BREATHING LIFE INTO MYTH: ELEMENTS OF TRAGEDY IN ALBERT CAMUS' THE STRANGER AND THE PLAGUE

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THESIS: BREATHING LIFE INTO MYTH: ELEMENTS OF TRAGEDY IN ALBERT CAMUS' THE STRANGER AND THE PLAGUE

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To Brandi, Markley and Zoey

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ABSTRACT

Albert Camus re-constructs the Greek myths of Sisyphus and Prometheus to symbolize man's essential condition and the rebellion against that condition. Through the use of symbol and allusion Camus connects *The Stranger* and *The Plague* to Greek myth and tragedy. Camus' tragic heroes are descendants of the tragic heroes of Aeschylus and Sophocles. Meursault, the tragic hero in *The Stranger* is the absurd man and this connects him to Sisyphus. But his tragic lineage is more comparable to that of Oedipus. They both cross a limit and are fated to a paradoxical existence that is both of their own making and unavoidable. In *The Plague* the tragic condition of the inhabitants of Oran and their evolution to solidarity mirrors the spirit of Prometheus. In both novels Camus anthropomorphizes the sun and the sea in ways that connect to Greek myth.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This thesis considers how Albert Camus adapts elements of Greek tragedy in two of his works, *The Stranger* and *The Plague*. This question will be considered from multiple angles and will examine to what extent Camus' use of symbols compares to the use of symbols in Greek tragedy, as well as to what extent Camus re-constructs Greek myth within each novel. The re-construction of mythical images in contrast with modernity will also be examined. Camus divided his work into three cycles with each cycle paired with a figure from Greek myth. The scope of this study examines the first two cycles and focuses on how Camus re-constructs the Sisyphus and Prometheus myths with the novels *The Stranger* and *The Plague*. The study excludes Camus' final cycle (Nemesis), which was unfinished because of his untimely death. There is a debate amongst academics about which works from this period Camus intended to include in his Nemesis cycle and although there is somewhat of a consensus, wading into that debate would distract from the primary purpose of this thesis, which is to study the elements of Greek tragedy and myth in the selected novels. This thesis will argue that Camus uses both mythical allusions and foundational concepts of Greek tragedy to contextualize his work and connect his tragic heroes to a mythical lineage.

In the preface to *Lyrical and Critical Essays* Camus writes that "a man's work is nothing but this slow trek to discover, through the detours of art, those two or three great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened" (17). One can't help but think that the images that a young Camus first opened his heart to were of the Mediterranean sun and sea and "the unbearable grandeur of this heat-soaked sky" (*Lyrical Essays* 67). Camus' work, however, would take a detour through myth and the image of Sisyphus at the bottom of his hill preparing once

again to begin his endless toil. It is here where myth converges with art and Camus finds a metaphor for modern man who in search of meaning from an indifferent universe, finds meaning in his response to his absurd condition. For Camus this is where the absurd emerges, not out of desperation for meaning but rather out of a confrontation with the silence of the world *(Myth of Sisyphus* 28).

Greek tragedy for Camus depicted an honest view of the world that contained within it a denial of transcendence and illusion and a strain of pessimism that was popular amongst pre-Socratic philosophers. Camus tragic heroes are descendants of this mix of myth and despair. There is a Greece of light and a Greece of darkness and both appeal to Camus. Meursault, the tragic hero of *The Stranger*, kills an Arab because of the sun. In Sisyphean fashion the sun becomes Meursault's rock, an obstacle he cannot endure. However, events like World War II and the Holocaust had "outstripped the meaning of Meursault and Sisyphus' singular rebellion" (Mikics and Zaretsky 203). The response to this singular revolt is *The Plague*, a lesson in solidarity and rebellion in the face of suffering. Camus, having re-assessed the limits of absurdity finds that the absurd is merely the first step towards the truth. While much of the scholarship on *The Plague* focuses on the allegorical elements with the French resistance during Nazi occupation, it is a novel with multiple layers of meaning that rests on the idea that through solidarity man can summon a collective will to defeat an indifferent evil.

The methodology that will be used for this thesis will attempt to isolate Camus' love of Greek classicism through the comparison of the use of symbol and imagery wherever possible rather than the dynamics of politics and history that dominates much of the recent scholarship. What symbolically connects Camus' tragic heroes to myth and to what extent they are descendants of Greek tragedy will also be discussed. This thesis will also attempt to answer

whether or not Camus' absurdism also has origins in Greek tragedy. Much of Greek pessimism emerges out of a tragic view of the world that sees man's place in it not at the center, but at its fringes, and often victim to the vengeance of the Gods. Camus fuses these ancient ideas with modern ones with his tragic heroes finding their place somewhere between faith and nihilism. At the heart of Greek tragedy and in the works of Camus is an honest assessment of the world in all its chaos and complexity. This honest assessment, it will be argued, has its origins in the tragic works of Aeschylus and Sophocles.

Camus undoubtedly thought that for the modern world to recover from the destruction of the early and mid-twentieth century a return to the moderation he found in ancient Greece was needed. That he was skeptical of this happening did not change his belief that it was a moral imperative (Camus, *Lyrical Essays* 139). The response to this crisis for Camus was a new humanism rooted in classical values that deny the excess of modernity. Camus' humanism stands at a crossroads between paganism and Christianity. By denying transcendence man comes face-to-face with the absurd and denied in his search for meaning he finds his source of rebellion. Camus' tragic hero is not much unlike Camus himself, who yearned for a cosmic sign to believe in something bigger than himself. When met with silence he instead puts his belief into the sensual elements of life and love of sun and sea.

The response to this modern crisis will dominate the majority of Camus' oeuvre both in literary and philosophical form. The absurd is simply the starting point and the first recognition of the struggle. That man struggles to triumph in an unjust condition is a common theme in Camus' work and it is one that will be discussed throughout the chapters of this thesis. The answer to this dilemma lies in how man responds to the absurd. To acquiesce to the absurd or to go about one's life without recognizing it, for Camus, is ultimately an exercise in bad faith. The

response must be, as Camus articulates in *The Rebel*, one of revolt, first as a solitary cry then as a collective rebellion (34).

For Camus, man's rebellion emerges from a tragic recognition of the absurd. The absurd man becomes aware of his condition and cries out in revolt. What links the absurd to Greek tragedy is a view of the world that recognizes man's displacement. It is a vision that is inherently pessimistic yet there is potential for greatness. In the dramas of Aeschylus and Sophocles, the hero's greatest strength, what propels him to greatness, is also his tragic flaw. This lineage is seen in the Camusian hero, who is driven by his passions to which he ultimately succumbs. What connects Camus' heroes to myth is that each of them violates a limit. This concept of limits can be traced throughout the history of tragedy from Prometheus to Macbeth to modern tragedies such as Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. It was an intense interest to Camus who wrote about it frequently in his essays on ancient Greece, most notably *Helen's Exile* where he writes that the Greeks carried "nothing to extreme" giving "everything its share, balancing light with shade" (*Lyrical Essays* 149).

Greek pessimism plays a vital role in both the development and the decline of Greek tragedy. In order to properly contextualize this argument, the concept of pessimism will be framed through its Nietzschean re-interpretation where it is reimagined as Dionysian pessimism. Dionysian pessimism for Nietzsche differs from philosophical pessimism in that it is a pessimism of strength that acknowledges and confronts the inherent tragic situation in life. This pessimism of strength goes beyond just giving an honest account of the human condition, it attempts, Joshua Foa Dienstag writes, to "promote an unblinkered re-examination of the world, and of the self, without built-in moral assumptions" (*Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit* 187).

This type of pessimism is not only a fundamental basis for Greek tragedy but is also a precursor to Camus' absurdism.

Although Camus read Nietzsche widely and mirrors many of his views on tragedy, he had, as George Sefler writes, an aesthetic that was entirely at odds with him (420). Very few of Nietzsche's ideas are assimilated into Camus' work in the way that Greek tragedy is. Camus widely quotes Nietzsche in both *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel* yet he rejects much of Nietzsche's overall project. Nietzsche saw illusion through art as an escape from the absurd. For Camus, this was destructive because it robbed man of the potential for revolt. Rather than illusion, Camus believed that meaning could be found by confronting the absurd head on.

Camus most closely echoes Nietzsche's thought when it comes to the reasons for tragedy's swift decline. Like Nietzsche, Camus believes the confluence of Socratic optimism and Euripides radical departure from Sophocles changed the cultural landscape for tragic expression. The mythical characters of Homeric epic that were re-imagined in Aeschylean and Sophoclean drama would be replaced in Euripides by the common man of ordinary birth. Nietzsche betrayed myth for accuracy and began tragedy's decline on the stage. It was, Nietzsche argues, Euripides deliberate intention "to eliminate from tragedy the primitive and pervasive Dionysiac element, and to rebuild the drama on a foundation of non-Dionysiac art, custom and philosophy" (*Birth of Tragedy* 76). Camus largely accepts this argument writing that Euripides "upset the tragic balance by concentrating on the individual and psychology" (*Lyrical Essays* 304).

For Nietzsche, "all the famous figures of the Greek stage, Prometheus, Oedipus, etc are merely masks of that original hero, Dionysus" (*Birth of Tragedy 66*). According to Nietzsche, Greek tragedy emerged out of a confluence between the Dionysic and Apollonian elements of Greek culture. Dionysius, who was also the God of theater and festival, was, according to

Nietzsche, the first tragic hero and embodied the "erring, striving, suffering individual" (52). Yet Camus' discussion of Dionysus in this context is conspicuously absent from his work. He does not touch the subject in *Myth of Sisyphus* and his discussion of Dionysus is limited to one passage on the subject of the intersection of suffering and rebellion in *The Rebel* (*The Rebel* 40). Similarly, Camus has little to say about Aristotle's *Poetics*, the seminal work in the defining of Greek tragedy. Robert Zaretsky chalks up these absences to Camus' intense focus on the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles (65). A tougher criticism comes from Paul Archambault who writes that "nothing seems to indicate that Camus had anything but a passing acquaintance with Greek thought between the death of Plato and the Christian era" (44).

