

ALBERT CAMUS

Awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature

LYRICAL AND CRITICAL ESSAYS

Edited by Philip Thody

Translated by Ellen Conroy Kennedy

A VINTAGE BOOK



LYRICAL
AND
CRITICAL ESSAYS

BY Albert Camus



EDITED AND WITH NOTES BY PHILIP THODY
TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH
BY ELLEN CONROY KENNEDY



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LYRICAL ESSAYS

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Introduction

ALTHOUGH Camus's greatest achievements as a creative writer are undoubtedly to be found in his novels and his plays, his literary career nevertheless both began and ended with the publication of a volume of essays. Between the appearance of *L'Envers et l'Endroit* in 1937 and the publication of his Nobel Prize speeches in 1958, he developed and extended his use of the essay form to express both his personal attitude toward life and certain artistic values. He also wrote articles on political topics, and a selection of these, under the title *Actuelles*, take up three volumes of his complete works. But these articles, however perfect their style, do not really fall under Camus's definition of the essay. For him, it was first and foremost what its etymology suggests: an attempt to express something, a trying out of ideas and forms, an experiment. It was not a polemical tool, although it could put forward very specific ideas. It was an attempt to record impressions and ideas that could later be used in other, more imaginative works. This is why the first two collections of essays included in this translation, *L'Envers et l'Endroit (The Wrong Side and the Right Side)* and *Noces (Nuptials)*, provide a natural commentary on Camus's first novel, *L'Étranger (The Stranger)*, and his first major philosophical work, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe (The Myth of Sisyphus)*. He is exploring, within the context of his own immediate experience, the ideas of the absurdity of the world, the inevitability of death, and the importance of the physical life, which will later be cast into a more intellectual mold in the philosophical work and into a more perfectly controlled artistic form in the novel. The Camus that emerges from these pages is, on an intellectual level, the young pagan rejecting Christianity, and the Mediterranean sensualist already preparing the criticism of Northern metaphysics which informs *L'Homme révolté (The Rebel)*. He is also, on the more human level, the son seeking to communicate with his mother, the young man trying to come to terms with old age, and the lover of nature endeavoring to express this love in words.

The third volume of essays, *L'Été (Summer)*, has less unity of tone and subject matter than the first two. It brings together texts ranging over a wider period and already bears signs of that intense disillusionment with French political life that formed the starting point for *La Chute (The Fall)* in 1956. It also shows Camus as an ironically detached observer of his native Algeria, concerned less with the intensity of its physical joys than with the occasional charming naïveté of its provincial culture. The first essays in *Summer* date from before the Second World War, and are again the working out of an experience that was to find its way into one of Camus's major works, though this time in a less central position. The evocation of Oran at the beginning of *La Peste (The Plague)* clearly stems from essays such as *The Minotaur or Stopping in Oran*, and offers in itself an example of the transition which Camus was making in that book from a provincial to a world-wide frame of reference. Camus is not, of course, suggesting that the lyrical or the humorous account which he gives of Algerian life is the whole story. The Algerian reports translated in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death* have to be read side by side with the essays in *Nuptials* or in *Summer* if an accurate picture is to emerge of the relationship between Camus and his native land. His love for Algeria was essential and lucid. But it was in that land, as all these essays show, that he found his truest and most lasting inspiration.

Camus began his career as a literary critic when he was twenty-five and was working as a journalist on the left-wing newspaper *Alger-Républicain*. Of the twenty or so short articles he published on literary topics before this newspaper was virtually forced to close down by the French authorities in North Africa, only three are translated here. The reviews of Sartre's first novel, *La Nausée*, and of his short stories, *Le Mur*, present an obvious interest for the enthusiasm that Camus showed for Sartre's work at a time when the two had never met, and for the very considerable difference of attitude that already separated the two men. By the time he wrote the other literary essays included in the second part of this collection, Camus had already passed beyond the stage when he was required to provide a review of a particular length to match the requirements of a newspaper. He could now write more fully, exploring the different philosophical and aesthetic problems that he had already encountered in his own work: the problems of language, the nature of tragedy, the conflict within Europe between Mediterranean and Northern values, the scope and nature of the novel. Except for his enthusiasm for Faulkner, his literary preferences were classical and traditional: Madame de Lafayette, Stendhal, Tolstoy, Melville, and Martin du Gard attracted him most as novelists; the Greeks, Shakespeare, and the Spanish playwrights of the Golden Age as dramatists. It is a record of the ideals which inspired him rather than of the influences which he underwent that his later literary criticism is so valuable.

