

Preface, Albert Camus

Preface

The essays collected in this volume were written in 1935 and 1936 (I was then twenty-two) and published a year later in Algeria in a very limited edition. This edition has been unobtainable for a long time and I have always refused to have *The Wrong Side and the Right Side* reprinted. There are no mysterious reasons for my stubbornness. I reject nothing of what these writings express, but their form has always seemed clumsy to me. The prejudices on art I cherish in spite of myself (I shall explain them further on) kept me for a long time from considering their republication.

A great vanity, it would seem, leading one to suppose that my other writings satisfy every standard. Need I say this isn't so? I am only more aware of the inadequacies in *The Wrong Side and the Right Side* than of those in my other work. How can I explain this except by admitting that these inadequacies concern and reveal the subject closest to my heart. The question of its literary value settled, then, I can confess that for me this little book has considerable value as testimony.

I say for me, since it is to me that it reveals and from me that it demands a fidelity whose depth and difficulties I alone can know. I should like to try to explain why.

Brice Parain often maintains that this little book contains my best work. He is wrong. I do not say this, knowing how honest he is, because of the impatience every artist feels when people are impertinent enough to prefer what he has been to what he is. No, he is wrong because at twenty-two, unless one is a genius, one scarcely knows how to write. But I understand what Parain, learned enemy of art and philosopher of compassion, is trying to say. He means, and he is right, that there is more love in these awkward pages than in all those that have followed. Every artist thus keeps within himself a single source which nourishes during his lifetime what he is and what he says.

When that spring runs dry, little by little one sees his work shrivel and crack. These are art's wastelands, no longer watered by the invisible current. His hair grown thin and dry, covered with thatch, the artist is ripe for silence or the salons, which comes to the same thing. As for myself, I know that my source is in *The Wrong Side and the Right Side*, in the world of poverty and sunlight I lived in for so long, whose memory still saves me from two opposing dangers that threaten every artist, resentment and self-satisfaction.

Poverty, first of all, was never a misfortune for me: it was radiant with light. Even my revolts were brilliant with sunshine. They were almost always, I think I can say this without hypocrisy, revolts for everyone, so that every life might be lifted into that light.

There is no certainty my heart was naturally disposed to this kind of love. But circumstances helped me. To correct a natural Indifference, I was placed halfway between poverty and the sun. Poverty kept me from thinking all was well under the sun and in history; the sun taught me that history was not everything. I wanted to change lives, yes, but not the world which I worshipped as divine. I suppose this is how I got started on my present difficult career, innocently stepping onto the tightrope upon which I move painfully forward, unsure of reaching the end. In other words, I became an artist, if it is true that there is no art without refusal or consent.

In any case, the lovely warmth that reigned over my childhood freed me from all resentment. I lived on almost nothing, but also in a kind of rapture. I felt infinite strengths within me: all I had to do was find a way to use them. It was not poverty that got in my way: in Africa, the sun and the sea cost nothing. The obstacle lay rather in prejudices or stupidity. These gave me every opportunity to develop a "Castilian pride" that has done me much harm, that my friend and

teacher Jean Grenier is right to make fun of, and that I tried in vain to correct, until I realized that there is a fatality in human natures.

It seemed better to accept my pride and try to make use of it, rather than give myself, as Chamfort would put it, principles stronger than my character. After some soul-searching, however, I can testify that among my many weaknesses I have never discovered that most widespread failing, envy, the true cancer of societies and doctrines.

I take no credit for so fortunate an immunity. I owe it to my family, first of all, who lacked almost everything and envied practically nothing. Merely by their silence, their reserve, their natural sober pride, my people, who did not even know how to read, taught me the most valuable and enduring lessons. Anyhow, I was too absorbed in feeling to dream of things. Even now, when I see the life of the very rich in Paris, there is compassion in the detachment it inspires in me. One finds many injustices in the world, but there is one that is never mentioned, climate.

For a long time, without realizing it, I thrived on that particular injustice. I can imagine the accusations of our grim philanthropists, if they should happen to read these lines. I want to pass the workers off as rich and the bourgeois as poor, to prolong the happy servitude of the former and the power of the latter. No, that is not it. For the final and most revolting injustice is consummated when poverty is wed to the life without hope or the sky that I found on reaching manhood in the appalling slums of our cities: everything must be done so that men can escape from the double humiliation of poverty and ugliness.