Although Camus' interest in Greek myth is visible in some of his earliest writings, it is not until his first published novel, *The Stranger*, that he would create a character that exists in parallel to Greek myth. Meursault, the tragic hero of *The Stranger*, has generally been considered by scholars to be a character that evolves to become conscious of his absurd condition and thus merges with Sisyphus. That both *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Stranger* were published the same year undoubtedly helped cement this connection. Meursault at his heart is a sensualist who lives for the immediacy of experience. This ultimately puts him in danger, not from others, but from the very thing he excessively gives in to, his love of nature. The sun both captivates and moves Meursault to violence, yet he is oblivious to its antagonism until it is too late.

Throughout *The Stranger* Camus connects Meursault to the mythical Greek King Oedipus in clear and subtle ways. Meursault's fate is analogous to that of Oedipus in that each of them succumbs to a tragic flaw that was also their greatest strength. They are both outsiders that are blind to a fate that is closing in on them. Meursault, motivated by his love of sun and sea, fails to head the warnings of the aggressive sun. Oedipus, blinded by ambition, ignores the

warnings from Tiresias that he himself is the murderer that he seeks. In his own analysis of Meursault, Camus writes that "the hero of the book is condemned because he doesn't play the game" (*The Stranger* 115). This may be true, but he is ultimately condemned because through his way of living he crosses the limit and violates order and balance and ultimately sets himself on the course of his tragic fate.

In *The Plague*, Camus confronts the absurd head on through collective rebellion against an indifferent evil. This rebellion is developed in the image of Prometheus. Alone and chained to his rock in defiance against Zeus, Prometheus symbolizes the collective spirit that ignites behind the walls of the plague-stricken city of Oran. From here we are given a glimpse into Camus' tragic humanism. It is a humanism that emerges from the response to suffering. For this Camus once again looks to the Greeks, whose view of suffering was appealing not only because suffering lead to wisdom but because it served as an impetus to rebellion. For Camus, the Christian concept of beauty and suffering as a means for redemption left man mired in abstraction. The differing concepts of suffering gets to the heart of Camus' reconstruction of myth as an attempt to link the humanism of ancient Greece with modernity as an alternative to Christianity. Modernity, argues Camus, negates moderation for excess and in doing so has set modern man on a path to nihilism. What attracts Camus to Greek myth is not only its symbols and images but its adherence to balance and moderation. This moderation extends to Prometheus' rebellion against Zeus, which is not a rebellion against all creation, but targeted toward a specific grievance.

Camus wrote numerous essays that provided extra commentaries on his work. These essays will be quoted whenever applicable to properly contextualize the two primary works that are treated here. Camus was an extensive note taker and his notebooks were posthumously

published after his untimely death. These notebooks are at times vague and difficult to decipher while at other times enlightening and poignant and help to further clarify his work. In an entry in his notebooks Camus simply writes: “find excess within moderation” (*Notebooks* 84). In this short sentence, Camus is both accessing that Greek heart while attempting to stretch its arbitrary limits. The same Camus that declared, “the world wherein I feel most at home is the world of Greek myth” is unable to completely shed the excess of modernity (*Notebooks* 249).

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This review will be concerned with the debate amongst scholars over Camus' authentic application of Greek myth and to what extent he was a disciple of ancient Greece. This question provides the foundation for this thesis and is the starting point for much of what will be discussed. Camus' interest in Greek myth informs much of his thought and is a constant reference point throughout his work. Yet there has been a debate amongst scholars for decades over how authentic this connection is. For Camus, the connection is synthesized through a shared geography and a shared way of looking at the world. Camus' heroes, like Camus himself, express themselves in harmony with their land. However, for Camus, the Mediterranean is more than its physical boundary, it is "a certain smell or scent that we do not need to express" because "we all feel it through our skin" (*Lyrical Essays* 101).

This thesis finds that there is a gap in the literature that is underexplored, although not entirely neglected. That gap includes how different elements of Greek tragedy and myth can be found in Camus' work. In this instance, element is used in a broad sense, and not just restricted to what is generally accepted as part of a formula for tragedy. Included in this broad definition of what constitutes an element is how Camus' use of symbolism connects his work to Greek myth, how the pessimism of Aeschylean and Sophoclean drama surfaces in Camus' art and how suffering, which is an integral element of Greek tragedy, is a major theme in the novel *The Plague*. These elements converge to create a lineage between Camus' modern tragic heroes with the tragic heroes of Greek myth.

The influence of Greek myth on Camus cannot be quantifiably measured simply by counting the numerous references and allusions. The question that matters, and which has been

up for scholarly debate, is to what extent Camus' understanding of Greek myth is consistent with his adaptation of its images. Zaretsky writes that tragedy "was a constituent element of Camus' Mediterraneanism" (58). For Camus, tragedy and Mediterraneanism are often one and the same. In the essay *The New Mediterranean Culture*, Camus writes "We want to link culture with life. The Mediterranean, which surrounds us with smiles, sea and sunlight, teaches us how it is done" (*Lyrical Essays* 196). This affinity for Greece, for Camus, was a lifelong passion that was strengthened through a shared Mediterranean culture that "expresses itself in harmony with the land" and "shares a way of appreciating life" (190-1). Camus celebrates the physical life, denying rationalism and abstractions, while declaring that "we claim Aeschylus and Sophocles and not Euripides" (194).

The ancient Greeks were frequent points of reference in Camus' essays, short stories and novels. Yet there is a shortage of scholarship on the topic relatively speaking compared to other aspects of Camus' work. This shortage of scholarship can possibly be explained by the fact that Camus himself went to great lengths to explain how Greek myth was a source of inspiration for his work. *The Myth of Sisyphus*, a philosophical treatise on the absurd, released the same year as *The Stranger*, provides a lot of clarity concerning Meursault's unique situation. Likewise, *The Rebel* which was published four years after *The Plague* goes into depth about Camus' ideas on the absurd and rebellion. Camus also references the Greeks throughout his volumes of essays, most of which appear in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*.

This review will begin with Archambault considering that his work *Camus' Hellenic Sources* is a monumental exercise in tracing the Greek influence that Camus himself was never short of attaching himself to. Archambault is skeptical that Camus' heroes are what Zaretsky calls "descendants of the tragic vision of Aeschylus and Sophocles" (64). Camus' heroes, he

writes are “not linked with the cosmos or the personal destiny that surrounds them … they may inhale a few passing joys, teeter, then disappear from the world, wherein they were strangers from the first” (18). Archambault argues that it was less important for Camus to understand the Greek mind than to find in it an anticipation or confirmation of his own tragic humanism (171). Camus’ nostalgia for classical Greek culture is approached with its own prejudices and preconceptions (171). Camus, Archambault argues, “cannot be considered a Greek, but as a modern with a Greek heart who has been compelled to face the historical paradox of Christianity” (173). The Camusian hero thus is not much different than Camus himself, a son of the Mediterranean and lover of sun and sea.

That Camus has created heroes who are entirely modern with superficial connections to the Greeks is countered by Ronald Srigley. Srigley argues in the foreword to his translation of Camus’ first published work, a master’s thesis titled *Christian Metaphysics and Neoplatonism*, that Camus’ oeuvre is “formulated in part through a critical engagement with modernity and the exploration of its Christian origins” (26). Through this critical engagement Srigley writes that Camus is attempting to de-construct modernity and reconnect with the values of Greece to form a new humanism. Camus attempts this de-construction, Srigley argues, by giving Greek meaning to Christian images.

Mathew Sharpe argues that Srigley paints Camus as too hostile to modernity, while ignoring what Camus admired most about the Greeks, their moderation (“A Just Judgement?” 54). Camus thus does not attempt to radically de-construct modernity but push modernity towards a recovery where re-cultivation of classical values can reshape art. As Sharpe notes, “Greek polytheism mythically expresses, for Camus, a more balanced sense of the place of human reality in a larger, plural order of the world” (“Camus’ Hellenic Heart” 255). Human

reality's truths and values, for Camus, had been altered first by post-tragedian Greece and then hastened with the rise of Christianity. Ultimately this cultural change in art paved the way for modernity. Camus' advocacy of an ethic of moderation, Sharpe argues, is grounded in Camus' own "deeply modern epistemic humility" fused with "a neoclassicism rooted in the refusal to hubristically claim knowledge of what we do not know" ("Camus' Philosophical Neoclassicism" 589).

Deinstag argues that Camus' interest in Greek tragedy rests on a nostalgic desire for a return "to an honest assessment of the world" ("Tragedy, Pessimism, Nietzsche" 89). Deinstag, echoing Nietzsche, attributes tragedy's demise to the rise of Socratic optimism writing that "the Greeks of Socrates generation could no longer bear to live with the brutal truths of the human condition and sought refuge in an optimistic philosophy" (89). These truths that went to the heart of Aeschylean and Sophoclean tragedy could be assuaged by embracing optimism. This is problematic for Camus because optimism as a philosophy ignores the absurd and negates rebellion. The pessimistic vision of existence in this sense is a precursor for the absurd. Man's honest assessment of existence leads to one natural conclusion, that of rebellion. That man's time on earth is violated by his inevitable death, for Camus, makes revolt against the absurd all the more urgent.