Like the essays in *The Wrong Side and the Right Side* or in *Nuptials*, the texts in the third part of this volume are particularly valuable for the light which they throw on Camus as a creative writer. Both *The Stranger* and *The Plague* have been widely interpreted and criticized. This is how Camus thought they should be approached and how he felt they could be defended against the criticisms sometimes made of them. His three interviews also clarify his attitude toward his work as a whole, and particularly toward *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*. These too were essays, but of a more perfect and finished kind: the expression within an intellectual and historical context of an attitude toward life already worked out in lyric terms.

PHILIP THOMAS

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LYRICAL ESSAYS

I

THE WRONG SIDE AND THE RIGHT SIDE

(L'Envers et L'Endroit)

to Jean Grenier



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 was 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 strength 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 finest and most revolting injustice is consummated when poverty is wed to the life without hope of 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 sight 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.

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 late when a serious illness temporarily deprived me of the natural vigor that always transfigures 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 the 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 a 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 homage 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 Julien Sorel often disconcert me in their naïveté and their modesty. Nietzsche's, Tolstoy's, and Melville's overwhelm me, precisely because of their failure. I feel humility, in my heart and 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 the new 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

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 and something I've a good deal of, one sometimes manages to behave morally, but never to *live* morally. 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 brave enough to do without it!

What does it matter? I merely wanted to show that if I have come a long way since the first 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 not 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 dreamed 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 not 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 world 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, a short through pain, toward that tranquil land where death itself is a happy silence. Here I 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, *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?

Irony



Two years ago, I knew an old woman. She was suffering from an illness that had almost killed her. The whole of her right side had been paralyzed. Only half of her was in this world while the other was already foreign to her. This bustling, chattering old lady had been reduced to silence and immobility. Alone day after day, illiterate, not very sensitive, her whole life was reduced to God. She believed in him. The proof is that she had a rosary, a leaden statue of Christ, and a stucco statue of Saint Joseph carrying the infant Jesus. She doubted her illness was incurable, but said it was so that people would pay attention to her. For everything else, she relied on the God she loved so poorly.

One day someone did pay attention to her. A young man. (He thought there was a truth and also knew that this woman was going to die, but did not worry about solving the contradiction.) He had become genuinely interested in the old woman's boredom. She felt it. And his interest was a godsend for the invalid. She was eager to talk about her troubles: she was at the end of her tether, and you have to make way for the rising generation. Did she get bored? Of course she did. No one spoke to her. She had been put in her corner, like a dog. Better to be done with it once and for all. She would sooner die than be a burden to anyone.

Her voice had taken on a quarrelsome note, like someone haggling over a bargain. Still, the young man understood. Nonetheless, he thought being a burden on others was better than dying. Which proved only one thing: that he had surely never been a burden to any one. And of course he told the old lady—since he had seen the rosary: “You still have God.” It was true. But even here she had her troubles. If she happened to spend rather a long time in prayer, if her eyes strayed and followed a pattern in the wallpaper, her daughter would say, “There she is, praying again!” “What business is that of yours?” the invalid would say. “It is none of my business, but eventually it gets on my nerves.” And the old woman would fall silent, casting a long, reproachful look at her daughter.

The young man listened to all this with an immense, unfamiliar pain that hurt his chest. And the old woman went on: “She'll see when she's old. She'll need it too.”

You felt that this old woman had been freed of everything except God, wholly abandoned to this final evil, virtuous through necessity, too easily convinced that what still remained for her was the only thing worth loving, finally and irrevocably plunged into the wretchedness of a man in God. But if hope in life is reborn, God is powerless against human interests.

They had sat down at table. The young man had been invited to dinner. The old lady wasn't eating, because it is difficult to digest in the evening. She had stayed in her corner sitting behind the young man who had been listening to her. And because he felt he was being watched he couldn't eat very much. Nevertheless, the dinner progressed. They decided to extend the party by going to the cinema. As it happened, there was a funny film on that week. The young man had blithely accepted, without thinking about the person who continued to exist behind his back.

