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By Albert Camus

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The Rebel

An Essay on Man in Revolt

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Albert Camus

The Rebel

An Essay on Man in Revolt

With a Foreword by Sir Herbert Read

A revised and complete translation
of L'HOMME RÉVOLTÉ
by Anthony Bower

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Foreword

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With the publication of this book a cloud that has oppressed the European mind for more than a century begins to lift. After an age of anxiety, despair, and nihilism, it seems possible once more *to hope*—to have confidence again in man and in the future. M. Camus has not delivered us by rhetoric, or by any of the arts of persuasion, but by the clarity of his intelligence. His book is a work of logic. Just as an earlier work of his (*Le Mythe de Sisyphe*) began with a meditation on living or not living—on the implications of the act of suicide—so this work begins with a meditation on enduring or not enduring—on the implications of the act of rebellion. If we decide to live, it must be because we have decided that our personal existence has some positive value; if we decide to rebel, it must be because we have decided that a human society has some positive value. But in each case the values are not "given" —that is the illusionist trick played by religion or by philosophy. They have to be deduced from the conditions of living, and are to be accepted along with the suffering entailed by the limits of the possible. Social values are rules of conduct implicit in a tragic fate; and they offer a hope of creation.

The Rebel, that is to say, offers us a philosophy of politics. It is a kind of book that appears only in France, devoted, in a passionate intellectual sense, to the examination of such concepts as liberty and terror. Not that it is a theoretical work—on the contrary, it is an examination of the actual situation of Europe today, informed by a precise historical knowledge of the past two centuries of its social development. It is "an attempt to understand the times."

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Camus believes that revolt is one of the "essential dimensions" of mankind. It is useless to deny its historical reality—rather we must seek in it a principle of existence. But the nature of revolt has changed radically in our times. It is no longer the revolt of the slave against the master, nor even the revolt of the poor against the rich; it is a metaphysical revolt, the revolt of man against the conditions of life, against creation itself. At the same time, it is an aspiration toward clarity and unity of thought—even, paradoxically, toward order. That, at least, is what it becomes under the intellectual guidance of Camus.

He reviews the history of this metaphysical revolt, beginning with the absolute negation of Sade, glancing at Baudelaire and the "dandies," passing on to Stirner, Nietzsche, Lautréamont, and the surrealists. His attitude to these prophetic figures is not unsympathetic, and once more it is interesting to observe the influence of André Breton on the contemporary mind. Camus then turns to the history of revolt in the political sense, his main object being to draw a clear distinction between rebellion and revolution. Here, and not for the first time, Camus's ideas come close to anarchism, for he recognizes that revolution always implies the establishment of a new government, whereas rebellion is action without planned issue—it is spontaneous protestation. Camus reviews the history of the French Revolution, of the regicides and deicides, and shows how inevitably, from Rousseau to Stalin, the course of revolution leads to authoritarian dictatorship. Saint-Just is the precursor of Lenin. Even Bakunin, to whom Camus devotes some extremely interesting pages (pointing out, for example, that he alone of his time, with exceptional profundity, declared war against the idolatry of science)—even Bakunin, if we examine the statutes of the Fraternité Internationale (1864–7) which he drew up, is found insisting on the absolute subordination of the individual to a central committee of action.

All revolutions in modern times, Camus points out, have led to a reinforcement of the power of the State. "The strange and terrifying growth of the modern State can be considered as the logical conclusion of inordinate technical and philosophical ambitions, foreign to the true spirit of rebellion, but which nevertheless gave birth to the

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revolutionary spirit of our time. The prophetic dream of Marx and the over-inspired predictions of Hegel or of Nietzsche ended by conjuring up, after the city of God had been razed to the ground, a rational or irrational State, which in both cases, however, was founded on terror." The counterrevolutions of fascism only serve to reinforce the general argument.

