believes that they both overstate the problem. According to Srigley: "Both accounts belie a kind of "excess" (démésure), a lack of understanding of the experience. They seem to be worse than it is (absolute) so as to encourage extravagant solutions in which life will be made better than it can be (perfect)."<sup>6</sup> Of the two, labelled for simplicity, *existentialist* and *Christian*, Camus has traditionally been seen as siding with the existentialists. The debate is, obviously, centred on the existence of God. If God exists then the world has meaning, if He doesn't then the world is meaningless. If God exists then there exists a transcendent good and a standard by which human behaviour can be judged good or bad. That Camus did not personally believe in God is well known, that he rejects God nor a transcendent good in *The Myth* is assumed. This assumption, Srigley observes, is not supported by a close reading of the text. What Camus does reject is the existence of an afterlife. When he takes on Christian ideas, belief in God is not his target. In Camus' words: "what contradicts the absurd in that work is not its Christian character but rather its announcing of a future life [vie future]. It is possible to be Christian and absurd. There are examples of Christians who do not believe in a future life."<sup>7</sup> Camus warns his readers against reading into him a denial of God or transcendence: "Let me assert again: it is not the affirmation of God that is challenged here, but rather the logic leading to the affirmation."<sup>8</sup> Camus' idea of the absurd man is someone who is "at grips with a reality that transcends him."<sup>9</sup> It is this transcendent reality that Camus is seeking to understand in *The Myth*. All this being so, Camus' understanding of the absurd must differ from that of the

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.39

<sup>7</sup> Cited in *Albert Camus' Critique of Modernity*, p.23

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p23-4.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

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existentialist and the Christian understanding. How does it differ? And in what way are the accounts Camus rejects excessive?

Awareness of the absurd comes from experiencing the collapse of ideas. Human ideas collapse partly due to human nature and partly because of the nature of the world. Ideas are used to understand the world and our place in it and it seems natural that existing ideas be continually questioned and challenged by new ones. This activity results in an experience of the absurd. In addition, the world itself seems to confront man (and of course, woman), in Srigley's words:

The greater reality in which the absurd man lives is not passive – it acts on him [...] The absurd man does not cause these movements, nor can he control them. They strike, amaze, and alarm him, leaving his “reason” for the moment “impotent” to understand their meaning [...] The world then seems “dense”, “strange”, “inhuman”, perhaps even “more remote than a lost paradise” [...] As disturbing as such experiences may be, the absurd man again resists the temptation, common among existentialists, to understand them as signifying a final confrontation with nothingness. It is not nothingness that the absurd man encounters through the collapse of his ideas but the world itself. Indeed he says that “the world escapes us because it becomes itself again.” [...] The world is no mere appearance, beneath which lies the void. To the contrary, for the absurd man the world is full of meaning, so much so that it can overturn human conventions and ideas through the mere force of its overwhelming and abiding presence.<sup>10</sup>

Camus' description of the collapse of ideas in *The Myth* is, in Srigley's words, a thumbnail sketch of modernity. In the essay Camus seeks first to understand how the absurd is experienced, then to how it ought to be interpreted and finally why the various solutions currently on offer are inadequate. The collapse of ideas, or in other words, the 'stage-sets' (décors) or the 'images and designs' by which he commonly orders his life<sup>11</sup> reveals to Camus neither an empty void (as experienced by Sartre's Roquentin) nor the mystery of God described by Kierkegaard. According to

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p.27

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p.26

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Strigley: 'The absurd man evokes the collapse or loss of these things by saying that he has emerged into a "desert," that is to say, a place where there are few, if any, human artefacts.'<sup>12</sup> This emergence into the desert can be likened to the unshackled prisoner emerging from Plato's cave. He leaves behind the shadows of existentialism and Christianity being cast upon the walls below. Instead of being confronted by a void that is not there or an insolvable mystery that is beyond the scope of human reason the absurd man finds the greater reality. Camus sees in the absurd a divorce or misrelation between us and world, the result of a sickness of mind (*mal de l'esprit*)<sup>13</sup> that may be part of the human condition but that we can heal. Christians see a gap that can not be bridged by human beings alone and existentialists see nothingness.