The guests had risen from table to go and wash their hands before leaving. There was

obviously no question of the old lady's going too. Even if she hadn't been half-paralyzed, she was too ignorant to be able to understand the film. She said she didn't like the movies. The truth was she couldn't understand them. In any case, she was in her corner, vacant, absorbed in the beads of her rosary. This was where she put all her trust. The three objects she kept near her represented the material point where God began. Beyond and behind the rosary, the statue of Christ, or of Saint Joseph, opened a vast, deep blackness in which she placed all her hope.

Everyone was ready. They went up to the old lady to kiss her and wish her a good night. She had already realized what was happening and was clutching her rosary tightly in her hand. But it was plain this showed as much despair as zeal. Everyone else had kissed her. Only the young man was left. He had given her an affectionate handshake and was already turning away. But she saw that the one person who had taken an interest in her was leaving. She didn't want to be alone. She could already feel the horror of loneliness, the long, sleepless hours, the frustrating intimacy with God. She was afraid, could now rely only on the young man, and, clinging to the one person who had shown any interest in her, held on to his hand, squeezing it, clumsily thanking him in order to justify this insistence. The young man was embarrassed. The others were already turning round to tell him to hurry up. The movie began at nine and it was better to arrive early so as not to have to wait in line.

He felt confronted by the most atrocious suffering he had ever known: that of a sick old woman left behind by people going to the movies. He wanted to leave and escape, didn't want to know, tried to draw back his hand. For a moment, he felt an intense hatred for the old woman, and almost slapped her hard across the face.

Finally he managed to get away, while the invalid, half rising from her armchair, watched with horror as the last certainty in which she could have found rest faded away. Now there was nothing to protect her. And, defenseless before the idea of death, she did not know exactly what terrified her, but felt that she did not want to be alone. God was of no use to her. All He did was cut her off from people and make her lonely. She did not want to be without people. So she began to cry.

The others were already outside in the street. The young man was gripped with remorse. He looked up at the lighted window, a great dead eye in the silent house. The eye closed. The old woman's daughter told the young man: "She always turns the light off when she's by herself. She likes to sit in the dark."¹

The old man brought his eyebrows triumphantly together, wagging a sententious forefinger. "When I was a young man," he said, "my father used to give me five francs a week out of my wages as pocket money to last me till the following Saturday. Well, I still managed to save. First of all, when I went to see my fiancée, I walked four miles through the open country to get there and four miles to get back. Just you listen to me now, young men, you just don't know how to amuse themselves nowadays." There were three young men sitting around a round table with this one old man. He was describing his petty adventures—childish actions, overblown, incidents of laziness celebrated as victories. He never paused in his story, and, in a hurry to tell everything before his audience left, mentioned only those portions of his past he thought likely to impress them. Making people listen was his only vice: he refused to notice the irony of the glances and the sudden mockery that greeted him. The young man saw in him the usual old bird for whom everything was marvelous in his day, while he thought

himself the respected elder whose experience carries weight. The young don't know that experience is a defeat and that we must lose everything in order to win a little knowledge. He had suffered. He never mentioned it. It's better to seem happy. And if he were wrong about this, he would have been even more mistaken to try to make people sympathize with him. What do an old man's sufferings matter when life absorbs you completely? He talked on and on, wandering blissfully through the grayness of his mutterings. But it couldn't last. He needed an ending, and the attention of his listeners was waning. He wasn't even funny any longer; he was old. And young men like billiards and cards, which take their minds off the imbecility of everyday work.

