

Albert Camus' *Jonas, or the Artist at Work: Deciphering a Painting, Solving a Contradiction*

William F. Birdsall

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Following are abbreviations used for Camus works cited in the text. Complete bibliographic information is given in the bibliography at the end of the text.

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| <i>EK1957</i> | <i>Exile and the Kingdom (1957)</i> |
| <i>EK2007</i> | <i>Exile and the Kingdom (2007)</i> |
| <i>ER</i> | <i>L'exil et le royaume</i> |
| <i>FM</i> | <i>The First Man</i> |
| <i>LCE</i> | <i>Literary and Critical Essays</i> |
| <i>MS</i> | <i>The Myth of Sisyphus</i> |
| <i>NB1951-1959</i> | <i>Notebooks 1951-1959</i> |
| <i>PH</i> | <i>Le premier homme</i> |
| <i>R</i> | <i>The Rebel</i> |
| <i>RRD</i> | <i>Resistance, Rebellion, and Death</i> |

An enigmatic contradiction

Albert Camus' short story *Jonas ou l'artiste au travail*, the fifth of six short stories in the collection *L'exil et le royaume* (ER), ends with an enigmatic conclusion to a contradiction that any reader of the story confronts in their own life: reconciling a need for personal freedom with a need for communion with others. This essay examines how Camus resolves this contradiction between *solitaire* and *solidaire* not only in *Jonas* but in his personal life. The greatness of *Jonas*—and of Camus' life---- is in his ability to bridge what appear to be unbridgeable contradictions. Camus' resolution of the contradiction challenges readers to consider their own relationship with others.

The difficulty in understanding the conclusion of *Jonas* is compounded, for those of us limited to reading it in English only, by differences in translations of the story that can influence

a reader's understanding of the author's intent. Justin O'Brien's 1957 translation (EK 1957) and Carol Cosman 2007 translation (EK 2007), both published as *Exile and the Kingdom* by Vintage Press, offer different translations of the concluding clause and the final words that embody the contradiction. The clause refers to a painting by the artist Jonas that is completely blank except for a word in small letters in the center of the canvas. The clause in French is "mais dont on ne saviat s'il fallait y lire *solitaire* ou *solidaire*" (Camus' emphasis, EK,139). According to O'Brien's translation the word could not be deciphered with "any certainty as to whether it should be read *solitary* or *solidary*" (EK1957, 158). Cosman's alternative is that "it was hard to tell whether it should be read as *independent* or *interdependent*" (EK2007, 123). The differing translations complicate interpreting the enigmatic painting in resolving the contradiction of "*solitaire* ou *solidaire*." However, although the two translations differ, they each contribute to understanding the ambiguity of the image in the painting.

I use Cosman's translation precisely because of her translation of the concluding words. When Camus was killed at the age of 46 in an automobile accident in 1960, the manuscript of an unfinished autobiographical novel entitled *Le premier homme* was found in his brief case at the scene of the crash. As executor of his estate his daughter Catherine Camus did not feel it appropriate until 1994 to publish the incomplete and unedited work (PH). The English translation appeared in 1995 as *The First Man* (FM). The incomplete novel includes an appendix, "First Man. Notes and Sketches," taken from a small notebook kept by Camus while working on the novel. This appendix includes a note drafted as interior monologue of the protagonist for possible inclusion later in the novel: "I've lived too long, and acted and felt, to say this one is right and that one wrong. I've had enough of living according to the image others show me of myself. I'm resolved on autonomy, I demand independence in interdependence"

(FM, 292). Whether Cosman translated *solitaire* and *solidaire* as “independent” and “interdependent” based upon her reading of the *Le premier homme* appendix or not, the coincidence of the two words in the *The First Man* note and in her translation triggered my realisation of what Camus’ full note reveals about the conclusion of *Jonas*; therefore, my use of Cosman’s text for this essay.

