

Three Interviews, Albert Camus

Three Interviews

§ I No, I am not an existentialist ...

"No, I am not an existentialist. Sartre and I are always surprised to see our names linked. We have even thought of publishing a short statement in which the undersigned declare that they have nothing in common with each other and refuse to be held responsible for the debts they might respectively incur. It's a joke, actually.

Sartre and I published all our books, without exception, before we had ever met. When we did get to know each other, it was to realize how much we differed. Sartre is an existentialist, and the only book of ideas that I have published, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, was directed against the so-called existentialist philosophers.

Sartre and I do not believe in God, it is true. And we don't believe in absolute rationalism either. But neither do Jules Romains, Malraux, Stendhal, Paul de Kock, the Marquis de Sade, André Gide, Alexandre Dumas, Montaigne, Eugène Sue, Molière, Saint-Evremond, the Cardinal de Retz, or André Breton.

Must we put all these people in the same school? But we had better leave this aside. After all, I don't see why I should apologize for being interested in those who live outside Grace. It is high time we began concerning ourselves with them, since they are the most numerous.

Doesn't a philosophy that insists upon the absurdity of the world run the risk of driving people to despair? All I can do is reply on my own behalf, realizing that what I say is relative. Accepting the absurdity of everything around us is one step, a necessary experience: it should not become a dead end. It arouses a revolt that can become fruitful. An analysis of the idea of revolt could help us to discover ideas capable of restoring a relative meaning to existence, although a meaning that would always be in danger.

Revolt takes a different form in every individual. Would it be possible to pacify it with notions valid for everyone?

... Yes, because 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. When a Czech was shot, the life of a grocer in the rue de Beaune was in jeopardy. The individualism of the French makes it difficult for them to have a real experience of this solidarity.

That remains to be proved. And besides, in a world whose absurdity appears to be so impenetrable, we simply must reach a greater degree of understanding among men, a greater sincerity. We must achieve this or perish. To do so, certain conditions must be fulfilled: men must be frank (falsehood confuses things), free (communication is impossible with slaves). Finally, they must feel a certain justice around them.

You wrote in "*The Myth of Sisyphus*": "A man without hope, and conscious of this condition, no longer belongs to the future." Since you do not believe that men can escape into religion, are you not afraid that young people today will be led into a dangerous neglect of action? If it were not possible nowadays to live or act without reference to God, then perhaps a very great number of people in the West would be condemned to sterility. Young people know this very well.

And if I feel so great a solidarity with so many students, for example, it is

because we are all confronted with the same problem, and because I am confident that, like me, they want to solve it by trying to act more effectively and to serve man. Since you know young people so well, does this mean that you have been a teacher?

Never. But to continue my studies, I had to work at a number of jobs. I sold spare parts for automobiles, worked in a meteorological office, in a shipping firm, and in a préfecture. I was an actor (I belonged to a company that performed for a fortnight each month, and during the rest of the time I prepared my licence), and, finally, I worked as a journalist, which gave me the chance to travel.

To write after having had a number of jobs is more usual in America than in France. Your first novel, *The Stranger*, recalls certain works by Faulkner and Steinbeck. Is this simply coincidence?

No. But the technique of the American novel seems to me to lead to a dead end. I used it in *The Stranger*, it is true. But this was because it suited my purpose, which was to describe a man with no apparent awareness of his existence. By generalizing this particular technique, we would end up with a universe of automatons and instincts.

It would be a considerable impoverishment. That is why, although I appreciate the real value of the American novel, I would give a hundred Hemingways for one Stendhal or one Benjamin Constant. And I regret the influence of this literature on many young writers.

You are nevertheless considered a revolutionary writer. I don't know what that means. If it is revolutionary to ask oneself questions about one's art, then perhaps ... but I cannot imagine literature without style. I know of only one revolution in art; it belongs to all ages, and consists of the exact adjustment of form to subject matter, of language to theme. From this point of view, I love, deeply, only the great classical French literature. It is true that I include here Saint-Evremond and the works of the Marquis de Sade. It is also true that I exclude certain academicians, both present and past.