Soon he was alone, despite his efforts and the lies he told to enliven his story. With no attempt to spare his feelings, the young men had left. Once again he was alone. No longer to be listened to: that's the terrible thing about being old. He was condemned to silence and loneliness. He was being told that he would soon be dead. And an old man who is going to die is useless, he is even an insidious embarrassment. Let him go. He ought to go. Or, if not to shut up is the least he can do. He suffers, because as soon as he stops talking he realizes that he is old. Yet he did get up and go, smiling to everyone around him. But the faces he saw were either indifferent, or convulsed by a gaiety that he had no right to share. A man was laughing: "She's old, I don't deny it, but sometimes the best stews are made in old pots." Another, already more seriously: "Well, we're not rich but we eat well. Look at my grandson now, he eats more than his father. His father needs a pound of bread, he needs two! And you can pile on the sausage and Camembert. And sometimes when he's finished he says: 'Hah! hah!' and keeps on eating." The old man moved away. And with his slow step, the short step of the donkey turning the wheel, he walked through the crowds of men on the long pavements. He felt ill and did not want to go home. Usually he was quite happy to get home to his table and the oil lamp, the plates where his fingers mechanically found their places. He still liked to eat his supper in silence, the old woman on the other side of the table, chewing over each mouthful, with an empty head, eyes fixed and dead. This evening, he would arrive home later. Supper would have been served and gone cold, his wife would be in bed, not worrying about him since she knew that he often came home unexpectedly late. She would say: "He's in the moon again," and that would be that.

Now he was walking along with his gently insistent step. He was old and alone. When a life is reaching its end, old age wells up in waves of nausea. Everything comes down to not being listened to any more. He walks along, turns at the corner of the street, stumbles, and almost falls. I've seen him. It's ridiculous, but what can you do about it? After all, he prefers being on the street, being there rather than at home, where for hours on end fever veils the old woman from him and isolates him in his room. Then, sometimes, the door slowly opens and gapes ajar for a moment. A man comes in. He is wearing a light-colored suit. He sits down facing the old man and the minutes pass while he says nothing. He is motionless, just like the door that stood ajar a moment ago. From time to time he strokes his hair and sighs gently. When he has watched the old man for a long time with the same heavy sadness in his eyes, he leaves, silently. The latch clicks behind him and the old man remains, horrified, with an acid and painful fear in his stomach. Out in the street, however few people he may meet, he is never alone. His fever sings. He walks a little faster: tomorrow everything will be different, tomorrow. Suddenly he realizes that tomorrow will be the same, and, after

tomorrow, all the other days. And he is crushed by this irreparable discovery. It's ideas like this that kill one. Men kill themselves because they cannot stand them—or, if they are young, they turn them into epigrams.

Old, mad, drunk, nobody knows. His will be a worthy end, tear-stained and admirable. He will die looking his best, that is to say, he will suffer. That will be a consolation for him. And besides, where can he go? He will always be old now. Men build on their future old age. They try to give this old age, besieged by hopelessness, an idleness that leaves them with no defense. They want to become foremen so they can retire to a little house in the country. But once they are well on in years, they know very well this is a mistake. They need other means for protection. And as far as he was concerned, he needed to be listened to in order to believe in his life. The streets were darker and emptier now. There were still voices going by. In the strange calm of evening they were becoming more solemn. Behind the hills encircling the town there were still glimmers of daylight. From somewhere out of sight, smoke rose imposingly, behind the wooded hilltops. It rose slowly in the sky, in tiers, like the branches of a pine tree. The old man closed his eyes. As life carried away the rumblings of the town and the heavens smiled their foolish, indifferent smile, he was alone, forsaken, naked, already dead.

Need I describe the other side of this fine coin? Doubtless, in a dark and dirty room, the old woman was laying the table. When dinner was ready she sat down, looked at the clock, waited a little longer, and then began to eat a hearty meal. She thought to herself: "He is like the moon." That would be that.

There were five of them living together: the grandmother, her younger son, her eldest daughter, and the daughter's two children. The son was almost dumb; the daughter, ailing and invalid, could think only with difficulty; and of the two children, one was already working for an insurance company while the other was continuing his studies. At seventy, the grandmother still dominated all these people. Above her bed you could see a portrait taken of her five years before, upright in a black dress that was held together at the neck by a large medallion, not a wrinkle on her face. With enormous clear, cold eyes, she had a regal posture she relinquished only with increasing age, but which she still sometimes tried to recover when she went out.

It was these clear eyes that held a memory for her grandson which still made him blush. The old woman would wait until there were visitors and would ask then, looking at him severely, "Whom do you like best? Your mother or your grandmother?" The game was even better when the daughter was present. For the child would always reply: "My grandmother," with, in his heart, a great surge of love for his ever silent mother. Then, when the visitors were surprised at this preference, the mother would say: "It's because she's the one who brought him up."