However, I do not adopt either O’Brien’s or Cosman’s translation of *solitaire* and *solidaire* in discussing the story. In 2010, Catherine Camus edited a book of documents and photographs with the title: *Albert Camus: Solitaire et solidaire*, published in English in 2012 as *Albert Camus: Solitude and Solidarity*. I adopt Catherine Camus’ use of “solitude” and “solidarity” in deciphering the contradiction concluding *Jonas* because I believe these words, along with the independence-interdependence of *The First Man* note, express through Jonas the resolution of the contradiction Camus reached for himself. Pursuing my argument begins with a brief summary of the story. It should be noted Camus style in this story displays the sardonic wit, only a little of which is represented in this essay, that so entranced the immediate post-war, Paris left bank intellectual elite. Yet, underneath the wit is a serious theme.

Jonas the artist

From an early age Gilbert Jonas senses his life unfolds due to the good luck brought by “his star rather than his merits” (EK2007, 87). This belief bestows on him a serenity reinforced by the benign neglect of his parents. After their divorce guilt drives them to insure all his needs are met. When he reaches adulthood he is given an undemanding job at his father’s large publishing firm. Having much spare time Jonas takes up painting which becomes a passion. He achieves sufficient success that an art dealer offers him a modest monthly stipend. He is able to devote all his time to painting. When immobilized with a broken arm due to an accident riding

on a motorcycle driven by his old friend Rateau, Jonas becomes aware of and marries Louise, an attractive petite woman. Intensely industriousness Louise handles all aspects of Jonas' personal, intellectual, and business needs including finding a modest three room apartment despite a housing crisis. Jonas is able to pursue his painting under the benevolent protection of his star. However, with the births of three children Louise shifts her energy to raising the babies. Consequently Jonas is "a little neglected and had to buy his shoes himself" (EK2007, 92). As the apartment fills up with canvases and active children constant renovations are made for the family's living arrangements. Jonas and Louise are assisted in making these changes by their loyal friend Rateau, an architect.

Around the age of thirty-five "a dozen critics suddenly fought over the glory of discovering his talent" (EK2007, 87). As a result of this notoriety the apartment fills up every day with artists, critics, and young disciples. Jonas receives numerous letters which he is too courteous to ignore. When asked, he agrees to sign petitions against injustice. The state commissions his portrait to be painted; it is to be called *The Artist at Work*. As people take up more time his output of paintings declines although his reputation rises. None of these developments surprise Jonas who is convinced they are due to his star. Still, he and Louise become overwhelmed in the ever more hectic, crowded apartment: "He always felt behind and always guilty, even when he was working, which still happened now and then" (EK2007, 105). As he and Louise try to maintain the frenetic pace he begins to experience tension between his need for the solitude of his painting and the demands made on his time by others. He finds "It was difficult to paint the world and men and to live with them at the same time" (EK2007, 106).

Louise's widowed sister and her daughter start to come daily to assist with maintaining the household. "Yet Jonas was working less, without quite knowing why" (EK2007, 112). As

well, his reputation starts to decline, fewer friends visit, disciples fall away, critics attack his work, and his dealer reduces his monthly stipend. But Jonas feels his star will sustain him: “All he needed was a good household arrangement” (EK2007, 114). He tries working in the hall, then the shower, but there are still people everywhere. He stops painting and starts going out in the morning. He avoids neighborhoods where people know him. He starts drinking and seeking the comfort of women. Finally Louise demands to know about his relations with other women, “And for the first time he saw on Louise’s face that despair caused by surprise and an excess of pain, and it broke his heart” (EK2007, 116). He begs her to forgive him and resolves that “everything would begin again as before” (EK2007, 117). The next day he builds a small loft hanging from the high ceiling of the hall. Using a ladder, he moves his painting equipment and a candle for light to the loft. When family or Rateau ask what he is doing he tells them he is painting but he is meditating, waiting for his star. He spends all day and night in the loft. With his absence people stop coming to the apartment except Rateau.

One evening Jonas calls to Rateau to bring him a canvas. Jonas looks frail. Rateau urges him to eat but Jonas asserts he is not hungry. He asks Rateau to tell Louise and the children that “I’m not leaving them. Be sure to tell them, I am not leaving” (EK2007, 121). When Rateau talks to Louise she is miserable and exclaims: “I can’t live without him” (EK2007, 121). Jonas remains secluded night and day with his painting. Finally at the dawn of a beautiful day he turns the finished painting to the wall. Happy, he listens to the familiar morning noises of the family below. He is joyful, feeling alive and free. He hears Louise and his little girl laughing: “He loved them! How he loved them!” (EK2007, 122). His star is still shining; he is full of gratitude. Exhausted and frail he collapses. The doctor arrives and assures Louise that Jonas will be alright; he will recover if he does not work too hard.