The need to reshape modernity with classical humanism by 1945 becomes for Camus an urgent matter in response to the European crisis. That World War II changed Camus' views on the urgency of developing a new humanism is largely agreed upon by scholars. To Zaretsky, the "recasting of the Promethean myth reflects Camus' tragic understanding of strife-torn Algeria" (64). Both France and Algeria had "equally compelling claims on the land" yet both were justified, but neither just in their violence (64). This parallels the equally compelling cases of

both Prometheus and Zeus. Prometheus believes he is in the right to give fire to man and prevent man's destruction while Zeus is doing what he believes will keep the cosmic order. That Camus is on the side of Prometheus is not surprising for he saw in this myth an ideal symbol of rebellion for modern man. Camus, Zaretsky writes, "embraces a Prometheus marked by revolutionary verve" because he too saw revolt as an answer to the problems that man was presented (58). The rebellion Camus found in Prometheus would be a template for contemporary man to confront the crisis of modernity.

Raymond Williams, in his monumental work *Modern Tragedy*, traces the tragic expression from its origins in Greek tragedy up until the 1950s of Camus and Sartre, a brand of tragedy he calls tragic despair and revolt (174). This comprehensive view of tragedy is countered by George Steiner who argues in *The Death of Tragedy* that modernity lacks a mythology to tap into as a means for artistic symbolic structures (128). Camus presages Steiner, writing that "the problem with modern tragedy lies precisely in the need to create new sacred images" (*Lyrical Essays* 308). Without images to connect to modern man becomes vulnerable to the excesses of individualism. The hero of ancient tragedy with his flaws and unfulfilled ambition does not lose his zeal for life even once he is confronted with a tragic fate. What emerges from modernity's images of technology and destruction is an alienation that lacks the cathartic vessel to escape the void of nihilism. Camus' antidote to this void is a re-cultivation of myth to connect modern man with the images of Ancient Greece.

The argument that Camus' tragic humanism emerges out of his experience with the French-Algerian conflict is common amongst scholars. In *Modern Tragedy*, Williams argues that "the condition of Meursault is in part the condition of Algeria" (180). Luke Richardson agrees that colonialism does play a role in Camus' tragic disposition, but argues what attracts Camus to

Greek myth is that it is a "tradition that has become a symbol of philosophical discourse, a part of the vocabulary of European philosophy, from Nietzsche's Dionysus to Freud's Oedipus" (244). Camus, Richardson argues, is interacting within this tradition. Zaretsky agrees with one caveat, that the interaction within this tradition is for Camus just a starting point and that "while Camus looks to the Greeks, he creates a hero to his own times, not the past" (57). This is echoed by Sharpe who writes that "a fuller appreciation of Camus' thought … bears out that Camus … looked to classical thought as the means to historically contextualize modernity" ("Camus' Hellenic Heart" 244). For Camus, the Greeks represent a vital pragmatism that is missing from the modern world. Modernity, in its quest for efficiency has replaced progress with technology and has alienated man from himself and from nature.

Camus' landscape plays a central role in both his life and his art. For Sharpe both the blazing sun in *The Stranger* and the pestilence in *The Plague* epitomize for Camus "the inhuman dimension of the natural world" ("Camus' Hellenic Heart" 248). Germaine Bree talks of the "fundamental rhythm" of Camus' worlds where the tragic hero undergoes a "slow closing in upon him of an irrespirable atmosphere which cannot sustain life" (96). For Meursault, the irrespirable atmosphere is the heat from the sun which possesses and then drives him to violence. It is a chain of events that Williams writes, "convincingly ends in murder" (176). Stephen Ohayon writes that the sun in *The Stranger* is a patriarchal symbol that "reminds the characters of their subjugation" and is a "metaphor for patriarchal absolutism" (193). Meursault's singular rebellion against the absurd is a rebellion of "the innocent son" challenging a patriarchal authority. In what Ohayon calls "Meursault's solar patricidal act" the aggressive omnipresence of the sun causes Meursault to do the sun's bidding (193). For Ben Stoltzfus by anthropomorphizing the sun Camus contaminates the non-human with human creating a tragic

complicity between Meursault and nature (298). The sun becomes Meursault's cause and source of his tragic act. Meursault's sensualism is used against him and since his primary state of being is his sensualist nature, he is unable to refuse to comply.

CHAPTER 3

TRAGEDY, PESSIMISM, AND THE ABSURD

What is tragedy? This question has occupied the minds of scholars since Aristotle's *Poetics*. For Aristotle, the purpose of tragedy was to bring about a catharsis within the audience to purge them of their anxieties and fears. The fate of the tragic hero is both catastrophic and inevitable and is set into motion by a tragic mistake by the protagonist. This tragic mistake sets into motion a reversal of fortune involving the hero, who typically is of renowned stature or birth. In traditional Greek drama the tragic hero must not only have estimable qualities that the Greek audience would have admired but one of those qualities would also be his tragic flaw (Aristotle 7). Prometheus was to be admired for his selflessness, Oedipus for his bravery and wits. The hero's fatal flaw leads to a tragic decision that results in an unavoidable chain of events, yet he is still master of his fate.

The tragic hero must choose his path even if it is one that was fated to him. He must be responsible for his suffering. Prometheus and Sisyphus are representative of Camus' tragic heroes because they symbolize man's desire to transcend his condition. Prometheus' compassion for man and his hubris and defiance towards Zeus is the source of his punishment. Sisyphus cheats death and lives a full life to old age, but he cannot avoid his ultimate punishment of being forced to roll a boulder up a hill for eternity. For Camus both figures symbolize a stage in his concept of heroism. Jerry Curtis writes that each represents a different approach to the same absurdity, the human condition (340). Sisyphus "dogged revolt against his condition" is a window into human fate (Camus, *Myth* 85). Prometheus' rebellion against Zeus in the name of humanist values is a model for modern man faced with the horrors and destruction of modern warfare and the strain of nihilism that runs through it.

What attracted Camus to Greek tragedy was the exploration of the greatness and suffering of man. That suffering was not just a portal to happiness but that it led to wisdom. Camus writes in the first paragraph of *Helen's Exile* of the confluence of beauty and suffering which the Greek tragedians, particularly Aeschylus and Sophocles had mastered:

> The Mediterranean has a solar tragedy that has nothing to do with mists. There are evenings at the foot of the mountains by the sea, when night falls on the perfect curve of the little bay and an anguished fullness rises from the silent waters. Such moments make one realize that if the Greeks knew despair, they experienced it always through beauty and its oppressive quality. In this golden sadness, tragedy reaches its highest point. (Camus, *Lyrical Essays* 148)

That the Greeks experienced despair and beauty simultaneously was undoubtedly appealing to Camus. The absurd man confronts his essential condition all the while bathing in the sensual parts of life. His rebellion is not possible without either suffering or beauty. The tragic heroes of Greek antiquity are at their heart rebels. Sisyphus is himself a rebel, not because he overcomes his tormentors, but because he overcomes himself. We are, as Camus argues, to imagine Sisyphus happy. This happiness emerges out of the realization that his struggle defines his essence and that he is the master of his fate. "Every act of rebellion expresses a nostalgia for innocence and an appeal to the essence of being" (Camus, *The Rebel* 105). Sisyphus becomes the absurd hero as much through his "passions as through his torture" (Camus, *Myth* 85). Meursault also eventually becomes master of his fate and merges with Sisyphus. His ultimate awareness of this and his becoming conscious of his essential condition is what makes him tragic. Like Sisyphus he is a sensualist that is blind to the limits he crosses and the balance he disrupts.

We know of Sisyphus' fate through Odysseus who descends into the underworld and relates:

> And I saw Sisyphus too, bound to his own torture, grappling his monstrous boulder with both arms working, heaving, hands struggling, legs driving, he kept on thrusting the rock uphill toward the brink, but just as it teetered, set to topple over—time in again the immense weight of the thing would wheel it back and the ruthless boulder would bound and tumble down to the plain again—so once again he would heave, would struggle to thrust it up, sweat drenching his body, dust swirling above his head. (Homer, 680-690)

From this Camus creates a new myth. The Sisyphus of Homer is re-constructed from trickster to a symbol of modern man struggling to endure in the face of a repetitive existence. In Camus' re-construction of the myth, Sisyphus is not punished for cheating death, but rather for enjoying the sensual parts of life too much. He is punished for his excess, a violation of the ancient Greek ethos of moderation. Camus has inverted the myth asking us that instead of pitying Sisyphus for his endless toil at a repetitive task, we must imagine him happy. As Camus notes, nothing is known of Sisyphus' time in the underworld. This is all the better for Camus who is not bound by history but rather a living evolving myth. As Camus would write in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, "myths are made for the imagination to breathe life into them" (120).

Meursault's tragedy is that he lives and dies out of harmony with fellow man. He is, as Zaretsky argues, a "tragic descendant of the mystery that Camus found in Hellenic myth" (64). Yet his lineage is not Sisyphus, although his struggle is Sisyphean. His lineage is Oedipus, because he too is blind to the fate that had been slowly marching towards him. What ties him to Oedipus is that each of them is crushed by an external force not of his making. Leon Golden

writes that Oedipus' tragic flaw is his "failure to understand the true relationship between his own finite human existence and the infinitely powerful and mysterious nature of Apollo" (51). The cathartic effect of Oedipus' downfall is that the spectator feels both fear and pity because as Golden argues, "we respect the moral stature of the hero" and "recognize ourselves as vulnerable to the same fate" (51). Meursault negates ambition altogether in order to avoid this fate and ultimately surrenders to it anyway. It is not his ambition that is his flaw, but that he is not ambitious about anything other than the sensual parts of life.