It was also because the old woman thought that love is something you can demand. The knowledge that she herself had been a good mother gave her a kind of rigidity and intolerance. She had never deceived her husband, and had borne him nine children. After his death, she had brought up her family energetically. Leaving their little farm on the outskirts, they had ended up in the old, poor part of the town where they had been living for a long time.

And certainly this woman was not lacking in qualities. But to her grandsons, who were in the age of absolute judgments, she was nothing but a fraud. One of their uncles had told them a significant story: he had gone to pay a visit to his mother-in-law, and from the outside had seen her sitting idly at the window. But she had come to the door with a duster in her hand and had apologized for carrying on working by saying that she had so little free time left after doing her housework. And it must be confessed that this was typical. She fainted very easily after family discussions. She also suffered from painful vomiting caused by a liver complaint. But she showed not the slightest discretion in the practice of her illness. Far from shutting herself away, she would vomit noisily into the kitchen garbage can. And when she came back into the room, pale, her eyes running with tears from the effort, she would remind anyone who begged her to go to bed that she had to get the next meal ready and carry on running the house: "I do everything here." Or again: "I don't know what would become of you without me."

The children learned to ignore her vomitings, her "attacks" as she called them, as well as her complaints. One day she went to bed and demanded the doctor. They sent for him to humor her. On the first day he diagnosed a slight stomach upset, on the second a cancer of the liver, on the third a serious attack of jaundice. But the younger of the two children insisted on seeing all this as yet another performance, a more sophisticated act, and felt no concern. This woman had bullied him too much for his initial reaction to be pessimistic. And there is a kind of desperate courage in being lucid and refusing to love. But people who play at being ill can succeed: the grandmother carried simulation to the point of death. On her last day, her children around her, she began freeing herself of the fermentations in her intestine. She turned and spoke with simplicity to her grandson: "You see," she said, "I'm farting like a little pig." She died an hour later.

As for her grandson, he now realized that he had not understood a thing that was happening. He could not free himself of the idea that he had just witnessed the last and most monstrous of this woman's performances. And if he asked himself whether he felt any sorrow, he could find none at all. Only on the day of the funeral, because of the general outburst of tears, did he weep, but he was afraid of being insincere and telling lies in the presence of death. It was on a fine winter's day, shot through with sunlight. In the pale blue sky, you could sense the cold all spangled with yellow. The cemetery overlooked the town and you could see the fine transparent sun setting in the bay quivering with light, like a moist lip.

None of this fits together? How very true! A woman you leave behind to go to the movies, an old man to whom you have stopped listening, a death that redeems nothing, and then, on the other hand, the whole radiance of the world. What difference does it make if you accept everything? Here are three destinies, different and yet alike. Death for us all, but his own death to each. After all, the sun still warms our bones for us.

¹ Roger Quillot, in his notes to the second volume of Camus's works published in the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade in 1965, traces the ideas Camus expresses in these essays to the very first literary sketches written in 1932, when he was only nineteen. A manuscript belonging to Camus's first wife, Simone Hié, presents the themes of loneliness and old age, and specifically mentions the old woman left behind by the young people who go to the cinema. In 1935 Camus sketched a plan for these essays that indicates he intended to center them around the son's relationship with his mother. He first had the idea of writing a preface to a new edition

these essays in 1949, and read part of this one to Quillot in 1954. The essays were originally published in 1937, by the small firm Charlot, in Algiers. The account of Camus's home life in the last section of Irony and in the essay The Wrong Side and the Right Side include the most openly autobiographical passages in all of his work. His father was killed at the first battle of the Marne in 1914 (cf. page 38), and he lived with his mother, his grandmother, and his elder brother Lucien in the working-class suburb Belcourt in Algiers. —P.T.



If it is true that the only paradises are those we have lost. I know what name to give the tender and inhuman something that dwells in me today. An emigrant returns to his country. And I remember. The irony and tension fade away, and I am home once more. I don't want to ruminate on happiness. It is much simpler and much easier than that. For what has remained untouched in these hours I retrieve from the depths of forgetfulness is the memory of a pure emotion, a moment suspended in eternity. Only this memory is true in me, and I always discover it too late. We love the gentleness of certain gestures, the way a tree fits into a landscape. And we have only one detail with which to recreate all this love, but it will do: the smell of a room too long shut up, the special sound of a footstep on the road. This is the way it is for me. And if I loved then in giving myself, I finally became myself, since only love restores us.