In another room Rateau is looking at the canvas Jonas completed. He is unable to discern if the word painted in the middle of the otherwise blank canvas is *solitaire* or *solidaire*. This enigmatic image leaves Rateau and the reader of the story baffled by Jonas' painting. Resolving this challenge begins with considering Camus' struggle to resolve his own need for solitude and solidarity.

Camus: his solitude and solidarity

Jonas can be interpreted as a satirical commentary on Camus' personal experience among the Paris intellectual elite of the 1940s and 50s. Camus observed that "A novelist certainly expresses and betrays himself through all his characters at the same time: each of them represents one of his tendencies or his temptations" (LCR, 271). Jonas' rapid embracement and subsequent abandonment by Paris critics, artists, and disciples reflects Camus' sardonic assessment of the Parisian cultural world:

"Paris begins by serving a work of art and pushes it. But once it is established, then the fun begins. It is essential to destroy it. Thus there are, in Paris, as in certain streams in Brazil, thousands of little fish whose job this is. They are tiny, but innumerable. Their whole head, if I may say so, is in their teeth. And they completely remove the flesh from a man in five minutes, leaving nothing but the bare bones. They then go away, sleep a little, and begin again" (LCE, footnote 1, 154).

Although his fiction draws on personal experience Camus believed authors should not be interested in writing only about themselves but focus "first and foremost in other people, or in his time, or in well-known myths" (LCE, 158). *Jonas* draws upon Camus' own experience but to explore a larger issue than fleeting artistic celebrity; it is about a person's relationship with others as characterized in making a choice between solitude and solidarity.

In the early 1950s, Camus writes in his notebook:

Deep inside me, the Spanish solitude [His mother was born in Spain]. Man does not escape from it but for a few *instants*, then he returns to his island. Later (since 1939) I tried to reconnect, I repeated all the steps of the era. But double-time, on the wings of clamor, beneath the lashes of wars and revolutions. Today, I am through—and my solitude overflows with shadow and works that belong only to me (Camus' emphasis, (NB1951-1959, 30).

But shortly he questions the ability to achieve real solitude:

The tragedy is not that we are alone, but that we cannot be. At times I would give anything in the world to no longer be connected by anything to this universe of men. But I am a part of this universe, and the most courageous thing to do is to accept the tragedy at the same time (NB1951-1959, 47).

He starts to think about how to address the theme of solitude and solidarity in a story or play.

He makes notes to himself in his notebooks about an artist named Jonas and the theme of solitude. He enters a note for a play to be entitled *La Vie d'artiste* (Life of the artist) “about the impossibility of solitude” (Camus' emphasis, NB1951-1959, 100). By 1958, he writes:

I have learned to recognize my limits and nearly all my weaknesses...I've learned at least that other people do exist, and that selfishness, although it cannot be denied, must try to be clear-sighted. To enjoy only oneself is impossible, I know, although I have great gifts in this direction. If solitude exists, and I don't know if it does, one should certainly have the right to dream of it occasionally as paradise. I do from time to time, like everyone else” (LCE, 13).

By the end of a decade of difficulties in his literary, political, and personal life he concludes; “I cannot live with people for a long time. I need a little solitude, a portion of eternity” (NB1951-1959, 255). Nonetheless, he recognizes along with need for solitude the need for solidarity with others. Indeed, solitude and solidarity can be conceived in the pure abstract as a contradiction but in the real, social world they can only be manifested in a person as a confused combination.