What are your projects? A novel about the plague, an essay on man in revolt. And perhaps I ought to make my mind up to study existentialism ... An interview with Jeanine Delpech, in *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, November 15, 1945

§ II Encounter with Albert Camus

Albert Camus, who is still a young writer, is considered one of the intellectual leaders of the younger generation. However, I will say at once that not for a moment when I was with him did he seem to have the strained look of a Master or a director of consciences. I will even go so far as to say that he seemed very little interested in such matters. "I am often depicted as an austere character," he told me, not without the kind of irony that breaks almost imperceptibly through the gravity of his writings.

There is also a discreet smile on his tormented face, a high, wrinkled forehead beneath very dark, crisp hair, a manly, North African face that has grown paler in our climate. A discreet but frequent smile, and his rather deep voice is not afraid of humorous inflexions.

The world was not hostile to me at first. I had a happy childhood ... Happy in its poverty, in spite of its poverty. Born in a village in the province of Constantine, Mondovici, the birthplace of General Juin, he was only a year old when his mother, widowed in the First World War, took him to Algiers where she had to work hard to bring up her two sons.

Nevertheless, he will never hear an envious or a bitter word. So that he doesn't

know what envy or bitterness are like. He feels himself rich in natural bounty. In Africa, of course, this is easier. He enjoys the sun and the sea, lives happily in the street or on the beach, until the day when he allows himself to be convinced of the usefulness of acquiring knowledge. He studies at the Lycée d'Alger, has to take a number of jobs in order to carry on up to the licence. He even works as an actor ...

I have had my share of difficult experiences. However, I did not begin my life with a feeling of anguish. Similarly, I did not go in for literature scorning or sneering of it, as many people do, but with admiration. How did you first get the urge to write? Can you remember the first feeling?

It is rather difficult to say. But I can remember how overwhelmed I was by a book written by a young man and lent to me by Jean Grenier. It was called *La Douleur*, by André de Richaud. You must understand that this shock took place in the life of a very young man. At the time, I read everything, even Marcel Prévost. But Richaud, in *La Douleur*, talked about things I knew: he depicted poor areas; he described the nostalgias I had felt. I saw, while reading his book, that I too might perhaps have something personal to express. You spoke of Jean Grenier. I believe he was your teacher in the Lycée d'Alger.

Yes, Grenier gave me the taste for philosophical meditation; he guided my reading. Both in style and by sensibility, he is one of our leading writers. Perhaps we should be sorry that his modesty, and a certain detachment, prevent him from showing himself more frequently. But the fact remains that *Les Iles* is an admirable book. And what a marvelous friend, always bringing you back to the essential, in spite of yourself. Grenier was my teacher, and still is.

The highly classical purity of your art has often made me think that Gide was your master as well. He reigned over my youth—while Grenier nonetheless remained the keeper of the garden—Gide, or to be more accurate, the Malraux-Gide conjunction ... Montherlant also affected me very deeply at that time. Not only by the ascendancy of his style: *Service inutile* is a book that moved me.... As for the earlier writers, the ones you go back to when you are tired of reading your contemporaries, it is Tolstoi I most like to reread nowadays.

There is an anguish in Tolstoi and a tragic sense doubtless less spectacular than Dostoevski's, but which I persist in finding overwhelming since it remained his own fate until the very end: of the two, it was Dostoevski after all who died in his own bed.... You yourself are often thought of as riddled with anguish. You are seen as a pessimistic writer. What do you think of this weighty reputation?

First of all that I very obviously do not adopt the opposite attitude. Comfortable optimism surely seems like a bad joke in today's world. Having said this, I am not one of those who proclaim that the world is hurtling toward its doom. I do not believe in the final collapse of our civilization. I believe—without, of course, nursing anything but ... reasonable illusions on this subject—that a renaissance is possible. If the world were hurtling toward its doom, we would have to blame apocalyptic modes of thought. Not every pose horrifies me. But I have no sympathy at all for that of *poète maudit*.