Slow, peaceful, and grave, these hours return, just as strong, just as moving—there is a kind of vague desire in the dull sky. Each rediscovered gesture reveals me to myself. Someone once said to me: "It's so difficult to live." And I remember the tone of voice. On another occasion, someone murmured: "The worst blunder is still to make people suffer." When everything is over, the thirst for life is gone. Is this what's called happiness? As we skirt along these memories, we clothe everything in the same quiet garb, and death looks like a backdrop whose colors have faded. We turn back into ourselves. We feel our distress and like ourselves the better for it. Yes, perhaps that's what happiness is, the self-pitying awareness of our unhappiness.

It is certainly like that this evening. In this Moorish café, at the far end of the Arab town, I recall not a moment of past happiness but a feeling of strangeness. It is already night. On the walls, canary-yellow lions pursue green-clad sheiks among five-branched palm trees. In a corner of the café, an acetylene lamp gives a flickering light. The real light comes from the fire, at the bottom of a small stove adorned with yellow and green enamel. The flames flicker up the middle of the room, and I can feel them reflected on my face. I sit facing the doorway and the bay. Crouched in a corner, the café owner seems to be looking at my glass, which stands there empty with a mint leaf at the bottom. There is no one in the main room, noise rises from the town opposite, while further off in the bay lights shine. I hear the Arab breathe heavily, and his eyes glow in the dusk. Is that the sound of the sea far off? The world sighs toward me in a long rhythm, and brings me the peace and indifference of immortal things. Tall red shadows make the lions on the walls sway with a wavelike motion. The air grows cool. A foghorn sounds at sea. The beams from the lighthouse begin to turn: one green, one red, and one white. And still the world sighs its long sigh. A kind of secret song is born of this indifference. And I am home again. I think of a child living in a poor district. The neighborhood, that house! There were only two floors, and the stairs were unlit. Even now, long years later, he could go back there on the darkest night. He knows that he could climb the stairs without stumbling once. His very body is impregnated with this house. His legs

retain the exact height of the steps; his hand, the instinctive, never-conquered horror of the bannister. Because of the cockroaches.

On summer evenings, the workingmen sit on their balconies. In his apartment, there was only one tiny window. So they would bring the chairs down, put them in front of the house and enjoy the evening air. There was the street, the ice-cream vendor next door, the cafe across the way, and the noise of children running from door to door. But above all, through the wide fig trees there was the sky. There is a solitude in poverty, but a solitude that gives everything back its value. At a certain level of wealth, the heavens themselves and the star-filled night are nature's riches. But seen from the very bottom of the ladder, the sky recovers its full meaning: a priceless grace. Summer nights mysterious with crackling stars! Behind the child was a stinking corridor, and his little chair, splitting across the bottom, sank a little beneath his weight. But, eyes raised, he drank in the pure night. Sometimes a large train would rattle swiftly past. A drunk would stand singing at a street corner, without disturbing the silence.

The child's mother sat as silently. Sometimes, people would ask her: "What are you thinking about?" And she would answer: "Nothing." And it was quite true. Everything was there, so she thought about nothing. Her life, her interests, her children were simply there with a presence too natural to be felt. She was frail, had difficulty in thinking. She had a harsh and domineering mother who sacrificed everything to a touchy animal pride and had long held sway over her weak-minded daughter. Emancipated by her marriage, the daughter came home obediently when her husband died. He died a soldier's death, as they say. One could see his gold-framed military medal and *croix de guerre* in a place of honor. The hospital sent the widow the small shell splinter found in his body. She kept it. Her grief has long since disappeared. She has forgotten her husband, but still speaks of her children's father. To support these children, she goes out to work and gives her wages to her mother, who brings them up with a whip. When she hits them too hard, the daughter tells her: "Don't hit them on the head." Because they are her children she is very fond of them. She loves them with a hidden and impartial love. Sometimes, on those evenings he's remembering, she would come back from her exhausting work (as a cleaning woman) to find the house empty, the old woman out shopping, the children still at school. She would huddle in a chair, gazing in front of her, wandering off in the dizzy pursuit of a crack along the floor. As the night thickened around her, her muteness would seem irredeemably desolate. If the child came in, he would see her thin shape and bony shoulders, and stop, afraid. He is beginning to feel a lot of things. He is scarcely aware of his own existence, but this animal silence makes him want to cry with pain. He feels sorry for his mother; is this the same as loving her? She has never hugged or kissed him, for she wouldn't know how. He stands a long time watching her. Feeling separated from her, he becomes conscious of her suffering. She does not hear him, for she is deaf. In a few moments, the old woman will come back, life will start up again: the round light cast by the kerosene lamp, the oilcloth on the table, the shouting, the swearing. Meanwhile, the silence marks a pause, an immensely long moment. Vaguely aware of this, the child thinks the surge of feeling in him is love for his mother. And it must be, because after all she is his mother.