Though born poor in a working-class neighborhood, I never knew what real misfortune was until I saw our chilling suburbs. Even extreme Arab poverty cannot be compared to it, because of the difference in climate. But anyone who has known these industrial slums feels forever soiled, it seems to me, and responsible for their existence.

What I have said is nonetheless true. From time to time I meet people who live among riches I cannot even imagine. I still have to make an effort to realize that others can feel envious of such wealth. A long time ago, I once lived a whole week luxuriating in all the goods of this world:

we slept without a roof, on a beach, I lived on fruit, and spent half my days alone in the water. I learned something then that has always made me react to the signs of comfort or of a well-appointed house with irony, impatience, and sometimes anger. Although I live without worrying about tomorrow now, and therefore count myself among the privileged, I don't know how to own things. What I do have, which always comes to me without my asking for it, I can't seem to keep.

Less from extravagance, I think, than from another kind of parsimony:

I cling like a miser to the freedom that disappears as soon as there is an excess of things. For me, the greatest luxury has always coincided with a certain bareness. I love the bare interiors of Spanish or North African houses. Where I prefer to live and work (and what is more unusual, where I would not mind dying) is in a hotel room. I have never been able to succumb to what is called home life (so often the very opposite of an inner life); "bourgeois" happiness bores and terrifies me.

This incapacity is nothing to brag about: it has made no small contribution to my worst faults. I don't envy anyone anything, which is my right, but I am not always mindful of the wants of others and this robs me of imagination, that is to say, kindness. I've invented a maxim for my own personal use: "We must put our principles into great things, mercy is enough for the small ones." Alas! We invent maxims to fill the holes in our own natures. With me, a better word for the aforementioned mercy would be indifference.

The results, as one can imagine, are less than miraculous. But all I want to emphasize is that poverty does not necessarily involve envy. Even later, when a serious illness temporarily deprived me of the natural vigor that always transfigured everything for me, in spite of the invisible infirmities and new weaknesses this illness brought, I may have known fear and discouragement, but never bitterness. The illness surely added new limitations, the hardest ones, to those I had already. In the end it encouraged that freedom of the heart, that slight detachment from human concerns, which has always saved me from resentment. Since living in Paris I have learned this is a royal privilege.

I've enjoyed it without restrictions or remorse, and until now at any rate, it has illuminated my whole life. As an artist, for example, I began by admiring others, which in a way is heaven on earth. (The present custom in France, as everyone knows, is to launch and even to conclude one's literary career by choosing an artist to make fun of.) My human passions, like my literary ones, have never been directed against others.

The people I have loved have always been better and greater than I. Poverty as I knew it taught me not resentment but a certain fidelity and silent tenacity. If I have ever forgotten them, either I or my faults are to blame, not the world I was born into.

The memory of those years has also kept me from ever feeling satisfied in the exercise of my craft. Here, as simply as I can, I'd like to bring up something writers normally never mention. I won't even allude to the satisfaction one supposedly feels at a perfectly written book or page. I don't know whether many writers experience it. As far as I'm concerned, I don't think I've ever found delight in re-reading a finished page.

I will even admit, ready to be taken at my word, that the success of some of my books has always surprised me. Of course, rather shabbily, one gets used to it. Even today, though, I feel like an apprentice compared to certain living writers I rank at their true worth. One of the foremost is the man to whom these essays were dedicated as long as twenty years ago.¹

Naturally, a writer has some joys he lives for and that do satisfy him fully. But for me, these come at the moment of conception, at the instant when the subject reveals itself, when the articulation of the work sketches itself out before the suddenly heightened awareness, at those delicious moments when imagination and intelligence are fused. These moments disappear as they are born. What is left is the execution, that is to say, a long period of hard work.

On another level, an artist also has the delights of vanity. The writer's profession, particularly in French society, is largely one of vanity. I say this without scorn, and with only slight regret. In this respect I am like everyone else; who is impervious to this ridiculous disease? Yet, in a society where envy and derision are the rule, the day comes when, covered with scorn, writers pay dearly for these poor joys. Actually, in twenty years of literary life, my work has brought very few such joys, fewer and fewer as time has passed.