When I do happen to look for what is most fundamental in me, what I find is a taste for happiness. I have a very keen liking for people. I have no contempt for the human race. I think that one can feel proud of being the contemporary of a certain number of men of our day whom I respect and admire.... At the center of my work there is an invincible sun. It seems to me that all this does not make up a very sad philosophy? Not sad. Grave and concerned. How could this fail to be the case, when one is as sensitive as you are to the drama of our century?

I am, in fact, very sensitive to it, and perhaps it is this sensitivity which has led me to write books which are, up to now, "blacker" than I would have liked. But it is also this sensitivity which has given you the attention and trust of a large section of young people. In turn, the new generation looks on

you today as one of its masters ...

(This time, the author of *The Plague* laughs out loud.) A master, already! But I don't claim to teach anybody! Whoever thinks this is mistaken. The problems confronting young people today are the same ones confronting me, that is all. And I am far from having solved them. I therefore do not think that I have any right to play the role you mention....

What are young people looking for? Certainties. I haven't many to offer them. All I can say definitely is that there is a certain order of degradation I shall always refuse. I think this is something they feel. Those who trust me know that I will never lie to them. As to the young people who ask others to think for them, we must say "No" to them in the clearest possible terms.

That is all I have to say. Let us go back to your own formation. You acknowledge having learned from André Gide. But which André Gide? For there are several, are there not? And in any case there are no traces in your work, which never gives away secrets about your own life, of the Gide of "*Si le grain ne meurt*" or the *Journals*.

Well, my cult was directed above all to the artist, the master of modern classicism, let us say to the Gide of the *Prétextes*. Being fully aware of the anarchy of my nature, I need to give myself limits in art. Gide taught me how to do this. His conception of classicism as a romanticism brought under control is something I share. As for his deep respect for artistic matters, I agree with him completely. For I have the highest possible idea of art. I place it too high ever to agree to subject it to anything.

Then I shall not have to ask Albert Camus what is by now the ritual question on "committed" literature. You have just heard his reply. But immediately, with that care for accuracy which characterizes him, both a scruple and a taste for nuance:

Nevertheless, I do not want to defend aesthetic ideas and artistic forms that are out of date. The writer who allows himself to be fascinated by the political Gorgon is doubtless making a mistake. But it is also a mistake to pass over the social problems of our time in silence.... And besides, it would be quite useless to run away from them: turn your back on the Gorgon, and it starts to move.... What, in fact, is the aim of every creative artist? To depict the passions of his day.

In the seventeenth century, the passions of love were at the forefront of people's minds. But today, the passions of our century are collective passions, because society is in disorder.

Artistic creation, instead of removing us from the drama of our time, is one of the means we are given of bringing it closer. Totalitarian regimes are well aware of this, since they consider us their first enemies. Isn't it obvious that everything which destroys art aims to strengthen ideologies that make men unhappy? Artists are the only people who have never harmed the world. Would you say the same of philosophers?

The evil geniuses of contemporary Europe bore the label of philosopher: they are Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche. Nietzsche? I thought he was one of your spiritual ancestors? He is, undoubtedly. What is admirable, in Nietzsche, is that you always find in him something to correct what is dangerous elsewhere in his ideas. I place him infinitely higher than the two others.

We are living in their Europe, the Europe they have made. When we have reached the final stage in their logic, we will remember that another tradition exists; one that has never denied what makes man's grandeur. Fortunately, there is a light that we Mediterraneans have known how to keep lit. If Europe were to reject certain values of the Mediterranean world—moderation, for example, true moderation, which has nothing to do with the more comfortable variety—can you

imagine what the results would be?

They are in fact visible already. Yes, of course, the Mediterranean has its word to say at this tragic juncture. But isn't it too detached to assume such a role, too skeptical? It was, until it was afflicted with its own truths. It is far less detached and skeptical today, now that it is stifling in a barbarous Europe.