She is thinking of nothing. Outside, the light, the noises; here, silence in the night. The child will grow, will learn. They are bringing him up and will ask him to be grateful, as

they were sparing him pain. His mother will always have these silences. He will suffer as he grows. To be a man is what counts. His grandmother will die, then his mother, then he.

His mother has given a sudden start. Something has frightened her. He looks stupid standing there gazing at her. He ought to go and do his homework. The child has done his homework. Today he is in a sordid café. Now he is a man. Isn't that what counts? Surely not since doing homework and accepting manhood leads to nothing but old age.

Still crouching in his corner, the Arab sits with his hands clasped round his feet. The scene of roasting coffee rises from the terraces and mingles with the excited chatter of young voices. The hooting of a tugboat adds its grave and tender note. The world is ending here as it does each day, and all its measureless torments now give rise to nothing but this promise of peace. The indifference of this strange mother! Only the immense solitude of the world can be the measure of it. One evening, they had called her son—he was already quite grown up—to his mother's side. A fright had brought on a serious mental shock. She was in the habit of going out on the balcony at the end of the day. She would take a chair and lean her mouth against the cold and salty iron of the railing. Then she would watch the people going past. Behind her, the night would gradually thicken. In front of her, the shops would suddenly light up. The street would fill with people and fights. She would gaze emptily out until she forgot where she was. On this particular evening, a man had loomed up behind her, dragged her backward, knocked her about, and run away when he heard a noise. She had seen nothing and fainted. She was in bed when her son arrived. He decided, on the doctor's advice, to spend the night with her. He stretched out on the bed, by her side, lying on the top of the blankets. It was summer. The fear left by the recent drama hung in the air of the overheated room. Footsteps were rustling and doors creaked. The smell of the vinegar used to cool his mother's brow floated in the heavy air. She moved restlessly about, whimpering, sometimes giving a sudden start, which would shake him from his brief snatches of sleep. He would wake drenched in sweat, ready to act—only to fall back heavily after glancing at his watch on which the night light threw dancing shadows. It was only later that he realized how much they had been alone that night. Alone against the others. The "others" were asleep, while they both breathed the same fever. Everything in the old house seemed empty. With the last midnight trams all human hope seemed drained away, all the certainties of city noises gone. The house was still humming with their passage; then little by little everything died away. All that remained was a great garden of silence interrupted now and then by the sick woman's frightened moans. He had never felt so lost. The world had melted away, taking with it the illusion that life begins again each morning. Nothing was left, his studies, ambitions, things he might choose in a restaurant, favorite colors. Nothing but the sickness and death he felt surrounded by ... And yet, at the very moment that the world was crumbling, he was alive. Finally he fell asleep, but not without taking with him the tender and despairing image of two people's loneliness together. Later, much later, he would remember this mingled scent of sweat and vinegar, this moment when he had felt the ties attaching him to his mother. As if she were the immense pity he felt spread out around him, made flesh, diligently, without pretense, playing the part of a poor old woman whose fate moves men to tears.

Now the ashes in the grate are beginning to choke the fire. And still the same sigh from the earth. The perfect song of a *derbouka* is heard in the air, a woman's laughter above it. In the bay, the fights come closer—fishing vessels no doubt, returning to harbor. The triangle of sky

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