

The Enigma, Albert Camus

The Enigma<sup>1</sup>

Waves of sunlight, pouring from the topmost sky, bounce fiercely on the countryside around us. Everything grows quiet beneath its force, and Mount Luberon, over there, is merely a vast block of silence that I listen to unceasingly. I listen carefully, someone is running toward me in the distance, invisible friends call to me, my joy grows, just as years ago.

Once again, a happy enigma helps me to understand everything. Where is the absurdity of the world? Is it this resplendent glow or the memory of its absence? With so much sun in my memory, how could I have wagered on nonsense? People around me are amazed; so am I, at times. I could tell them, as I tell myself, that it was in fact the sun that helped me, and that the very thickness of its light coagulates the universe and its forms into a dazzling darkness.

But there are other ways of saying this, and I should like, faced with the white and black clarity that, for me, has always been the sign of truth, to explain in simple terms what I feel about this absurdity which I know too well to allow anyone to hold forth on it without making certain nuances.

The very fact of talking about it, after all, will lead us back to the sun. No man can say what he is. But sometimes he can say what he is not. Everyone wants the man who is still searching to have already reached his conclusions. A thousand voices are already telling him what he has found, and yet he knows that he hasn't found anything.

Should he search on and let them talk? Of course. But, from time to time, one must defend himself. I do not know what I am looking for, cautiously I give it a name, I withdraw what I said, I repeat myself, I go backward and forward. Yet people insist I identify my term or terms, once and for all. Then I object; when things have a label aren't they lost already? Here, at least, is what I can try to say.

If I am to believe one of my friends, a man always has two characters: his own, and the one his wife thinks he has. Substitute society for wife and we shall understand how a particular expression, used by a writer to describe a whole context of emotions, can be isolated by the way people comment on it and laid before its author every time he tries to talk about something else. Words are like actions: "Are you the father of this child?" "Yes." "Then he is your son." "It is not as simple as that, not at all!" Thus Gerard de Nerval, one filthy night, hanged himself twice, once for himself because he was unhappy, and a second time for his legend, which now helps some people to live. No one can write about real unhappiness, or about certain moments of happiness, and I shall not try to do so here.

But, as far as legends are concerned, we can describe them, and, for a moment at least, believe that we have dispelled them. A writer writes to a great extent to be read (let's admire those who say they don't, but not believe them). Yet more and more, in France, he writes in order to obtain that final consecration which consists of not being read. In fact, from the moment he can provide the material for a feature article in the popular press, there is every possibility that he will be known to a fairly large number of people who will never read his works because they will be content to know his name and to read what other people write about him. From that point on he will be known (and forgotten) not for what he is, but according to the image a hurried journalist has given of him.

To make a name in literature, therefore, it is no longer indispensable to write books. It is enough to be thought of as having written one which the evening papers will have mentioned and which one can fall back on for the rest of one's

life.

There is no doubt that such a reputation, great or small, will be undeserved. But what can be done about it? Let us rather admit that the inconvenience may also be beneficial. Doctors know that certain illnesses are desirable: they compensate, in some way, for a functional disorder which, without them, might express itself in some more serious disturbance. Thus there are fortunate constipations and providential attacks of arthritis.

The flood of words and hasty judgments, which nowadays drowns all public activity in an ocean of frivolity, at least endows the French writer with a modesty he constantly needs in a nation that, furthermore, gives a disproportionate importance to his calling. To see one's name in two or three newspapers I could mention is so harsh a trial that it must inevitably involve some spiritual benefit.

Praise be, then, to a society that teaches us so cheaply, every day, by its very homage, that the greatness it honors is worthless. The louder its noise, the quicker it dies. It evokes the flaxen fires Alexander VI often had burned before him to remind him that the glory of this world vanishes like smoke.

But let's leave irony aside. It is enough to say that an artist must resign himself good humoredly and allow what he knows is an undeserved image of himself to lie about in dentists' waiting rooms and at the hairdresser's. I know a fashionable writer who, according to such sources, supposedly spent every night presiding over Bacchanalian orgies, where nymphs were clothed in nothing but their hair and fauns had gloomy fingernails.

One might have wondered how he found the time to write a series of books that fill several library shelves. Like most of his colleagues, this writer actually spends his nights sleeping in order to spend long hours every day at his desk, and drinks Vichy water so as not to strain his liver.

This does not prevent the average Frenchman, whose Saharan sobriety and mania for cleanliness are well known, from growing indignant at the idea of our writers teaching people to drink and not to wash. There is no dearth of examples. I personally can furnish an excellent cheap recipe for securing a reputation for austerity. I actually have so weighty a reputation, a source of great amusement to my friends (as far as I'm concerned, it rather makes me blush, since I know how little I deserve it).

It's enough, for instance, to decline the honor of dining with a newspaper editor of whom you do not have a high opinion. Even simple decency cannot be imagined except by reference to some twisted sickness of the soul. No one will ever imagine that if you refuse this editor's dinner, it may be not only because you haven't a very high opinion of him, but also because your greatest fear in the world is being bored—and what is more boring than a typical Parisian dinner?

One must therefore submit. But, from time to time, you can try to readjust the sights, and repeat that you can't always be a painter of the absurd and that no one can believe in a literature of despair. Of course, it is always possible to write, or to have written, an essay on the notion of the absurd.