Isn't it the memory of the truths glimpsed in *The Wrong Side and the Right Side* that has always kept me from feeling at ease in the public exercise of my craft and has prompted the many refusals that have not always won me friends? By ignoring compliments and homages we lead the person paying those compliments to think we look down on him, when in fact we are only doubting ourselves.

By the same token, if I had shown the mixture of harshness and indulgence sometimes found in literary careers, if like so many others I had exaggerated a bit, I might have been looked upon more favorably, for I would have been playing the game. But what's to be done, the game does not amuse me! The ambitions of a Lucien de Rubempré or a Julien Sorel often disconcert me in their naïveté and their modesty. Nietzsche's, Tolstoy's, or Melville's overwhelm me, precisely because of their failure. I feel humility, in my heart of hearts, only in the presence of the poorest lives or the greatest adventures of the mind. Between

the two is a society I find ludicrous.

Sometimes on those opening nights at the theater, which are the only times I ever meet what is insolently referred to as "all Paris," it seems to me that the audience is about to vanish, that this fashionable world does not exist. It is the others who seem real to me, the tall figures sounding forth upon the stage. Resisting the impulse to flee, I make myself remember that every one in the audience also has a rendezvous with himself: that he knows it and will doubtless be keeping it soon.

Immediately he seems like a brother once more; solitudes unite those society separates. Knowing this, how can one flatter this world, seek its petty privileges, agree to congratulate every author of every book, and openly thank the favorable critic. Why try to seduce the enemy, and above all how is one to receive the compliments and admiration that the French (in the author's presence anyway, for once he leaves the room!...) dispense as generously as Pernod or the fan magazines.

I can't do it and that's a fact. Perhaps there is a lot of that churlish pride of mine here, whose strength and extent I know only too well. But if this were all, if only my vanity were involved, it seems to me that I ought to enjoy compliments, superficially at least, instead of repeatedly being embarrassed by them. No, the vanity I share with others comes mostly when I react to criticisms that have some measure of truth.

It's not conceit that makes me greet compliments with that stupid, ungrateful look I know so well, but (along with the profound indifference that haunts me like a natural infirmity) a strange feeling that comes over me: "You're missing the point ..." Yes, they are missing the point, and that is why a reputation, as it's called, is sometimes so hard to bear that one takes a kind of malicious pleasure in doing everything one can to lose it.

On the other hand, re-reading *The Wrong Side and the Right Side* for this edition after so many years, I know instinctively that certain pages, despite their inadequacies, are the point. I mean that old woman, a silent mother, poverty, light on the Italian olive trees, the populated loneliness of love—all that in my opinion reveals the truth.

Since these pages were written I have grown older and lived through many things. I have learned to recognize my limits and nearly all my weaknesses. I've learned less about people, since their destiny interests me more than their reactions, and destinies tend to repeat each other. 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. Yet two tranquil angels have always kept me from that paradise: one has a friend's face, the other an enemy's. Yes, I know all this and I've also learned or nearly learned the price of love. But about life itself I know no more than what is said so clumsily in *The Wrong Side and the Right Side*.

"There is no love of life without despair of life," I wrote, rather pompously, in these pages. I didn't know at the time how right I was; I had not yet been through years of real despair. They came, and managed to destroy everything in me except an uncontrolled appetite for life.

I still suffer from this both fruitful and destructive passion that bursts through even the gloomiest pages of *The Wrong Side and the Right Side*. It's been said we really live for only a few hours of our life.

This is true in one sense, false in another. For the hungry ardor one can sense in these essays has never left me; in the last analysis, this appetite is life

at its best and at its worst. I've certainly tried to correct its worst effects. Like everyone, I've done my best to improve my nature by means of ethics. Alas, the price has been high. With energy, something I've a good deal of, one sometimes manages to behave morally, but never to be moral.

To long for morality when one is a man of passion is to yield to injustice at the very moment one speaks of justice. Man sometimes seems to me a walking injustice: I am thinking of myself. If I now have the impression I was wrong, or that I lied sometimes in what I wrote, it is because I do not know how to treat my iniquity honestly. Surely I've never claimed to be a just man. I've only said that we should try to be just, and also that such an ambition involves suffering and unhappiness. But is this distinction so important? And can the man who does not even manage to make justice prevail in his own life preach its virtues to other people? If only we could live according to honor—that virtue of the unjust! But our society finds the word obscene; "aristocratic" is a literary and philosophical insult.