Camus shows the real quality of his thought in his final pages. It would have been easy, on the facts marshaled in this book, to have retreated into despair or inaction. Camus substitutes the idea of "limits." "We now know, at the end of this long inquiry into rebellion and nihilism, that rebellion with no other limits but historical expediency signifies unlimited slavery. To escape this fate, the revolutionary mind, if it wants to remain alive, must therefore return again to the sources of rebellion and draw its inspiration from the only system of thought which is faithful to its origins: thought that recognizes limits." To illustrate his meaning Camus refers to syndicalism, that movement in politics which is based on the organic unity of the cell, and which is the negation of abstract and bureaucratic centralism. He quotes Tolain: "*Les êtres humains ne s'émancipent qu'au sein des groupes naturels*"—human beings emancipate themselves only on the basis of natural groups. "The commune against the State . . . deliberate freedom against rational tyranny, finally altruistic individualism against the colonization of the masses, are, then, the contradictions that express once again the endless opposition of moderation to excess which has animated the history of the Occident since the time of the ancient world." This tradition of "*mesure*" belongs to the Mediterranean world, and has been destroyed by the excesses of German ideology and of Christian otherworldliness—by the denial of nature.

Restraint is not the contrary of revolt. Revolt carries with it the very idea of restraint, and "moderation, born of rebellion, can only live by rebellion. It is a perpetual conflict, continually created and mastered by the intelligence. . . . Whatever we may do, excess will always keep its place in the heart of man, in the place where solitude is found. We all carry within us our places of exile, our crimes and our ravages. But our task is not to unleash them on the world; it is to fight them in ourselves and in others. Rebel-

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lion, the secular will not to surrender of which Barrès speaks, is still today at the basis of the struggle. Origin of form, source of real life, it keeps us always erect in the savage, formless movement of history."

In his last pages Camus rises to heights of eloquence which are exhilarating. It is an inspiring book. It is particularly a book that should be read by all those who wish to see the inborn impulse of revolt inspired by a new spirit of action—by those who understand "that rebellion cannot exist without a strange form of love." Not to calculate, to give everything for the sake of life and of living men—in that way we can show that "real generosity toward the future lies in giving all to the present."

Herbert Read

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The Rebel

An Essay on Man in Revolt

*

For Jean Grenier

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And openly I pledged my heart to the grave and suffering land, and often in the consecrated night, I promised to love her faithfully until death, unafraid, with her heavy burden of fatality, and never to despise a single one of her enigmas. Thus did I join myself to her with a mortal cord.

HÖLDERLIN:
The Death of Empedocles

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Introduction

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There are crimes of passion and crimes of logic. The boundary between them is not clearly defined. But the Penal Code makes the convenient distinction of premeditation. We are living in the era of premeditation and the perfect crime. Our criminals are no longer helpless children who could plead love as their excuse. On the contrary, they are adults and they have a perfect alibi: philosophy, which can be used for any purpose—even for transforming murderers into judges.

Heathcliff, in *Wuthering Heights*, would kill everybody on earth in order to possess Cathy, but it would never occur to him to say that murder is reasonable or theoretically defensible. He would commit it, and there his convictions end. This implies the power of love, and also strength of character. Since intense love is rare, murder remains an exception and preserves its aspect of infraction. But as soon as a man, through lack of character, takes refuge in doctrine, as soon as crime reasons about itself, it multiplies like reason itself and assumes all the aspects of the syllogism. Once crime was as solitary as a cry of protest; now it is as universal as science. Yesterday it was put on trial; today it determines the law.

This is not the place for indignation. The purpose of this essay is once again to face the reality of the present, which is logical crime, and to examine meticulously the arguments by which it is justified; it is an attempt to understand the times in which we live. One might think that a period which, in a space of fifty years, uproots, enslaves, or kills seventy million human beings should be condemned out of hand. But its culpability must still be understood. In more ingenuous times, when the tyrant

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razed cities for his own greater glory, when the slave chained to the conqueror's chariot was dragged through the rejoicing streets, when enemies were thrown to the wild beasts in front of the assembled people, the mind did not reel before such unabashed crimes, and judgment remained unclouded. But slave camps under the flag of freedom, massacres justified by philanthropy or by a taste for the superhuman, in one sense cripple judgment. On the day when crime dons the apparel of innocence—through a curious transposition peculiar to our times—it is innocence that is called upon to justify itself. The ambition of this essay is to accept and examine this strange challenge.