His realization of a person's need for solidarity came out of his service in the resistance movement against German occupiers of France during World War II. In an interview in 1945 he indicated that "if there is one fact that these last five years have brought out, it is the extreme solidarity of men with one another. Solidarity in crime for some, solidarity in the upsurge of resistance in others. Solidarity even between victims and executioners" (LCE, 346). This solidarity arises out of a consciousness of the world we share with others: "The sea, rains, necessity, desire, the struggle against death—these are the things that unite us all. We resemble one another in what we see together, in what we suffer together" (RRD, 258). The solidarity of "we are" does not negate the solitude of "I am." Indeed, Camus asserts "'We are' paradoxically defines a new form of individualism" (R, 297). In this individualism "I have need of others who have need of me and of each other" (R297). A person and a society will "lose their direction if they deny the 'We are'" (R 297). How does Jonas resolve the contradiction between solitude and solidarity, between "I am" and the "we are"?

Jonas: His solitude and solidarity

Since childhood cycles of solitude and solidarity were part of Jonas' life. As a child he lives in a state of benign neglect that gives him "the leisure to daydream" (EK2007, 88). When his parent's divorce his needs are met through a job with ample solitary time. Indeed he adopts the solitude of an artist: Among the truly solitary is the painter confronted by a blank canvas taunting him to act. He marries a woman who takes care of all his needs, at least until the children arrive. Then, love of family and of friend Rateau become markers of Jonas' increasing bonds of solidarity with others. As his fame increases he is embraced by the artistic community. His house is filled every day with visitors crowding around him in a concentric circle, a universal image of solidarity, as he paints. As the demands on his time increases he finds it a challenge to

maintain the solitude of painting and the solidarity of family and artistic community. Yet, when Rateau warns him that all his artist friends are not good he counters: “I know them. You have to love them” (EK2007, 109). He is disturbed when friends keep him from painting “But in another sense this new solidarity was in some way beneficial” (EK2007, 123). Nonetheless, he experiences increasing “difficulty painting, even in moments of solitude” (EK2007, 112). Jonas is experiencing a crisis; a tension between solitude and solidarity, between “I am” and “we are.”

In the past Jonas demurred to the wishes of others but when confronted by his faithful wife he finally takes responsibility for his actions. Taking action by seeking solitude, Jonas begins to become a free person. Camus wrote: “There are no more deserts. There are no more islands. Yet there is a need for them. In order to understand the world, one has to turn away from it on occasion; in order to serve men better, one has to hold them at a distance for a time. But where can one find the solitude necessary to vigor, the deep breath in which the mind collects itself and courage gauges its strength?” (MS, 157). Jonas seeks a place of solitude to hold those crowding around at a distance, to understand his world. He returns to the solitude of his loft, “listening to his heart” (EK2007, 119). Spending time alone is often a prelude to initiating significant, volunteer action. Jonas turns the completed canvas to the wall. He breaks out of his solitude; he hears the noises of the street, of the family below the loft; “The world was still there, young, lovable: Jonas listened to the lovely murmur of humanity” (EK2007, 122). Through his solitude he reaches the solidarity of “we are. How does his painting represent his resolution of the contradiction of solitude and solidarity?

Independence in interdependence, solitude in solidarity

To know solitude Jonas needs to know solidarity. To know solidarity he needs to know solitude. He must assess for himself the limits of each. Jonas experiences considerable solitude during his childhood and his life as an artist but he is then drawn into greater solidarity through his marriage. The constant renovations of the apartment with the assistance of their close friend Rateau represents the incremental creation of that edifice of solidarity—the home. A greater impingement on his solitude is sudden fame and the resulting invasion of outsiders. Building his loft Jonas creates a center of solitude. Hiding in his secluded space Jonas withdraws into himself, frees his imagination. He experiences solitude day and night, waiting for his star. And he finds it; it is himself. From his solitude he hears the sound of his family and of his close friend in the home they all created, in the solidarity they all created. Such familiar, intimate sounds bring to Jonas huddled in his loft a strong sense and image of comfort and security, of solidarity. He is moved to action which in itself is an act of becoming his own person.