But after all, you can also write about incest without necessarily having hurled yourself on your unfortunate sister, and I have nowhere read that Sophocles ever thought of killing his father and dishonoring his mother. The idea that every writer necessarily writes about himself and depicts himself in his books is one of the puerile notions that we have inherited from Romanticism.

It is by no means impossible—quite the opposite—that a writer should be interested first and foremost in other people, or in his time, or in well-known myths. Even if he does happen to put himself on stage, it is only very exceptionally that he talks about what he is really like. A man's works often retrace the story of his nostalgias or his temptations, practically never his

own history especially when they claim to be autobiographical.

No man has ever dared describe himself as he is. On the other hand, as far as such a thing is possible, I should like to have been an objective writer. What I call an objective author is one who chooses themes without ever taking himself as the subject. But the modern mania of identifying the author with his subject matter will not allow him this relative creative liberty. Thus does one become a prophet of the absurd. Yet what else have I done except reason about an idea I discovered in the streets of my time? That I have nourished this idea (and part of me nourishes it still) along with my whole generation goes without saying.

I simply set it far enough away so that I could deal with it and decide on its logic. Everything that I've been able to write since shows this plainly enough. But it is more convenient to exploit a cliché than a nuance. They've chosen the cliché: so I'm as absurd as ever. What is the point of saying yet again that in the experience which interested me, and which I happened to write about, the absurd can be considered only as a point of departure—even though the memory and feeling of it still accompany the farther advances.

In the same manner, with all due sense of proportion, Cartesian doubt, which is systematic, was not enough to make Descartes a skeptic. In any case, how can one limit oneself to saying that nothing has meaning and that we must plunge into absolute despair? Without getting to the bottom of things, one can at least mention that just as there is no absolute materialism, since merely to form this word is already to acknowledge something in the world apart from matter, there is likewise no total nihilism.

The moment you say that everything is nonsense you express something meaningful. Refusing the world all meaning amounts to abolishing all value judgments. But living, and eating, for example, are in themselves value judgments. You choose to remain alive the moment you do not allow yourself to die of hunger, and consequently you recognize that life has at least a relative value. What, in fact, does "literature of despair" mean? Despair is silent. Even silence, moreover, is meaningful if your eyes speak. True despair is the agony of death, the grave or the abyss.

If he speaks, if he reasons, above all if he writes, immediately the brother reaches out his hand, the tree is justified, love is born. Literature of despair is a contradiction in terms.

Of course, a certain optimism is not my speciality. Like all men of my age, I grew up to the sound of the drums of the First World War, and our history since that time has remained murder, injustice, or violence. But real pessimism, which does exist, lies in outbidding all this cruelty and shame. For my part, I have never ceased fighting against this dishonor, and I hate only the cruel. I have sought only reasons to transcend our darkest nihilism.

Not, I would add, through virtue, nor because of some rare elevation of the spirit, but from an instinctive fidelity to a light in which I was born, and in which for thousands of years men have learned to welcome life even in suffering, Aeschylus is often heart-breaking; yet he radiates light and warmth. At the center of his universe, we find not fleshless nonsense but an enigma, that is to say, a meaning which is difficult to decipher because it dazzles us.

Likewise, to the unworthy but nonetheless stubborn sons of Greece who still survive in this emaciated century, the scorching heat of our history may seem unendurable, but they endure it in the last analysis because they want to understand it.

In the center of our work, dark though it may be, shines an inexhaustible sun, the same sun that shouts today across the hills and plain. After this, the flaxen fire can burn; who cares what we appear to be and what we usurp? What we are, what we have to be, are enough to fill our lives and occupy our strength. Paris is a wondrous cave, and its inhabitants, seeing their own shadows reflected on the far wall, take them for the only reality there is.

The same is true of the strange, fleeting renown this town dispenses. But we have learned, far from Paris, that there is a light behind us, that we must turn around and cast off our chains in order to face it directly, and that our task before we die is to seek through any words to identify it.

Every artist is undoubtedly pursuing his truth. If he is a great artist, each work brings him nearer to it, or, at least, swings still closer toward this center, this buried sun where everything must one day burn. If he is mediocre, each work takes him further from it, the center is then everywhere, the light disintegrates. But the only people who can help the artist in his obstinate quest are those who love him, and those who, themselves lovers or creators, find in their own passion the measure of all passion, and hence know how to criticize.

Yes, all this noise ... when peace would be to love and create in silence! But we must learn to be patient. One moment more, the sun seals our mouths.

1950

<sup>1</sup> This essay, composed in 1950, was also dedicated to René Char. As it shows, Camus suffered a great deal from the failure of French critics and journalists to realize that his attitude was constantly evolving, and that *L'Étranger* (The Stranger) and *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (The Myth of Sisyphus) did not necessarily contain all his ideas. Later on, even before the publication of *L'Homme révolté* (The Rebel) had led to violent public quarrels with André Breton in 1951 and Jean-Paul Sartre in 1952, Camus's pessimism about his relationship with his public and his literary colleagues became even more marked. Thus, on page 321 of *Carnets II* (Alfred A. Knopf edition, p. 252) he noted that "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." —P.T.

The end