Our purpose is to find out whether innocence, the moment it becomes involved in action, can avoid committing murder. We can act only in terms of our own time, among the people who surround us. We shall know nothing until we know whether we have the right to kill our fellow men, or the right to let them be killed. In that every action today leads to murder, direct or indirect, we cannot act until we know whether or why we have the right to kill.

The important thing, therefore, is not, as yet, to go to the root of things, but, the world being what it is, to know how to live in it. In the age of negation, it was of some avail to examine one's position concerning suicide. In the age of ideologies, we must examine our position in relation to murder. If murder has rational foundations, then our period and we ourselves are rationally consequent. If it has no rational foundations, then we are insane and there is no alternative but to find some justification or to avert our faces. It is incumbent upon us, at all events, to give a definite answer to the question implicit in the blood and strife of this century. For we are being put to the rack. Thirty years ago, before reaching a decision to kill, people denied many things, to the point of denying themselves by suicide. God is deceitful; the whole world (myself included) is deceitful; therefore I choose to die: suicide was the problem then. Ideology today is concerned only with the denial of other human beings, who alone bear the responsibility of deceit. It is then that we kill.

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Each day at dawn, assassins in judges' obes slip into some cell: murder is the problem today.

The two arguments are inextricably bound together. Or rather they bind us, and so firmly that we can no longer choose our own problems. They choose us, one after another, and we have no alternative but to accept their choice. This essay proposes, in the face of murder and rebellion, to pursue a train of thought which began with suicide and the idea of the absurd.

But, for the moment, this train of thought yields only one concept: that of the absurd. And the concept of the absurd leads only to a contradiction as far as the problem of murder is concerned. Awareness of the absurd, when we first claim to deduce a rule of behavior from it, makes murder seem a matter of indifference, to say the least, and hence possible. If we believe in nothing, if nothing has any meaning and if we can affirm no values whatsoever, then everything is possible and nothing has any importance. There is no pro or con: the murderer is neither right nor wrong. We are free to stoke the crematory fires or to devote ourselves to the care of lepers. Evil and virtue are mere chance or caprice.

We shall then decide not to act at all, which amounts to at least accepting the murder of others, with perhaps certain mild reservations about the imperfection of the human race. Again we may decide to substitute tragic dilettantism for action, and in this case human lives become counters in a game. Finally, we may propose to embark on some course of action which is not entirely gratuitous. In the latter case, in that we have no higher values to guide our behavior, our aim will be immediate efficacy. Since nothing is either true or false, good or bad, our guiding principle will be to demonstrate that we are the most efficient—in other words, the strongest. Then the world will no longer be divided into the just and the unjust, but into masters and slaves. Thus, whichever way we turn, in our abyss of negation and nihilism, murder has its privileged position.

Hence, if we claim to adopt the absurdist attitude, we must prepare ourselves to commit murder, thus admitting

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that logic is more important than scruples that we consider illusory. Of course, we must have some predisposition to murder. But, on the whole, less than might be supposed, to judge from experience. Moreover, it is always possible, as we can so often observe, to delegate murder. Everything would then be made to conform to logic—if logic could really be satisfied in this way.

But logic cannot be satisfied by an attitude which first demonstrates that murder is possible and then that it is impossible. For after having proved that the act of murder is at least a matter of indifference, absurdist analysis, in its most important deduction, finally condemns murder. The final conclusion of absurdist reasoning is, in fact, the repudiation of suicide and the acceptance of the desperate encounter between human inquiry and the silence of the universe. Suicide would mean the end of this encounter, and absurdist reasoning considers that it could not consent to this without negating its own premises. According to absurdist reasoning, such a solution would be the equivalent of flight or deliverance. But it is obvious that absurdism hereby admits that human life is the only necessary good since it is precisely life that makes this encounter possible and since, without life, the absurdist wager would have no basis. To say that life is absurd, the conscience must be alive. How is it possible, without making remarkable concessions to one's desire for comfort, to preserve exclusively for oneself the benefits of such a process of reasoning? From the moment that life is recognized as good, it becomes good for all men. Murder cannot be made coherent when suicide is not considered coherent. A mind imbued with the idea of the absurd will undoubtedly accept fatalistic murder; but it would never accept calculated murder. In terms of the encounter between human inquiry and the silence of the universe, murder and suicide are one and the same thing, and must be accepted or rejected together.