I am judging, it is true, as a Mediterranean from North Africa, which is a harder and a harsher earth than your Provence. But equally fecund in new talents, it seems to me. Indeed. It's a regular nest of singing birds: The generation before ours did not know even how to read.

And now we have an Audisio, a Roblès, a Jules Roy, a de Fréminville, a Rosfelder, a Pierre Millecan, etc., and a young author who is going to make his debut with Gallimard, with a very curious novel. Fruits grow quickly there. Of course, it was the country of Jugurtha and Saint Augustine. A singularly explosive mixture, don't you think?

Let us come back to sad Europe. I am thinking of certain European novelists many people will be surprised not to have heard you name among your intellectual mentors. The Czech writer, Franz Kafka, for example, the great painter of the absurd.

I look upon Kafka as a very great storyteller. But it would be wrong to say that he has influenced me. If a painter of the Absurd has played a role in my idea of literary art, it is the author of the admirable Moby Dick, the American, Melville... I think that what repels me a little in Kafka is the fantastic element. I am not at home in fantasy. The artist's universe should exclude nothing. But Kafka's universe excludes practically the whole world. And then ... then, I really cannot entertain an affection for a literature of total despair.¹

To what extent should we look upon your books, whether they are novels or plays, as symbolic translations of the philosophy of the Absurd? People have often done this. This word "Absurd" has had an unhappy history, and I confess that now it rather annoys me. When I analyzed the feeling of the Absurd in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, I was looking for a method and not a doctrine. I was practicing methodical doubt. I was trying to make a "tabula rasa," on the basis of which it would then be possible to construct something.

If we assume that nothing has any meaning, then we must conclude that the world is absurd. But does nothing have a meaning? I have never believed that we could remain at this point. Even as I was writing *The Myth of Sisyphus* I was thinking about the essay on revolt that I would write later on, in which I would attempt, after having described the different aspects of the feeling of the Absurd, to describe the different attitudes of man in revolt. (That is the title of the book I am completing.)

And then there are new events that enrich or correct what has come to one through observation, the continual lessons life offers, which you have to reconcile with those of your earlier experiences. This is what I have tried to do ... though, naturally, I still do not claim to be in possession of any truth. Robert de Luppé seems to have brought out this constant development of your ideas very well in the little book on your work he has just published.

At any rate, it's a book written in a spirit of sympathetic objectivity, and for this I am grateful to its author. I appreciate the way he has not presented me as a doctrinal writer enslaved to one particular system. What is more complex than the birth of thought? The right explanation is always double, at least. Greece teaches us this, Greece to which we must always return. Greece is both shadow and light. We are well aware, aren't we, if we come from the South, that the sun has its black side?

The sun that a painter like Jean Marchand likes to bring bursting into his

skies? Exactly. René Char has also given very fine expression to this duality. I consider him one of the few French poets who are great today and will still be great tomorrow.... I mean that he is ahead of his time, although he is at one with it. The truth is that it is a hard fate to be born in a pagan land in Christian times. This is my case. I feel closer to the values of the classical world than to those of Christianity. Unfortunately, I cannot go to Delphi to be initiated! Interview with Gabriel d'Aubarède in *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, May 10, 1951

§ III Replies to Jean-Claude Brisville²

At what time in your life did you become clearly aware of your vocation as a writer? Vocation is perhaps not the right word. I wanted to be a writer when I was about seventeen, and at the same time I was vaguely aware that I would become one. Were you thinking then of another profession? Teaching. By necessity. But I have always wanted to have a second profession to ensure my freedom to work as a writer.

At the time of *The Wrong Side and the Right Side* did you have any idea of what your literary future would be? After *The Wrong Side and the Right Side* I had doubts. I wanted to give up. And then an overwhelming sense of life burst to express itself in me:

I wrote *Noces*. Do you find it difficult to reconcile your role as a creator with the social role you see yourself obliged to play? Is this an important problem for you? Of course. But our century has reached the point where it gives so derisory or odious a face to "social preoccupations" that it helps us to feel freer in this respect. The fact remains that writing while others are gagged or imprisoned is a delicate undertaking. So as not to fall short, either in one direction or in the other, we have to remember that the writer lives for his work and fights for liberties. Do you feel at ease in your personality as a writer?