Camus is attempting a new humanism rooted in the values of Ancient Greece. He writes in *The Rebel*: "Since the salvation of man is not achieved in God, it must be achieved on earth. Since the world has no direction, man, from the moment he accepts this, must give it one that will eventually lead to a superior type of humanity" (42). This tragic humanism develops out of what Haskell Block calls an insistence on the irrationality of the external world pitted against its confrontation with human aspiration (354). Essentially, the absurd, the experience that emerges out of man's desire for meaning that goes unfulfilled by an indifferent universe, is itself tragic. By connecting the tragic hero in his work with myth, Jean-Paul Sartre writes that Camus attempts to re-create the Greek myths of antiquity "turning from a purely psychological study of characters to a more profound study of "the state of man in its entirety" in an effort to present a composite view of modern man, "his problems, his hopes, his struggles" (Curtis 340). This composite view of man requires an honest way of looking at the world in all its random chaos, happiness and despair. This honest way of looking at the world and a view of man's ultimate fate is essentially a pessimistic one.

It is difficult to discuss Greek tragedy without examining the role that pessimism had not only in its artistic development but also in its eventual disappearance. Deinstag argues that

tragedy is pessimistic "because it lays bare for us the horrible situation that life offers to us that the pre-Socratic philosophers describe" ("Tragedy, Pessimism, Nietzsche" 87). This horrible situation was a way of looking at the world that was rooted in man's displacement in the universe. In a world where men were subjected to the whims of deities, man's place in the world was chaotic and anxiety filled. This anxiety would have been intensified by the finality of the Greek afterlife, the images of which were dire. The Greeks largely viewed the afterlife as meaningless and thus its adaptation on the stage would have reflected this. That all things have destructive properties also transferred on to people, who once they left the physical world and travelled to the underworld ceased to progress and stayed within a static existence for eternity. Tragedy does not provide the antidote, but by bringing it to the Greek stage it was seeking a public recognition of this reality.

That tragedy dried up with the emergence of Socratic optimism is a central argument in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*. Socrates, Nietzsche writes, "represents the archetype of the theoretical optimist, who, strong in the belief that nature can be fathomed considers knowledge to be the true panacea and error to the radical evil" (*Birth of Tragedy* 94). Euripides, whom Nietzsche would call "the poet of esthetic Socratism," ushers in a new kind of drama that denies the Apollonian elements of Aeschylean and Sophoclean tragedy and instead "serves to illustrate the efficacy of the rationalistic method (79). Camus largely agrees with Nietzsche's thought on this, arguing in a lecture titled *The Future of Tragedy* that "the final triumph of individual reason causes the literature of tragedy to dry up for centuries" (297-98). In this same lecture Camus seems to echo Nietzsche on Euripides when he notes that "Euripides, on the other hand, will upset the tragic balance by concentrating on the individual and psychology. He is thus a forerunner of individualistic drama, that is to say, of the decadence of tragedy" (*Lyrical Essays*

304). Because of the fact that Camus shares with Nietzsche a belief that Socratic reason leads to the demise of tragedy it is not a stretch to argue that he had similar beliefs about tragedy and pessimism. However, Camus said very little on the subject outside of arguing against pessimism as a negative philosophy, writing in *Resistance, Rebellion and Death* that "the idea that a pessimistic philosophy is necessarily one of discouragement is a puerile idea, but one that needs too long a refutation" (4).

The concept of pessimism at its heart is rooted in time being an "unshakeable burden for human beings because it leads to the ultimate destruction of all things" (Dienstag, "Tragedy, Pessimism, Nietzsche" 87). The pre-Socratics tragedians "grasped the chaotic and disordered nature of the world and only attempted to cope with it insofar as that was possible" (Dienstag, "Nietzsche's Dionysian Pessimism" 926). What emerges out of this base of pessimistic knowledge is a tragic vision that defined the Athens stage from Aeschylus to Euripides. Pessimism lays bare for us a reality that pre-Socratic dramatists describe and one that which was a constant presence in tragic drama.

Pessimism plays such an important role in tragedy that when Nietzsche reissues *The Birth of Tragedy* in 1886 he added the subtitle *Hellenism and Pessimism*. In the introduction he promises to expose within the updated text "the good severe will of the older Greeks to pessimism, to the tragic myth" (21). Nietzsche prescribed to the ancient Greeks a pessimism of strength that is concerned with what he called "the hard, gruesome, malevolent and problematic aspects of existence" (43). This pessimism, which Nietzsche re-imagined as Dionysian pessimism, emerges out of a "consequence of knowledge of the absolute illogic of world-order" (*Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* 74). The tragic theater was thus a mirror of the view that the universe is something constantly in "flux, constantly in the process of becoming and thus,

constantly in the process of destroying" (Deinstag, "Tragedy, Pessimism, Nietzsche" 87). The goal of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* was twofold: to explain how Greek tragedy came into existence and to explain how and when its demise occurred. In both cases it was the rise and fall of the philosophy of pessimism.

No longer able to face the harsh truth of the human condition that tragedy dramatized the Greeks of Socrates generation became attracted to optimism. While tragedy purged man of his fears and pity, Socratic optimism denied those fears and rested its truth on an exploration of virtues. Once the optimistic element was introduced into tragedy "it overgrew its Dionysiac regions and brought about their annihilation" (*Birth of Tragedy* 88). This Nietzsche argues was the beginning of a more "genteel domestic drama" (88). That Socratic virtue was the beginning of the death of tragedy is largely accepted by Camus when he writes that the evolution of tragedy is one from "cosmic thought impregnated with divinity" to "individualistic and rational concepts" (*Lyrical Essays* 297). This movement from Aeschylus to Euripides, Camus writes, is "roughly speaking, the development from the great pre-Socratic thinkers to Socrates himself" (*297*). This is, to put it favorably, a close reading of Nietzsche's own interpretation of the timeline. Camus' own absurdist philosophy is filtered through much of this thought and it heavily shares with Dionysian pessimism a fundamental honesty for what is true. It is a world view that Camus shares with the Ancient Greeks that is at its heart pessimistic. What emerges out of this is an absurdist philosophy that, while not analogous with pessimism, includes a compatible view of the world. Pessimism and absurdism have in common a need to confront man's essential condition. The absurd man sees the world through this prism of pessimism the moment he decides the antidote to his condition is revolt. Thus, pessimism and absurdism essentially swim in the same waters but only absurdism is actionable.

Greek tragedy portrays the distress of the human condition in all its reality and presents, for Camus, a more balanced response to the question of meaning than does Christianity. This distress of the human condition, its fears and anxieties, creates a tension that underlines the drama. While the tension in tragedy is typically between two opposing forces, another layer of tension beneath the surface creates the tragic atmosphere. This tension is essential to tragedy because the conflict exists within the limits of the universal order and is "born between light and darkness and struggles between them" (Camus, *Lyrical Essays* 303). Christianity, Camus writes "plunges the whole of the universe, man and the world, into the divine order" (303). This divine order thus removes the tension that drives tragic drama while tragedy places man "between the poles of extreme nihilism and boundless hope" (304). The immediacy in ancient Greece is contrasted by the Christian belief in redemption through Christ. Through Christianity man has a reason to be optimistic because the trials of this world prepare him for the next. The pessimism that provided the cultural landscape for tragedy is assuaged by the optimism of an afterlife through Christianity.

For Germaine Bree there is a physiological rhythm in Camus' work where the threat of death establishes the tension (96). Meursault commits a crime and must own his singular fate. The inhabitants of Oran are observers of their fate yet the moment they collectively push back their fate is shared. *The Plague* sets up "its mechanism of destruction to attack in man what defines his humanity" (Bree 99). This tension for Camus is a "frenzied immobility, between two powers, each of which wears the double mask of good and evil" (*Lyrical Essays* 302). Tragedy demands the tension that arises from conflict between two forces that have legitimate claims. Prometheus is the existential rebel, heroic in giving man fire and the arts knowing that this act would meet the disapproval of Zeus. Yet he is also neglectful in his awareness of what his

actions would do to the cosmic order. In *Oedipus the King*, Sophocles adheres to the ancient Greek maxim of nothing in excess by punishing Oedipus for his excessive pride with a fate he cannot escape. His tortuous fate is revealed to him at the moment he reaches his highest point, becoming King of Thebes.

The Greeks had a word for this sudden reversal of fortune. Peripeteia is the moment where the hero is ascending and then a sudden shift in his fortune turns his fate from good to bad. This idea, first introduced by Aristotle in *Poetics*, involves "a change by which the action veers round to its opposite, subject always to our rule of probability or necessity" (41). The hero, having ascended to the top undergoes a sudden decline which comes as a surprise to the audience. Meursault reaches his peripeteia bathing in the soft glow of the sun and sea only to suddenly feel the rising heat of the sun. He has crossed a limit, yet he is unaware he has done so. It is the moment where his greatest strength, love of nature, becomes his tragic flaw. Within this tension is also an understanding that the tragic hero must go through a process where he understands how he is culpable in his fate. This process Aristotle called the anagnorisis and is the moment of tragic recognition where the truth is revealed to the hero. However, this understanding comes too late for the hero to change his predicament. It is in essence the hero's tragic awakening. This element applies to Meursault, who once he becomes conscious, also becomes aware of his complicity. Meursault's consciousness is also the impetus to his awareness of his essential condition, that of absurdity.

The concept of the absurd is a philosophical idea central to Camus' thought. For Camus the absurd is a tragic conflict between man's desire for meaning and the indifferent silence of the universe to that desire. Man seeks order and purpose and at every step he is denied. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus clarifies his definition of the absurd concluding that neither man himself nor

the world around him are absurd but that it is the interaction between man and the world around him. “The absurd is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation” (30). Man’s alienation emerges out of this realization of the absurd. Sisyphus’ fate is tragic the moment he becomes aware of it. His fate, Camus writes, “is the price that must be paid for the passions of the earth” (*Myth of Sisyphus* 120).

