

The Almond Trees, Albert Camus

The Almond Trees

"Do you know," Napoleon once said to Fontanes, "what astounds me most about the world? The impotence of force to establish anything. There are only two powers in the world: the sword and the mind. In the end, the sword is always conquered by the mind."¹

Conquerors, you see, are sometimes melancholy. They have to pay some price for so much vainglory. But what a hundred years ago was true of the sword is no longer true today of the tank. Conquerors have made progress, and the dismal silence of places without intelligence has been established for years at a time in a lacerated Europe. At the time of the hideous wars of Flanders, Dutch painters could still perhaps paint the cockerels in their farmyards.

The Hundred Years War has likewise been forgotten, and yet the prayers of Silesian mystics still linger in some hearts. But today, things have changed; the painter and the monk have been drafted we are one with the world. The mind has lost that regal certainty which a conqueror could acknowledge; it exhausts itself now in cursing force, for want of knowing how to master it.

Some noble souls keep on deploring this, saying it is evil. We do not know if it is evil, but we know it is a fact. The conclusion is that we must come to terms with it. All we need know, then, is what we want. And what we want precisely is never again to bow beneath the sword, never again to count force as being in the right unless it is serving the mind. The task is endless, it's true. But we are here to pursue it. I do not have enough faith in reason to subscribe to a belief in progress or to any philosophy of history. I do believe at least that man's awareness of his destiny has never ceased to advance.

We have not overcome our condition, and yet we know it better. We know that we live in contradiction, but we also know that we must refuse this contradiction and do what is needed to reduce it. Our task as men is to find the few principles that will calm the infinite anguish of free souls. We must mend what has been torn apart, make justice imaginable again in a world so obviously unjust, give happiness a meaning once more to peoples poisoned by the misery of the century. Naturally, it is a superhuman task. But superhuman is the term for tasks men take a long time to accomplish, that's all.

Let us know our aims then, holding fast to the mind, even if force puts on a thoughtful or a comfortable face in order to seduce us. The first thing is not to despair. Let us not listen too much to those who proclaim that the world is at an end. Civilizations do not die so easily, and even if our world were to collapse, it would not have been the first. It is indeed true that we live in tragic times. But too many people confuse tragedy with despair. "Tragedy," Lawrence said, "ought to be a great kick at misery."²

This is a healthy and immediately applicable thought. There are many things today deserving such a kick. When I lived in Algiers, I would wait patiently all winter because I knew that in the course of one night, one cold, pure February night, the almond trees of the Vallée des Consuls would be covered with white flowers. I would marvel then at the sight of this fragile snow resisting the rains and the wind from the sea. Yet every year it lasted just long enough to prepare the fruit.

There is no symbol here. We will not win our happiness with symbols. We'll need something more solid. I mean only that sometimes, when life weighs too heavily today in a Europe still full of misery, I turn toward those shining lands where so much strength is still intact. I know them too well not to realize that they are the chosen land where courage and contemplation can live in harmony. Thinking of them teaches me that if we are to save the mind we must ignore its gloomy virtues and celebrate its strength and wonder.

Our world is poisoned by its misery, and seems to wallow in it. It has utterly surrendered to that evil which Nietzsche called the spirit of heaviness. Let us not add to this. It is futile to weep over the mind, it is enough to labor for it.

But where are the conquering virtues of the mind? The same Nietzsche listed them as mortal enemies to heaviness of the spirit. For him, they are strength of character, taste, the "world," classical happiness, severe pride, the cold frugality of the wise. More than ever, these virtues are necessary today, and each of us can choose the one that suits him best. Before the vastness of the undertaking, let no one forget strength of character. I don't mean the theatrical kind on political platforms, complete with frowns and threatening gestures.

But the kind that through the virtue of its purity and its sap, stands up to all the winds that blow in from the sea. Such is the strength of character that in the winter of the world will prepare the fruit.

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1 Camus first noted down the remark by Napoleon in his Carnets in 1939, and sketched out a description of the almond trees later the same year. (See Carnets I, pp. 186, 196; Alfred A. Knopf edition, pp. 156, 165-6.)

2 The quotation from D. H. Lawrence is taken from a letter written to A. W. McLeod on October 6, 1912: "I hate Bennett's resignation. Tragedy ought to be like a great kick at misfortune." Camus first noted it down in Carnets I, p. 183, in 1939; Alfred A. Knopf edition, p. 153. A first version of this text appeared in *La Tunisie Française* on January 25, 1941. -P.T.

The end