Kierkegaard uses the absurd to describe 'that the eternal truth has come into being in time, that God has come to being, has been born, has grown up, and so forth, precisely like any other individual human being, quite indistinguishable from other individuals'<sup>14</sup>. For him there is a breach between God and the world that is only fixed through the acceptance of Jesus Christ. The idea that human beings can reject Christ, rejecting a mediator between themselves and God, introduces the possibility of existing in a world devoid of God, that is, a world that is devoid of meaning. It is this meaningless world that the existentialists find themselves in. And so despite being on opposite sides of the 'God debate' Christians and existentialists have in common the idea of a world and existence without meaning. Kierkegaard's answer is to put one's faith in the salvation offered by Jesus Christ, Sartre's is to create meaning out of nothing. For Camus, what both these positions ignore is the true reality of the world and by ignoring this reality they both overstate the problem as revealed through experience of the absurd. Because the problem is overstated the solutions are excessive. Integral to both solutions is the idea that

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p.26

<sup>13</sup> Cited in *Camus' Critique of Modernity*, p.30

<sup>14</sup> Cited in *Camus' Critique of Modernity*, p.33

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the human condition is something from which human beings need to be saved.

Camus will continue to explore these ideas in *The Rebel* but as discussed above he will put aside his analysis and take as his starting point the existentialist position on the absurd. This 'puzzling' decision is, according to Srigley, the cause of Camus' methodological problems. By choosing this position as his starting point Camus finds himself assenting to the idea that he is attacking, that is, that human beings require some kind of mediator in order to understand their place in the world. Obviously, since he does not believe in God this mediator will not be the Christian candidate, Jesus Christ. Neither can he put his support behind the Marxist candidate of the proletariat or the Communist Party. Instead Camus seems to put forward his own messianic candidate, the rebel. Has he forgotten that he needs no mediator, that since we do not need saving from the human condition no saviour is required?

In *The Rebel* modernity is sometimes described as a genuine or true desire for salvation that has merely gone wrong or is excessive. The main problem with the analysis is that it leaves the apocalyptic character of desire untouched. This is why Camus is unable to complete the argument in that book. Every time he comes close to doing so, the metaphysical need or void on which that desire rests reasserts itself and the reader is left thinking that any true solution to the problem must bear the shape of the Christian or modern apocalypse, if not their content. This explains the antiapocalyptic apocalyptic desire of *The Rebel's* argument.<sup>15</sup>

Camus wants to argue that modernism has Christian origins. That is, the Christian (Gnostic) idea of the disorder of the world being overcome through special knowledge and the desire to put into action this knowledge bringing Heaven to Earth lives on in modernity. Marxism put into action is the desire to bring order to the world, leading to the withering away of the State and, instead of Heaven, introducing pure communism. The alternative to Christian ideas is Greek thought and in *The Rebel* Camus seems

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p.99-100

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to require a choice be made (between the ancients and the moderns) while at the same time endorsing Christian/modern ideas to some degree (in the attempt to tease out moderation). Srigley argues that these problems are caused not just by the limitations he put upon himself in *The Rebel* but in his decision to organise his books into cycles.

The project became unworkable in part because the cyclical books rested on the assumption that one could find a way beyond modernity's conclusions while remaining faithful to its premises. These are the famous "starting point" arguments of *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*. In both instances Camus clearly wanted to move beyond the premises of modernity. But his method guaranteed that even his best critical insights would never be entirely free of modern assumptions and thus would continue to compromise his efforts in a variety of different ways.<sup>16</sup>

It is in *The Fall*, a book in the intermediate stage between cycles, that Camus manages to break out of his methodological bind. And it is this book Srigley turns his attention to in his third chapter, 'Modernity in Its Fullest Expression'. What we find is a Camus no longer looking (in vain) for modernity's good intentions. This search for good intentions – necessary for someone trying to moderate rebellion's violent excesses – had previously led to some unfortunate positions in *The Rebel*, such as seeming to approve, in some way, of the motivations behind terror and concentration camps ("The destruction of man again affirms man. Terror and concentration camps are the extreme means that man employs to escape solitude... If men kill one another, the reason is that they refuse their mortal condition and want immortality for all men."<sup>17</sup>) Camus' critique of modernity had always brought him back to its Christian origins but it wasn't until *The Fall* that he tackled the subject unequivocally. In this book we see the effect of the Christian world-view (in particular the idea of Original Sin, The Fall of Adam and Eve, and inherited guilt) on modern ideas and how this is manifested in the character of Clamence.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p.8