The Stranger gives us an insular view of man in an absurd universe. Man, aware of his absurd existence, devolves into nihilism without values to connect with. There is only one requirement for the absurd man and that is that he must live in full awareness of the absurdity of his existence. This ordinary confrontation between man in search of meaning and an indifferent universe sets into motion a crisis. It is a crisis, Camus argues, that modernity, having exiled what the Greeks stood for, is largely unequipped to confront (148).

While Nietzsche’s views on pessimism and tension are largely confirmed in Camus’ own view of tragedy, one major division between the two thinkers is the response to the absurd. For Nietzsche, the response to the absurd is illusion. For Camus the response is recognition, solidarity and rebellion. Nietzsche, Sefler argues, sees illusion through art as the catalyst to an “assuagement of man’s sufferings” (419). Art has the power to direct man away from the feeling of the absurd. In order to withstand the miseries of life man must turn to beauty even if it is an illusion. This for Camus, is a surrender to the absurd. Instead the absurd man must face his condition and find within his revolt against the absurd his source of meaning. The function of art as a shroud to prevent man from the horrors of modernity is only a temporary illusion, one that the absurd man can see through.

Sefler argues that Camus’ rejection of art as an opiate for man’s reality makes his world more severe than that of Nietzsche. He writes that Nietzsche’s world “contains within its bounds

means of sedation to calm man momentarily in his existential situation" (419). The Nietzschean man sees no inherent value or meaning in the world and thus the illusion is a source of meaning. The Nietzschean hope is not that man can find true meaning, there is none, but as Sefler writes "a hope-giving awareness that, if needed, a means exists to help endure life, to alleviate its extreme hardships" (419). For Camus, man needs to confront the absurd in order to rebel. Art that tranquilizes man ultimately negates the possibility of rebellion and "culminates in forced optimism" (Camus, *Resistance* 263).

CHAPTER 4

MEURSAULT'S SOLAR TRAGEDY

The most common view amongst readers and many academics is that *The Stranger* is a modernist text that dives into the concurrent themes of meaningless and nihilism. Meursault is called an existentialist, a sociopath and a modern hero. He is, as Camus tells us, the only Christ we deserve (*Lyrical Essays* 337). This Camus argues, is because Meursault refuses to lie and accepts death for the sake of truth (336). Except as we learn throughout the novel, Meursault lies all the time. He lies to protect Raymond from the police and lies to Marie. What he does not do however is lie to himself or lie to make others feel better. He refuses to lie to better himself and he refuses to lie about feelings he doesn't have. He is unable to hide his indifference to his mother's death for this reason. The prosecutor at his trial equates this indifference to matricide and the charge he is on trial for is considered by the magistrate to be worse than patricide. But it is the sun, the reason Meursault gives for committing the crime, that creates the tension and moves him to his violent act.

The Stranger revolves around three deaths: The mother, the Arab and Meursault himself, although being the narrator of the story he does not die but is sentenced to death. However, the tension in the novel is not between Meursault or any one individual, but rather is between Meursault and the relentless Mediterranean sun. The antagonism of the sun starts at the beginning of the novel on the day of his mother's funeral when Meursault is met by the "blazing hot sun" and climaxes with the murder of the Arab on the beach (Camus, *The Stranger* 2). However, the sun only mildly relents and continues to be an aggressive presence stalking Meursault throughout the trial and even during his imprisonment.

The sun for Meursault is a source of discomfort that is only moderated when combined with the sea. A swim in the ocean and its "pleasant salty tang" saves Meursault from the "mottled red power of the sun" (Camus, *The Stranger* 14). In the ocean with Marie, their bodies synchronized in swim, the cold water neutralizes the sun's aggressiveness. "I had the whole sky in my eyes and it was blue and gold" (23). Once out of the water and away from Marie the sun's aggression returns. The light is "almost vertical and the glare from the water seared one's eyes" (66). During the afternoon on the beach with Raymond moments before the first confrontation with the Arab men, Meursault describes the sun as "splintering into flakes of fire on the sand and sea" (70). As the sun becomes more and more aggressive, Meursault fails to see the potential crisis. This lack of awareness, Robert Solomon writes, is because of Meursault's "inability to reach a level of consciousness where truth and falsity can be articulated" (144). He does not see the rising aggression of the sun because he cannot look for it beyond his carnal appetite.

After the encounter where Raymond, having assaulted the Arab, is stabbed in the melee, the men return to the bungalow where Meursault is tasked with informing the women that the others have made their way to get medical help. But instead, he stares at the sea "under the flood of blinding light falling from the sky" and is unable to move (Camus, *The Stranger* 73). When the moment for solidarity presents itself, Meursault is paralyzed to act, turns his back to the others and returns to the beach alone summoned by the red glare "as far as the eye could reach" (73). Still unaware of the sun's calculated antagonism, he sequesters himself under its glare and is summoned back to the site of the initial confrontation.

Once on the beach it is the cold clear stream behind the rock that now occupies Meursault's mind, but he finds the Arab "shaded by the rock while the sun beats down on his body" (Camus, *The Stranger* 74). The sun points the way for Meursault and after a feeble

attempt to fend it off he acquiesces to its demands and succumbs to the "dark befuddlement it was pouring into" him (73). He becomes like an insect caught in a fly trap, unable to wiggle free and unable to comprehend the perplexity of the apparatus that restrains him. He no longer sees the Arab as a man but as a "blurred dark form wobbling in a heat haze" (74). He is blinded by the sun that shines off the Arab's knife. The blade sears his eyelashes and gouges his eyeballs, an allusion to Oedipus, who also looked upon the sun one final time before gouging out his own eyes (Sophocles 1185). He thinks momentarily that all he has to do is turn around and walk away but the "whole beach pulsing with heat" presses on his back and he becomes blinded "beneath a veil of brine and tears" (75).

The sea, which had been Meursault's sanctuary, is devoured by the sun which turns the water to "molten steel" and now without the sea as his ally Meursault can no longer turn back (Camus, *The Stranger* 74). The sun's aggression intensifies, and Meursault is urged into a violent act. His whole being becomes an apparatus of the sun, a "steel spring" waiting to be given its orders and moments later it is set into motion as, "the trigger gave, and the smooth underbelly of the butt" jogs his palm (76). Four successive shots finished the sun's bidding and once Meursault had shaken off "the clinging veil of light" he becomes keenly aware of the gravity of the crime (76). Not just that murder was committed but that he "shattered the balance of the day" (76).

It is the following summer when Meursault's trial begins. It is a day of brilliant sunshine and he is assured by his lawyer that his case will take no more than three days because of a parricide case on the docket. It is from this point on where the classical Greek tragedy of *Oedipus the King* intertexts much of the second half of the novel. Camus, who was well versed in the story of Oedipus, contextualizes Meursault's dilemma within this same framework. Meursault the sensualist that should be protected by the sun oversteps a boundary and is struck

down. His fate is tragic because his very strength, his relationship with nature, has become his tragic flaw.

We learn very little of Meursault's past. He hints that there was a time in his life when he did not have a sense of the absurd. This lack of a past is foreboding for Meursault when contextualizing his situation within Greek myth considering that in ancient Greece a man without a past was a man without a future. Oedipus leaves Corinth to escape his own fate and believes himself to be a stranger to Thebes even though he isn't. Like Meursault, Oedipus' life is defined by a lack of belonging and also like Oedipus, his fate is his own to collect on. Oedipus, having learned that the oracle prophecies that he will kill his father and marry his mother, leaves Corinth thinking that he has escaped both. What ties Meursault to the Oedipus myth is that his fate is also unavoidable. Like Oedipus, who refuses to heed the words of Tiresias, Meursault is blind to the rules of society, and ultimately to the sun's unforgiving and calculated aggression.

The blind being the only ones who can truly see what is right in front of them is a common theme in Greek tragedy. Tiresias, the blind oracle, says to Oedipus "but I say that you, with both your eyes, are blind" (Sophocles 400-401). It is a remark that could easily be uttered to Meursault, whose blinding by the sun is a metaphor for what he is truly blinded by, the rules of society. But Oedipus dismisses Tiresias and evokes the sun in doing so. "You child of endless night! You cannot hurt me or any other man who sees the sun" (421). The sun God Apollo protects Oedipus, or so he thinks, but it is Apollo who eventually sends the plague to Thebes setting in motion Oedipus' blinding and exile. After blinding himself with his mother's brooch Oedipus gains the knowledge to see what was in front of him all along. Just as Tiresias warns Oedipus of his fate, nature had also been warning Meursault. "A sort of slow, persistent breeze

had been blowing toward me, all my life long, from the years that were to come" (Camus, *The Stranger* 152). Like Oedipus, Meursault only becomes conscious of the truth once he is blinded.

By using parricide as a subplot Camus is contextualizing the work within Greek tragedy where familial murder was a common occurrence. Camus likely would have been familiar not only with the theme of familial murder in tragedy but also of parricide's role in Greek creation myth. In these early myths, first recorded in Hesiod's *Theogony*, Cronus kills his father Uranus out of jealousy over his power as ruler of the universe and is then subsequently overthrown by Zeus and imprisoned in Tartarus. What emerged out of these myths began a pattern of familial violence that was often portrayed in Greek drama. Oedipus kills his father (unknowingly); Clytemnestra kills her husband; Agave having been driven mad by Dionysus, kills her son believing him to be a lion, only to realize the horror of her deed afterwards (Hall 3). The Greeks knew moderation, but they also knew the lingering cultural impact of such psychological torture.

That parricide was such a common theme in tragedy however likely has a simpler explanation. The killing of the father (or oldest son) whether intentional or not was a fundamental threat to Greek society because of how much Greek culture relied on patrilineal inheritance. It would have been something Greek audiences were keenly aware of and held anxieties about. And because Greek tragedy, if we are to believe Aristotle, included amongst its cathartic elements, the purging of the audience's fears and pity, the inclusion of this real fear would have been of cultural benefit. The link to *The Stranger* is not a terribly elaborate one. Just as ancient Greek society could not tolerate disrupting paternal inheritance, modern society cannot tolerate Meursault, a passive social rebel that refuses to play the game.