Ascertaining the limits of solitude and solidarity clarifies and enhances the vividness of the contradiction between the two. Jonas experiences a heightened state of solitude in the hermetic confinement of his loft and of solidarity surrounded by the tight concentric circle of the throng filling up his apartment. By testing the limits of solitude and of solidarity he resolves their contradiction through what Camus calls the law of moderation. Absolute solitude denies the possibility of solidarity. Absolute solidarity denies the possibility of solitude. The degree adopted of each is relative to the other. Choosing one means choosing the other simultaneously; there cannot be solitude if there is no solidarity. Jonas attains a dynamic equilibrium between the two; a matter of learning “to braid with a white thread and a black thread a cord stretching to the breaking point” (MS, 202). Inherent in this tension is the ambiguity that must be endured; resolving the contradiction of solitude and solidarity through moderation “cannot be anything

other than the affirmation of contradiction and the heroic decision to stay with it and survive it” (NB1951-1959, 21).

To understand Jonas’ resolution of the solitude-solidarity contradiction in his painted image we return to Camus’ entry in *The First Man* notes (FM, 292). It begins: “I’ve lived too long, and acted and felt, to say this one is right and that one wrong. I’ve had enough of living according to the image others show me of myself” (FM, 292). Jonas reaches this conclusion as well through his retreat to the solitude of his loft and meditating on his past experience. He was always driven here and there by the opinions others asserted about the direction of his life. As a result he was torn between the need for solitude and the pull of solidarity with others. Camus further asserted in his note: “I’m resolved on autonomy, I demand independence in interdependence” (FM, 292). Recall Camus used *l’indépendance* and *l’interdépendance* in *Le premier homme* and *solitaire* and *solidaire* in *Jonas*, which implies he was making a specific distinction between the meanings of the two sets of words.

My view is that for Camus independence and solitude and interdependence and solidarity were, for him, inseparably linked. This accounts for O’Brien’s and Cosman’s differing but complementary translations of *solitaire* and *solidaire*. A compound of O’Brien’s *solitary* and *solidary* and Cosman’s *independent* and *interdependent* acknowledges Camus’ linking of solitude and independence and solidarity and interdependence. It is not a choice of solitude *or* solidarity. Nor is it a choice of solitude *and* solidarity. Jonas, hearing the family below his loft, the mummer of humanity from the boulevard, realizes they “did not conflict with that joyful strength in him, his art, those thoughts that he could never express but that set him above all things, in an atmosphere that was free and alive” (EK, 122). Jonas finds solitude *in* solidarity, independence *in* interdependence with others. He achieves his “I am” *in* “we are.” Achieving

solitude *in* solidarity cannot be described empirically; it is intuited by a person by ascertaining through experience their own limits of solitude and of solidarity with others.

Holding a position that avoids what is for Jonas the limits of solitude and solidarity is a position of constructive strength by maintaining a balance between the destructive absolutisms of extreme positions. Jonas found through his experience in solitude the independence, the freedom, to determine the direction of his life while recognizing this must be done *in* solidarity with others, especially his family and the unwavering friendship of Rateau. Jonas braids a thread of solitude and a thread of solidarity into a single cord embodying both “I am” and “we are.” This cord is visually represented in the entwined *solitaire-solidaire* painted on his canvas. Being an artist Jonas would want to share his insight through a painting, a powerful mode of communication with others. Attempting to give visual form to the non-rational, poetic insight that solitude in solidarity is possible, Jonas recognizes, as truly creative artists do, that to do so an element of ambiguity intensifies the impact of an image and intensifies the need to understand the meaning of an image. His painting, like the ambiguity of Camus’ story itself, incites the reader consider how to achieve for themselves solitude in solidarity.

Conclusion

So what becomes of Jonas? Resolving the contradiction that exhausted him to the point of collapse he will, as the doctor predicted, surely recover. Having achieved solitude in solidarity it is for Jonas to determine what is next. We can only wish him well in the hope he remembers the law of moderation “cannot be anything other than the affirmation of contradiction and the heroic decision to stay with it and to survive it” (NB1951-1959, 21). As for Camus, his star also stayed with him. In an autobiographical note in *The First Man* he wrote: “He loved his

mother and his child, everything that it was not up to him to choose. And after all he, who had challenged everything, questioned everything, he had never loved anything except what was inevitable. The people fate had imposed on him, the world as it appeared to him, everything in his life he had not been able to avoid, his illness, his vocation, fame or poverty—in a word, his star” (FM, 311).

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