Very much at ease in my private relationships. But the public aspect of my calling, which I have never liked, is becoming unbearable. If for any reason you had to give up writing, do you think that you could nevertheless be happy? Would the simple "agreement between the earth and the foot" of which you speak in *Caligula* be enough to compensate for the happiness of expressing yourself? When I was younger, I could have been happy without writing. Even today I have great gifts for silent happiness. However, I have to acknowledge now that I probably could not live without my art.

Do you think that your early success—the fact of having been considered, whether you wanted it or not, as an "intellectual master" after the publication of *The Myth of Sisyphus*—has given any particular direction to your work? Do you, in short, think that you would have written the same books if you had composed them in relative obscurity?

Of course, having a reputation changed many things. But, on this point, I have few complexes. My rule has always been a simple one:

refuse all that could be refused quietly; in any case, make no effort to gain either reputation or obscurity. Accept either in silence, if it is to be one or the other, and perhaps accept them both. As to being an "intellectual leader," it simply makes me laugh. To teach, you need to know. To guide other people, you must know how to guide yourself. Even so, it is true that I have known the servitudes of having a reputation before having written all my books. The most obvious consequence of this is that I have been obliged, and still am obliged, to struggle against society to find time for my work. I manage, but at a high price.

Do you consider the main part of your work as completed? I am forty-five, and have a rather disturbing vitality. Does the development of your work follow a

general plan established long in advance, or do you discover this plan while you are actually writing? Both. There is a plan that circumstances, on the one hand, and the actual writing of my books, on the other, tend to modify. What is your method of working?

Notes, scraps of paper, vague musing, and this for years on end. One day, the idea, the conception that causes these scattered fragments to coagulate, comes along. Then the long and painful task of setting everything to order begins. And this task is all the longer because of the immensity of my profound anarchy. Do you feel the need to talk about the work while you are writing it? No. When, once in a while, I happen to talk about it, I am not pleased with myself. When it is completed, do you ask the views of a friend—or do you content yourself with your own opinion?

I have two or three friends who read my manuscripts and note down what they don't like. Nine times out of ten, they are right, and I make the correction. What, in your work as a writer, is the moment you prefer (the conception, the first draft, the working over of what you have written)? The moment of conception. Do you see any kind of relationship in the artist between the life of the body and his inspiration (or the nature of his work)? If so, what do you think this relationship is?

Physical life in the open air, in the sun, sport, and a proper balance in my body are, for me, the conditions under which I do my best intellectual work. Together (and the two things are connected) with a good timetable. To tell the truth, I rarely find myself in these conditions.

But in any case I know that creation is an intellectual and bodily discipline, a school of energy. I have never achieved anything in anarchy or physical slackness. Do you work regularly?

I try to. When everything is going well: four or five hours at the start of every day. When everything is going badly! ...

Do you find fault with yourself when you put your work off to the next day? Yes. I feel guilty. How shall I put it? I don't like myself. Is there a character in your work of whom you are particularly fond? Marie, Dora, Céleste.³

There seem to be two families of people in your work: the first, illustrated by Caligula, seem to correspond to a taste for powerful individuality; the second, which might be represented by Meursault, correspond to the temptation of self-effacement. Can you recognize this double direction in yourself?

Yes, I have a liking for energy and conquests. But I soon tire of what I have obtained. This is my great weakness. I also have a liking for obscurity, for self-effacement. But the passion for life urges me forward again. In short, I never solve the dilemma.

Which technique—fiction, the theater, or the essay—gives you the most satisfaction as a creator? The alliance of all these techniques in the service of a single work. It seems from some of your writings that you see an art of living in the theater. Do you agree with this?

That would be saying a great deal. But I sometimes feel that I could have been an actor and been satisfied with this profession. To what values in a work of art—and especially in a literary work of art—are you most sensitive?