Oedipus concludes after reflecting on his life that all is well. This comment by Oedipus is sacred for Camus because "it echoes in the wild and limited universe of man. It teaches that all is

not, has not been, exhausted" (Camus, *Myth* 122). Oedipus' relentless search for truth leads him to madness. Meursault's search for truth leads him to commit murder. Both tragic heroes stand "face to face with the irrational" (Camus, *Myth* 28). Meursault ultimately finds happiness once he confronts existence in an honest and truthful way, yet he remains tragic. Srigley writes that the absurd man, like Oedipus, is a tragic figure and that his "tragedy lies precisely in his lucid willingness to face both of these aspects of life without sophisticatedly conjuring away either of them, and without giving way to the temptation to condemn the whole of reality or any of its dimensions" (*Albert Camus' Critique of Modernity* 115). The absurd man does not count on another life to be freed from his condition. He must find happiness in this one.

Haskell Block writes that Meursault's tragedy is that he "dies unreconciled with his fellow man sharing their essential condition yet unwilling to consider any bond that may arise out of their common destiny" (367). His only bond with others is to be implicated in their falseness and accept the same abstract ideas that distract them from the absurd. He is blind to the possibility of solidarity. He returns to the rock, not with his companions, but to confront the Arab alone because fellowship with man is alien to him. He becomes friends with Raymond not out of any need to bond with fellow man but because he believes that being friends with other people is what he is supposed to do. He is ignorant to the rules of society beyond what impacts him in the moment. It is not until Meursault is condemned and imprisoned that he becomes conscious and ultimately finds happiness.

Robert Meagher divides *The Stranger* into two parts: natural happiness and conscious happiness and writes that Camus' creation of Meursault "brings all the strange excitement of discovering a fragment of some ancient, misplaced treasure" (42). Meursault's natural happiness is his ignorance to society's rules and his love of sun and sea. He absorbs sensual pleasures and

thrives off the immediacy of his experience, yet he does not understand human connections. He is what Meagher calls, a "living mindless rock" and a "human beast, innocent and untamed" (41). He moves from one sensual moment to the next, bathing in the sun, feeling the cool ocean and the soft touch of his girlfriend Marie. Yet when moments call for human connection, he is unable to genuinely recall the emotion needed. Meursault's conscious happiness emerges once he is a condemned man. It is then that he begins to have feelings and emotions that in Part I he was devoid of. He longs for simple pleasures such as the warm smells of summer and the sky in the evening. He begins to mark the summer evening by spying through his cell window the "soft golden glow spreading across the sky" (Camus, *The Stranger* 144). In this conscious state he develops a passion for life, a hatred of death and an awareness of his past life.

In Meursault's conversation with the priest he wears the mask of Sisyphus. Now completely aware and conscious of his condition, he firmly rejects transcendence and his solitary rebellion is complete. It is here where we approach myth as Meursault merges with Sisyphus and the sensuality of life is replaced with a certainty of death. Seized with a desire to return to the sea he can only watch the passing of birds and the drifting of clouds from his prison cell. His alienation and estrangement from society is now combined with physical exile. He questions the finality of his sentence, how a man condemned to a certain death has no escape. "I came to the conclusion that what was wrong about the guillotine was that the condemned man had no chance at all" (Camus, *The Stranger* 139). He laments that it is in the condemned man's best interest that the execution goes off without a hitch. But that this reality requires the condemned man to "collaborate mentally" with the execution (139).

Like Oedipus, Meursault cannot escape his fate, but unlike Oedipus his fate is not a consequence of his ambition, but rather, is the result of his passiveness and his excessive love of

sun and sea. This excessive sensualism combined with his failure to become conscious ultimately blinds him from recognizing the limit. He becomes a victim of his own passivity and indifference. Meursault, Solomon argues, “appears to be a Newtonian victim of the reaction of the revolver” as much as “the unnamed, undescribed victim is of the action of the bullet” (152). His tragedy is that just like his tragic forefathers, his situation is immune to resolution.

CHAPTER 5

THE PLAGUE AND PROMETHEAN REBELLION

The Plague chronicles the effects of a contagion on the coastal Algerian city of Oran and how its inhabitants deal with the resulting separation, exile and suffering. The consensus analysis is that *The Plague* is an allegory for Nazi occupation of France during World War II. In a broader sense it is considered an allegory against all forms of totalitarianism. But at its heart it is a tale about how exile, suffering and how a confrontation against an indifferent evil is the impetus to solidarity, rebellion and meaning. For Camus, rebellion is the answer to man's absurd predicament, and it is through rebellion that he finds value. The symbol Camus has chosen for this rebellion is the Greek myth of Prometheus, whom he calls the first rebel. Prometheus for Camus is not just a symbol for humanity, he is the "hero who loved men enough to give them fire and liberty" and the model for greatness for contemporary man (*Lyrical Essays* 138).

Camus' interest in Prometheus actually predates his writings on Sisyphus. In 1937 he adapted Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* for his own theatre company, the Theatre du travail (Zaretsky 57). In 1947, two years after World War II and the same year of the publication of *The Plague*, Camus wrote an essay in the pages of the journal *Palimurgre* titled "Prometheus in the Underworld." In the essay, Camus asks what Prometheus, who gave strength to the "great cry of human revolt," means to man today (*Lyrical Essays* 138). Discouraged by modernity's excessive impulses, Camus argues that if Prometheus were to return that modern man would nail him to his rock "in the name of the very humanism he was first to symbolize" (139). Modern man, Camus writes, "rebels through his machines" not his art and equates technology with progress "holding art and what art implies as an obstacle and a symbol of slavery" (138). Camus, who detested the Nietzschean view of art as a shroud to protect man from a reality he must confront and rebel

against, saw in modern man an impulse to view technology as this shroud. “Modern man, no longer drawn into the allure of art and beauty only “needs and cares for only technology” (139).

Camus’ source for the Prometheus myth is Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* which itself is a reconstruction from Hesiodic origins (Conacher 14). Aeschylus takes a relatively minor figure from Hesiod and “re-constructs him as a rebel against Zeus’ authority” (10). However, in the Theogony, the main purpose of the story of Prometheus is to glorify Zeus (11). Zeus sees through Prometheus’ flesh and bones trick and chooses the inferior offering in order to punish him. Hesiod’s Prometheus is a fast-talking Titan, a rogue who repeatedly deceives Zeus and gives fire to man as a means to goad Zeus rather than as a humanist endeavor. With Aeschylus’ adaptation of the myth the trickster from Hesiodic origins is gone and in his place is a Prometheus that is more humanist than swindler. The Prometheus of Aeschylus is a rebel but unlike the biblical Cain who rebels against all of creation, this Prometheus rebels strictly against Zeus and for a very specific reason, to return fire to man. “It is a question settling a particular account of a dispute about what is good, and not a universal struggle between good and evil” (Camus, *The Rebel* 27). In Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound*, Prometheus is a symbol for humanity and a beacon of hope for mankind (Conacher 13). No longer juxtaposed against the infallibility of Zeus, the Prometheus of Aeschylus is imbued with a humanist spirit that undoubtedly appealed to Camus for reasons that go beyond the limits of Aeschylus’ adaption.

For Prometheus’ rebellion against Zeus he is chained to a rock in the Caucasus where he is tormented daily by an eagle that chews on his liver, which regenerates by the next morning. His suffering is for all eternity, or so we are told, and for this suffering the myth of Prometheus as a symbol for humanity is born. Yet as Camus notes in *The Rebel*, by the third play in the trilogy, *Prometheus the Firebringer*, Prometheus is pardoned. This for Camus is further evidence

of the Greek ethos of moderation. To Camus the ancient Greeks were not vindictive. “In their most audacious flights they always remain faithful to the idea of moderation” (*The Rebel* 27). This adherence to balance, Camus argues, is an essential conflict between the ancient world and modernity, the latter of which he calls “the daughter of excess” (*Lyrical Essays* 149).

Prometheus exhibits “the most perfect myth of intelligence in revolt” (Camus, *The Rebel* 26). His refusal to repent and his awareness of the depths of his rebellion make him the existential rebel. He stays within the limits of his rebellion. For man to exist, Camus writes, “man must rebel, but rebellion must respect the limits it discovers in itself—a limit where minds meet and, in meeting, begin to exist” (22). Prometheus’ rebellion against Zeus respects these limits. “For the Greeks authentic revolts were distinguishable from illegitimate ones on the basis of moderation” (Eubanks and Petrakis 310). *Prometheus Bound* ends with Prometheus chained to a rock refusing to submit to Zeus. By associating Prometheus with *The Plague*, Camus is reminding us that the same rebellious spirit that began with Prometheus chained to the rock exists in all men. In *The Plague* it is manifested in collective rebellion against an unjust universe. The inhabitants of Oran, like Prometheus, rebel against injustice in the name of humanist values.

What links Prometheus to Oran is not just rebellion but the harsh physical landscape that each endure. *Prometheus Bound’s* prologue begins by setting the landscape: “The earth’s most distant stretch we come, to this Scythian waste, unmanned and desolate” (Aeschylus 1-2 [1931]). This distant stretch is reminiscent of the city of Oran, exiled along the Algeria sea, feasted on not by an eagle, but by a contagious pestilence. The city held captive by an all-seeing sun looks to Prometheus and his cosmic exile for inspiration. This inspiration comes in the form of a new humanism based on an inherent human need to fulfill values of justice and dignity. Prometheus’ rebellion against Zeus in the name of humanist values is, for Camus, a myth worth fighting for.