Equally, absolute nihilism, which accepts suicide as legitimate, leads, even more easily, to logical murder. If our age admits, with equanimity, that murder has its justifications, it is because of this indifference to life which is the mark of nihilism. Of course there have been periods of history in which the passion for life was so strong that it

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burst forth in criminal excesses. But these excesses were like the searing flame of a terrible delight. They were not this monotonous order of things established by an impoverished logic in whose eyes everything is equal. This logic has carried the values of suicide, on which our age has been nurtured, to their extreme logical consequence, which is legalized murder. It culminates, at the same time, in mass suicide. The most striking demonstration of this was provided by the Hitlerian apocalypse of 1945. Self-destruction meant nothing to those madmen, in their bomb-shelters, who were preparing for their own death and apotheosis. All that mattered was not to destroy oneself alone and to drag a whole world with one. In a way, the man who kills himself in solitude still preserves certain values since he, apparently, claims no rights over the lives of others. The proof of this is that he never makes use, in order to dominate others, of the enormous power and freedom of action which his decision to die gives him. Every solitary suicide, when it is not an act of resentment, is, in some way, either generous or contemptuous. But one feels contemptuous in the name of something. If the world is a matter of indifference to the man who commits suicide, it is because he has an idea of something that is not or could not be indifferent to him. He believes that he is destroying everything or taking everything with him; but from this act of self-destruction itself a value arises which, perhaps, might have made it worth while to live. Absolute negation is therefore not consummated by suicide. It can only be consummated by absolute destruction, of oneself and of others. Or, at least, it can only be lived by striving toward that delectable end. Here suicide and murder are two aspects of a single system, the system of a misguided intelligence that prefers, to the suffering imposed by a limited situation, the dark victory in which heaven and earth are annihilated.

By the same token, if we deny that there are reasons for suicide, we cannot claim that there are grounds for murder. There are no half-measures about nihilism. Absurdist reasoning cannot defend the continued existence of its spokesman and, simultaneously, accept the sacrifice of others' lives. The moment that we recognize the impossibility of absolute negation—and merely to be alive

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is to recognize this—the very first thing that cannot be denied is the right of others to live. Thus the same idea which allowed us to believe that murder was a matter of indifference now proceeds to deprive it of any justification; and we return to the untenable position from which we were trying to escape. In actual fact, this form of reasoning assures us at the same time that we can kill and that we cannot kill. It abandons us in this contradiction with no grounds either for preventing or for justifying murder, menacing and menaced, swept along with a whole generation intoxicated by nihilism, and yet lost in loneliness, with weapons in our hands and a lump in our throats.

This basic contradiction, however, cannot fail to be accompanied by a host of others from the moment that we claim to remain firmly in the absurdist position and ignore the real nature of the absurd, which is that it is an experience to be lived through, a point of departure, the equivalent, in existence, of Descartes's methodical doubt. The absurd is, in itself, contradiction.

It is contradictory in its content because, in wanting to uphold life, it excludes all value judgments, when to live is, in itself, a value judgment. To breathe is to judge. Perhaps it is untrue to say that life is a perpetual choice. But it is true that it is impossible to imagine a life deprived of all choice. From this simplified point of view, the absurdist position, translated into action, is inconceivable. It is equally inconceivable when translated into expression. Simply by being expressed, it gives a minimum of coherence to incoherence, and introduces consequence where, according to its own tenets, there is none. Speaking itself is restorative. The only coherent attitude based on non-signification would be silence—if silence, in its turn, were not significant. The absurd, in its purest form, attempts to remain dumb. If it finds its voice, it is because it has become complacent or, as we shall see, because it considers itself provisional. This complacency is an excellent indication of the profound ambiguity of the absurdist position. In a certain way, the absurd, which claims to express man in his solitude, really makes him live in front of a mirror. And then the initial anguish runs the risk of turning to

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