Truth. And the artistic values that reflect it. Is there a theme in your work that you think is important and that you consider has been neglected by your commentators? Humor.

How do you look on the part of your work which is already completed? I don't reread it. It is dead for me. I would like, I want, to do something else. What, in your view, distinguishes the creator?

The ability to renew himself. He always says the same thing, no doubt, but he tirelessly renews the forms in which he says it. He has a horror of rhymes. Which writers have formed you—or, at least, have helped you to become aware of what you wanted to say?

Among the moderns: Grenier, Malraux, Montherlant. Among classical writers: Pascal, Molière. Nineteenth-century Russian literature. The Spanish writers. What importance do you attribute to the plastic arts?

I would have liked to be a sculptor. Sculpture for me is the greatest of arts. And music?

When I was young, I used to get drunk on it. Nowadays, very few musicians move me. But Mozart still does.

What do you think of the cinema?

And you?

There are often misunderstandings in the way artists are admired. What is the compliment that annoys you the most?

Honesty, conscience, humanity—you know, all the modern mouthwashes.

What, in your view, is the most marked feature of your character? That depends on the day. But, often, a kind of blind, heavy obstinacy. Which human characteristic do you value highest?

There is a mixture of intelligence and courage, which is fairly rare, that I like very much.

Your last hero, the narrator in *The Fall*, seems discouraged. Does he express what you feel at the present moment?

My hero is indeed discouraged, and this is why, as a good modern nihilist, he exalts servitude. Have I chosen to exalt servitude? You once wrote: "Secret of my universe: imagine God without the immortality of the soul." Can you define more exactly what you meant? Yes. I have a sense of the sacred and I don't believe in a future life, that's all.

Is the simple pleasure of being alive, and the dispersion which it implies, threatened, in your view, by a vocation—an artistic one, for example—and by the discipline it demands?

Yes, unfortunately. I like burning, active days, a free life.... And this is why discipline is hard, and necessary. And this is why it is good to escape from it sometimes.

Have you a rule for living—or do you improvise, according to the circumstances and your reactions at the time?

I make strict rules for myself, in order to correct my nature. It is my nature in the end that I obey. The result is by no means brilliant. What, for example, was your first reaction to the personal attacks directed against you in the press after the award of the Nobel Prize?

Oh, first of all, I felt hurt. When a man has never asked for anything in his life, and is then suddenly subjected to excessive praise and excessive blame, both praise and blame are equally painful. And then I soon rediscovered the notion I normally rely on whenever things go against me: that this was in the order of things. Do you know the remark of a man who was a great solitary being in spite of himself? "They have no love for me. Is this a reason for not blessing them?" No, everything that happens to me is good, in a sense. Besides, these noisy events are essentially secondary.

What wish would you make, at this stage in your life?

"Within a superabundance of life-giving and restoring forces, even misfortunes have a sunlike glow and engender their own consolation." This remark of Nietzsche's is true, and I have experienced it myself. And all I ask is that this strength and this superabundance should be given to me again, even if infrequently....

La Bibliothèque Idéale, Gallimard, 1959

1 One shouldn't put too much stock in these cutting remarks. Camus expressed himself very thoughtfully on Kafka in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. According to René Char, Camus remained deeply troubled, even obsessed, by Kafka, and near the end of his life rendered him unlimited homage.

—Roger Quilliot, note from p. 1342, *Pléiade II*.

2 J.-C. Brisville, a writer of whom Camus had a high opinion, is a critic and novelist, and reader for the publishing house of Julliard. His study of Camus in the collection entitled "La Bibliothèque idéale" was published by Gallimard in 1959.

3 Marie is Meursault's mistress in *The Stranger*. Dora is Kaliayev's mistress in *The Just*. Céleste is the owner of the little restaurant where Meursault takes his meals. When Meursault is on trial for shooting the Arab, Céleste tries to defend him by showing how good a person he is, but can say nothing but: "He is a man." (See "Summer in Algiers," this page) —P.T.

The end