Prometheus, with divine understanding and human physical boundaries is keenly aware of the depths of his torment. The same cannot be said for the inhabitants of Oran, who in the beginning remain creatures of habit as the plague begins to consume the city. That the people of Oran are so habitual is not without purpose. For Camus, if habits and rituals can distract man from a plague then such habits can surely distract man from his absurd condition. Oran's inhabitants fall in line and adapt to the suffering but, "cease to feel its sting" because the suffering becomes habitual (Camus, *The Plague* 181). Distracted from his absurd condition the creature of habit lives by his hopes and ambitions. Yet for Camus, hope becomes an irrelevant desire because once man relies on hope he has resigned himself to a predestination that he no longer has any control over. Henri Peyre writes that Camus "revolts against hope indicting it as a form of resignation, robbing man of the energies he needs" (23). However, it is not hope that Camus necessarily rejects. It is hope as a virtue in the Christian sense. To Camus, this kind of hope robs man of what he needs for his revolt. "Hope undermines the courage needed by men to cope with all too real ills here and now" (24). Prometheus does not hope while he is chained to his rock. He rebels against the cosmic injustice and stands up for humanist values. Likewise, Dr. Rieux does not hope for the plague to go away, he recognizes its utter indifference and ignites first a solitary rebellion, then a collective one.

Dr. Rieux's heroism is not rooted in abstract concepts such as hope, but in basic decency. To continue to do one's job in the face of death, for Camus, is an act of heroism. He rebels against the injustice of the plague because, "a fight must be put up" (Camus, *The Plague* 122). To Dr. Rieux, man must not only be capable of great deeds, but he must also be capable of great love. "Man is an idea, and a previous small idea, once he turns his back on love" (162). His revolt is a means to uphold humanist values. Rather than frame the struggle against the plague as

a fight of good versus evil, Dr. Rieux had "deliberately taken the victims side and tried to share with his fellow citizens the only certitudes they had in common: love, exile and suffering" (299). The Camusian hero first must free himself from abstraction and only then can solidarity with others be possible.

Dr. Rieux is the first to see the plague as a random evil and ignites the fuse of rebellion. Revolt, Camus writes in *The Rebel*, is a response to" the spectacle of irrationality, confronted with an unjust and incomprehensible condition" (10). This first gesture of rebellion begins with the individual as a response to the absurd and evolves into solidarity. This sharing of a common suffering is an essential element of Camus' humanistic revolt. In *The Rebel* Camus describes this movement from despair to revolt:

> In absurdist experience, suffering is individual. But from the moment that a movement of rebellion begins, suffering is seen as a collective experience—as the experience of everyone. Therefore, the first step for a mind overwhelmed by the strangeness of things is to realize that this feeling of strangeness is shared with all men and that the entire human race suffers from the division between itself and the rest of the world. (22)

As the plague begins to affect them all, the people of Oran are united by a shared common suffering and exile. Their separation and exile become an affliction more damaging than the plague itself. "Their tragic predicament lies," as Williams argues, "in the common condition of despair" (183). The inhabitants share an "ache of separation" from loved ones "that suddenly became a feeling in which all shared alike and—together with fear—the greatest affliction of the long period of exile that lay ahead" (Camus, *The Plague* 67). Dr. Rieux, whose wife is being treated at a sanitarium in a city outside of Oran, feels the separation, yet remains determined in

his fight. He keeps the fight going against the pestilence demonstrating that there are values worth fighting for. For Camus, these values of dignity and solidarity with humanity are Promethean in origin. “What’s true of all the evils in the world is true of plague as well. It helps men to rise above themselves” (125). For Dr. Rieux, this common condition is both a blessing and a curse. While it strengthens the bond between the people of Oran it also devolves into habitual despair, which for Dr. Rieux is worse than despair itself.

Irene Finel-Honigman writes that “Oran is the mythic archetype of death, exile and isolation” (78). As the pestilence grows it becomes a city that is a “living entity … that dictates the habits and concerns of its population” (77). Inside its gate, “nature is denied and forgotten” and the city becomes a “living organism,” which acts collectively against its inhabitants (77). It becomes, as Dr. Rieux describes, “a defunct city in which plague, stone, and darkness had effectively silenced every voice” (Camus, *The Plague* 172). As Finel-Honigman argues, in Camus’ fiction “the city imposes its own personality and attributes upon its inhabitants” (76). Oran, the narrator tells us, is a city without intimations whose people fritter away their time at cafes and card tables loving only in the modern sense (Camus, *The Plague* 5). The plague forces an inactivity on them, limiting their movements and “throwing them, day after day, on the illusive solace of their memories” (71). Bound to the same streets and exiled by stone and darkness the city effectively symbolizes the steel chains binding Prometheus to his rock.

For Camus, friendships among men serve as a special kind of love that is necessary for solidarity. Such friendships Ohayon argues give “substance and direction to the Camusian will to exist” (192). Without faith in God there is faith in fellow man. Tarrou and Dr. Rieux have what Thomas Merton calls a comradeship “with a certain purity because it is based on the renunciation of all illusions, all misleading ideas, all deceptive and hypocritical social forms” (9). The love

between Tarrou and Dr. Rieux emerges out of a shared humanism that is rooted in its defiance against the evils of suffering. Man suffers but his rebellion against the suffering gives meaning to his existence. This concept of suffering being the impetus to truth has its origins in Greek tragedy. The chorus in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* warns us that "we must suffer, suffer into truth" (*The Oresteia* 109). These truths are often painful to confront. For Oedipus it is the truth that he has fulfilled a fate he thought he had avoided. The truth that Dr. Rieux must confront, by first witnessing the torturous death of a child and then the death of Tarrou, is whether knowledge is a price worth paying for suffering.

The chorus in Antigone reveals the unavoidable fate for all men. "From suffering that has been decreed / no man will ever find escape" (Sophocles 1335-36). That man cannot deny his fate and must accept his suffering is for Camus the path to solidarity. It is not just solidarity with fellow man that assuages suffering, it is man's bond with nature where beauty and despair converge. This differs from the Christian concept of suffering, which is expressed in *The Plague* by Father Paneloux, who in his first sermon since the start of the contagion lays blame on the inhabitants of Oran themselves. "Calamity has come to you, my brethren, and, my brethren, you deserved it" (Camus, *The Plague* 94). For Paneloux, the people of Oran have neglected their duty not to men, but to God. Their escape from suffering can only be assuaged by accepting that it is God's purpose. For Camus, the Christian concept of suffering does not bring men closer to each other but rather is an illusion that presents abstraction in the guise of hope. The suffering that Dr. Rieux witnesses is an impetus to solidarity but it is also corrupting to man and nature. As the loss of life begins to mount, Dr. Rieux walks out on to the hospital balcony as night falls over Oran but he does not find his usual comfort in the landscape. "That first hour of darkness which in the past had always had a special charm for Rieux—seemed today charged with menace, because of

all he knew" (Camus, *The Plague* 58). For Camus, suffering ultimately corrupts everything, disconnecting man from himself and from his harmony with nature.

In *The Plague* the sea represents both renewal and exile. It is also a vessel for solidarity for Dr. Rieux and Tarrou who go for a swim, turning their back on the ravaged city. Exiled from the city and from fellow man, Camus' heroes, just as Camus himself did, always find a bond with nature. The swim out to sea reminds us that where there is more than one person there is hope for solidarity. The sea provides access to this essential communion and is a source of renewal. Dr. Rieux and Tarrou become "isolated from the world" and "free of town and plague" (Camus, *The Plague* 256). However, they are not free from danger, finding themselves caught in an ice cold current, "a trap the sea had sprung on them" (257). This trap has mythic implications as Camus anthropomorphizes the sea, giving it the same despotic fury as the plague and we recall Prometheus chained to his rock surrounded by "a tempestuous sea of baneful griefs" (Aeschylus 52 [1866]). By giving the sea such a temperament Camus implies that the sea is more than just indifferent to suffering. It, like the sun, can be disturbed when the balance is disrupted.

Once back on land while staring into the sea Dr. Rieux recalls the story by Lucretius about the plague in Athens and how the dead were buried along the seashore (Camus, *The Plague* 40). That Camus links Oran to Athens is interesting. For one both are port towns however the similarities stop there. The narrator of the plague, who we later learn is Dr. Rieux himself tells us that Oran "let us admit, is ugly" filled with "smug placid air" and inhabitants who are driven by nothing more than "doing commerce" (4). It is a far cry from the birthplace of genius and creativity that was fifth century BC Athens. Yet by classical accounts the plague of Athens had an effect on the inhabitants that brought out the worst in them. According to Thucydides, "the catastrophe was so overwhelming that men, not knowing what would happen next to them,

became indifferent to every rule of religion or law" (Thucydides, 51-53). Rather than bonding through solidarity like the inhabitants of Oran, the people of Athens gave in to their worst nihilist impulses.

In ancient Greek literature the sea is seen as both a source of nourishment and a symbol of danger. In Homeric epic it is both a mother figure and a symbol of man's weakness compared to the Gods. Homer calls the sea, "the bright sea, the divine sea" while also referring to it as "fruitless, unharvested" (Homer, *Iliad* 1.141). The Odyssey begins by describing the trials that Odysseus went through at sea. "Many pains he suffered, heartsick on the open sea" (Homer, 1.5). Marie-Claire Beaulieu writes that the sea in Greek literature is "a space of contradictions where the potential discovery, exchange and communication is counterbalanced by an equal potential for eternal wandering and death" (25). Camus' use of the sea stays within this pattern at one moment symbolizing renewal and solidarity while without warning becoming dangerous and tempestuous.