<sup>17</sup> Cited in *Albert Camus' Critique of Modernity*, p. 51

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Clamence's speech(es) in *The Fall* are a confidence trick designed to hide the existence of an alternative to modernity (the Greeks). It is a trick, we've seen, Camus himself had previously fallen for. This reading of *The Fall* is not typical. The book is usually read as an autobiographical account of the fallout with Sartre et al over *The Rebel*. Some commentators see a confession, while others see Camus taking revenge on his critics by confessing their sins on their behalf. These interpretations take Clamence as a stand-in for Camus. This approach misses Camus' critique of modernity by reading into the text an unflinching description of the human condition instead of the exposure of a confidence trick. Srigley's claim that Camus lost his way, taking a detour rather than just going down the wrong road, rests on his making the case that Camus intended *The Fall* to be understood as he suggests in *ACCM*. Accordingly, he takes on the various interpretations of *The Fall* patiently and convincingly reveals the flaws and misreadings he finds in these accounts.

Camus uses Clamence to show that the driving force behind modernity is not in fact a desire for salvation but self-love. Self-love, however, has always been around so how are things now different? We saw in *The Myth* that both the Christian and modern account of the absurd overstated the case with the result that their proposed solutions were excessive. With Clamence his account of his pre-fall life doesn't fit his response to it and his reaction is excessive. His personal fall, initiated by the laughter he hears, exposes the reality of his self-love but instead of accepting this reality he resorts to extreme measures in an attempt to maintain his self-love.

Everything Clamence says or does is an expression of his postfall resolution to perfect his self-love, even his description of his prefall life. That is the backstory of the narrative to which Clamence periodically alludes and that he states explicitly in the closing pages of the book. What this means is that everything he says is calculated to corrupt and deceive his listener and to satisfy and enhance his self-love. His aim in doing so is clear. By mixing his description of the horrors of modernity with an account of his own unreflective life, he draws his listener into the narrative and encourages him to engage in the same type of reflection. The aim is to implicate him in the same crimes and excesses and to shatter the good opinion he holds of himself. Clamence can then lessen the judgement he experiences in

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himself by extending it to others and by rising above them as their judge because of his own more highly differentiated and reflective self-knowledge.<sup>18</sup>

Clamence's need to see himself as pure echoes modernity's need to morally justify its excesses. Whereas the ancients killed and enslaved they did not feel the need to hide the ugliness of their acts beneath a cloak of morality. According to Srigley: 'The modern desire to cleanse or purify the world is a direct consequence of the Christian doctrine of the fall and original sin. So too is modernity's frightening moralism and inability to face its own self love frankly and do what can be done to diminish it.'<sup>19</sup>

Camus struggles to make the choice between the Greeks and the moderns a viable option in *The Rebel*. As discussed, his unwillingness to commit himself totally introduced confusion into his account. In *The Fall*, Clamence's sophistry is designed to keep this choice hidden. A careful reading will reveal what Clamence attempts to prevent us from seeing – which is the way out of the nightmare of modernity (Camus provides us with everything we need so that we don't fall into Clamence's trap, although some commentators are still taken in). Clamence himself was offered this way out, discovered during a trip to Greece. His memories of travelling in the Greek archipelago are contrasted with a soggy trip on the Zuider Zee and Camus wants us to keep this image in mind as we listen to Clamence's account of his debauchery and of the 'little-ease', the medieval prison cell designed to convince the innocent of their guilt. Greece is on his mind as he tells his tale ('Greece itself drifts somewhere within me, on the edge of my memory, tirelessly...'<sup>20</sup>) and, bearing in mind the con he is attempting, he checks that Greece is not on his listener's mind before moving on ('By the way, do you know Greece? No? So much the better.'<sup>21</sup>)

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p.97

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p125

<sup>20</sup> *The Fall*, p.72

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

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Srigley concluded *ACCM* with an examination of *The First Man*. Since Camus did not have the opportunity to finish the novel any commentary must be provisional. Srigley sees in what we have of this book 'Camus' first attempt to return to the premodern and pre-Christian world of the Greeks.<sup>22</sup> Srigley notes the significance of the 'first man' appearing for Camus after the rebellion and fall, the reverse of the Christian idea of Adam, the first man who rebelled and then fell from grace. For Camus there is no fall, no original sin and so we are all first men and women. The world of Jacques Cormery vividly illustrates 'a world full of meaning, sometimes frighteningly so [...] What Camus says about the struggles and meanings it entails corrects modern assumptions and replaces their apocalyptic excesses with truer, more moderate explanations of the character of human life.'<sup>23</sup>

### **Albert Camus' Critique of Modernity**

Ronald D. Srigley

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<sup>22</sup> *Albert Camus' Critique of Modernity*, p.142

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p.130

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