I am not an aristocrat, my reply is in this book: here are my people, my teachers, my ancestry, here is what, through them, links me with everyone. And yet I do need honor, because I am not big enough to do without it!

What does it matter? I merely wanted to show that if I have come a long way since this book, I have not made much progress. Often, when I thought I was moving forward, I was losing ground. But, in the end, my needs, my errors, and my fidelities have always brought me back to the ancient path I began to explore in *The Wrong Side* and *the Right Side*, whose traces are visible in everything I've done since, and along which on certain mornings in Algiers, for example, I still walk with the same slight intoxication.

If this is so, why have I so long refused to produce this feeble testimony? First of all because, I must repeat, I have artistic scruples just as other men have moral and religious ones. If I am stuck with the notion "such things are not done," with taboos in general rather alien to my tree nature, it's because I am the slave, and an admiring one, of a severe artistic tradition. Since this uneasiness may be at war with my profound anarchy, it strikes me as useful. I know my disorder, the violence of certain instincts, the graceless abandon into which I can throw myself. In order to be created, a work of art must first of all make use of the dark forces of the soul.

But not without channeling them, surrounding them with dikes, so that the water in them rises. Perhaps my dikes are still too high today. From this, the occasional stiffness ... Someday, when a balance is established between what I am and what I say, perhaps then, and I scarcely dare write it, I shall be able to construct the work I dream of. What I have tried to say here is that in one way or another it will be like *The Wrong Side* and *the Right Side* and that it will speak of a certain form of love.

The second reason I've kept these early essays to myself will then be clear: clumsiness and disorder reveal too much of the secrets closest to our hearts; we also betray them through too careful a disguise. It is better to wait until we are skillful enough to give them a form that does not stifle their voice, until we know how to mingle nature and art in fairly equal doses; in short, to be.

For being consists of being able to do everything at the same time. In art, everything comes at once or not at all; there is no light without flame. Stendhal once cried: "But my soul is a fire which suffers if it does not blaze." Those who are like him in this should create only when afire. At the height of the flame, the cry leaps straight upward and creates words which in their turn reverberate. I am talking here about what all of us, artists unsure of being artists, but certain that we are nothing else, wait for day after day, so that in the end we may agree to live. Why then, since I am concerned with what is probably a vain expectation, should I now agree to republish these essays? First of all because a number of readers have been able to find a convincing argument.²

And then, a time always comes in an artist's life when he must take his bearings, draw closer to his own center, and then try to stay there. Such is my position today, and I need say no more about it. If, in spite of so many efforts to create a language and bring myths to life, I never manage to rewrite *The Wrong Side and the Right Side*, I shall have achieved nothing. I feel this in my bones. But nothing prevents me from dreaming that I shall succeed, from imagining that I shall still place at the center of this work the admirable silence of a mother and one man's effort to rediscover a justice or a love to match this silence.

In the dream that life is, here is man, who finds his truths and loses them on this mortal earth, in order to return through wars, cries, the folly of justice and love, in short through pain, toward that tranquil land where death itself is a happy silence. Here still ... Yes, nothing prevents one from dreaming, in the very hour of exile, since at least I know this, with sure and certain knowledge: a man's work is nothing but this slow trek to rediscover, through the detours of art, those two or three great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened.

This is why, perhaps, after working and producing for twenty years, I still live with the idea that my work has not even begun. From the moment that the republication of these essays made me go back to the first pages I wrote, it was mainly this I wanted to say.

1 Jean Grenier was Camus's philosophy teacher at the Lycée d'Alger and later at the University of Algiers. It was under his direction that Camus undertook research for his *Diplôme d'études supérieures*, which he successfully completed in 1936, on *Métaphysique chrétienne et néoplatonisme*. -P.T.

2 A simple one. "This book already exists, but in a small number of copies sold by booksellers at a very high price. Why should wealthy readers be the only ones with the right to read it?"
Why indeed?

The end