In Greek tragedy, the sun takes a more prominent role, perhaps because the sun, which would shine on the Athens stage on summer days, was such a constant presence. As Edith Hall notes, Greek heroes "uttered their laments under the sun which beat down upon them and whose light they were about to leave forever" (3). Sunlight, writes Hall, was "one of the main poetic images denoting the boundary dividing life from death" (3). Whether or not the hero in tragedy died he lived with an "unusually close communion with the dead" (3). Ajax, inflicted with momentary madness and guilt, impales himself on his own sword. But before doing so he calls out to the sun to bear witness to his final act (2). Before singing her funeral lament, Antigone takes one last look at the sun before leaving the stage to die (2). That the sun plays such a central role in Greek tragedy was not lost on Camus, whose heroes suffer under the same Mediterranean

sun. In both cases the sun becomes all-knowing and all seeing. Thus, in the case of Greek tragedy and in Camus the sun is both a constant source of heat and also a witness to suffering.

That Camus uses nature to induce suffering in his heroes also follows a similar pattern from Greek tragedy. *The Plague* shares with Greek tragedy a representation of suffering that is both physical and psychological. For the carriers of the disease the suffering manifests in physical ways. For those not yet infected, the suffering is psychological both in bearing witness to others suffering and knowing that in all likelihood that they too will be next. *The Plague* is accompanied by sustained heat and it is this heat that prolongs suffering. The first breath of free air comes from the sea and signals the end of the plague. The sea, fierce one moment, embodies the nurturing qualities of the mother figure archetype the next.

This unleashing of nature on man has its origins in the Pandora myth. Camus references the myth in *The Myth of Sisyphus* writing that, "from Pandora's box, where all the ills of humanity swarmed, the Greeks drew out hope after all the others, as the most dreadful of all. I know no more stirring symbol; for contrary to the general belief, hope equals resignation. And to live is not to resign oneself" (153). Camus, like Nietzsche, draws from the Hesiodic Pandora, in which according to myth, Zeus, angry that Prometheus gave man fire, punishes man by sending him Pandora. Pandora, having succumbed to curiosity, opens the jar given to her by Zeus, thus unleashing on nature the power to turn on itself and on man. It is unclear if Camus intends to derive all of man's struggle with nature from the Pandora myth or if his reason for referencing it is to highlight Zeus' own infallibility. However, the latter would fit into the narrative that even the Gods in Greek myth were tricksters.

The sea and the sun are recurrent features in Camus' landscape, what Walter A. Strauss calls, Camus' paradise (268). But while Camus' tragic heroes are oppressed by nature, they

never turn their backs on the sun or the sea. Like Camus himself, they are in every sense most alive when surrounded by nature and the union of sun and sea. That Camus turns to nature to allay man's anxieties recalls the Nietzschean idea of illusion as an antidote to the human condition. However, Camus does not deny one truth while hiding behind another. The absurd man simultaneously rebels against his essential condition while also embracing the sensual elements of life. As Srigley notes, without nature as a guide man becomes susceptible to being manipulated by history and politics (*Camus' Critique of Modernity* 20). Camus' use of nature as both a nurturer and aggressor, Alice Kaplan argues, captures the "essential gesture in Camus, a brute confrontation between man and the physical world and separates Camus from Sartre, whose "ideas were rooted in the social world, in the confrontation of self and other" (110). This distinction connects Camus with the ancient Greeks who also saw man's relationship with the physical world as both alluring and precarious.

The Plague is an affirmation of collective solidarity against injustice. Prometheus' "excessive love for humankind" and his defiance against Zeus crosses a limit. But it is a limit that must be crossed in the name of humanist values. By connecting Prometheus to Oran, Camus is arguing that rebellion is a universal condition. Prometheus, having been chained to his rock addresses the "all seeing circle of the sun" to bear witness to his suffering (Aeschylus 88-92 [1866]). The people of Oran also bear witness, but it is witness to each other in the face of indiscriminate evil and their collective struggle is an affirmation of what exists in all men, their rebellion.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

In 1955 Camus was optimistic that tragedy would make a resurgence. “Our age is extremely interesting, that is to say, it is tragic” (*Lyrical Essays* 295). This tragic age, like the tragic ages that preceded it stands at a “dangerous turning point in the history of civilizations” (295). Modernity, Camus argues, has in common with ancient Greece a people who are “heavy with both glory and with menace” (295). Modern man however gives deference to technology and denies the beauty necessary for tragic expression. By equating progress with technology and favoring excess over moderation, man has “refashioned a hostile destiny with the very weapons it used to reject fatality” (306). Camus, like other artists of his generation, was writing about a world that had used the instruments of technology to destructive and diabolical ends.

Camus was confident that the cultural landscape for tragedy would return once again, that a “tragic sensibility is taking shape in our lives and it will flourish and find its expression” *(Lyrical Essays* 306). However, he was mistaken that the individualism that culturally emerged during the twentieth century was a trend that would soon subside and make way for collective modes of tragic expression. “Our only reason for hope is that individualism is visibly changing today and that beneath the pressures of history, little by little the individual is recognizing his limits” (306). Yet Camus was skeptical that this would come to fruition and remained acutely aware that at any moment the pendulum could swing in the opposite direction and Cartesian scientific reason “would proclaim the rights of the individual and empty the stage” (306). Ultimately the world that modernity provides is tragic, but it lacks the cultural vessels to cultivate tragic art and thus man succumbs to the Nietzschean illusion that technology offers.

What Camus could not envision was that the second half of the twentieth century would cement the era as the century of the individual setting up the twenty-first-century iGeneration. Psychological ideas would blur the distinction between art, democracy and consumerism giving birth to a Camusian nightmare, a society that is both rational and excessive. This however would not have been all that surprising to Camus, who proclaimed that modern man was essentially trapped in a paradox, living in a tragic age but denied tragic art. This he lays at the feet of eighteenth-century Cartesian rationalism, arguing, that "the world that the eighteenth-century individual thought he could conquer and transform by reason and science has in fact taken shape, but it's a monstrous one" (Camus, *Lyrical Essays* 306). This explains why he was so concerned with prescriptions for modernity's excess. He believed that modernity was on a collision course with nihilism. The solution he offered was a return to classical values that emphasize moderation in all things. This remedy starts with an "admission of ignorance, rejection of fanaticism, the limits of the world and of man, the beloved face, and finally beauty" (153). This, Camus writes, "is where we shall be on the side of the Greeks" (153).

Camus' artistic act of recovery of myth and symbol goes to the heart of much of his literary work. His use of Greek myth goes beyond a simple symbiotic association and is deeply rooted in a common philosophical outlook on existence and man's place in the world. Camus shared with the ancient Greeks a way of looking at the world that was at its foundation a search for the intersection of beauty and despair. Tragedy, for Camus, reaches its highest form in despair (*Lyrical Essays* 148). However, it is not just this despair that links the tragic hero of Camus with his Greek forefathers. It is, in the case of Prometheus, an insistence on the right of man to be happy. The Greeks knew despair, but they also knew that life ultimately was worth living. Camus shares this view. Man's revolt starts as an affirmation of his own humanity in the

face of a destiny(death) which will ultimately crush him but before it does, he will bathe in “the silver armor of the sea” under “the raw blue sky” (65).

Camus saw in the heroes of Greek myth a model for contemporary man. His choice of mythic heroes also highlights his own philosophical evolution. Meursault is Sisyphean in that he is the manifestation of the absurd man, but his tragic fate reveals his Oedipal connections. The blazing Mediterranean sun stalks him, physically blinds him and compels him to violence. His undoing however is not the ambition of Oedipus, but the failure to recognize that his own greatest strength, his sensualism, is also his fatal flaw. He becomes tragic the moment he becomes conscious. His solitary rebellion against his suffering is inherently tragic because it lacks the potential for solidarity. Camus wants us to imagine Meursault happy, like Sisyphus, yet his tragedy goes unresolved. Meursault, like Sisyphus, in the end teaches us that some life is better than no life at all. With *The Plague*, Camus leaves the solitary rebel of *The Stranger* behind. It is an admission that man’s potential can only be fully realized when he is in solidarity with others. The solidarity in *The Plague* reminds us that there are more things to admire in men than to despise. (Camus 308). For Camus, the universe’s indifference to the suffering of man can find no better analogy than Prometheus tied to his rock. That Prometheus refuses to accept freedom on Zeus’ terms is for Camus a model for contemporary man who must confront the excesses of modernity.

Modern man, the renegade son of Greece, has set the world on fire with ideas that are antithetical to the Greek ethos of moderation. Modernity shuns the tragic expression for romanticism and melodrama that celebrates individual heroism because it lacks sacred images to connect to. With no modern sacred images, Camus turns to the world of ancient Greece. This influence of Greek myth however goes beyond Camus’ use of its central figures and involves a

comprehensive use of Greek symbol and images to connect the modern tragic hero with the hero of Aeschylus and Sophocles. It is an attempt to remind us that man's struggle is a universal one that links him to the past and is a template for the future. Modern man, Camus writes, has taken from ancient Greece all "the fruits of its decadence" while "ignoring its essential genius" (*Lyrical Essays* 193). The solution, for Camus, is to reconnect with the essential genius of Greek tragedy as a means to find a cathartic vessel for the alienation and angst that has become a constituent element of modernism.

Camus understood more than anyone of his time that man's innate need for meaning could not go unfulfilled, that a Nietzschean illusion would weaken any potential revolt. He shares with the dramatists of Greek tragedy a way of looking at the world that denies illusion for accuracy and confronts the grim reality of life's finality. Greek tragedy exhibits the complexities and realities of the human condition while also portraying its heroes as fundamentally flawed. The pessimism that runs through the works of Aeschylus and Sophocles and that which Nietzsche found to be at the very heart of tragedy is an integral part of Camus' own absurdism. Dionysian pessimism and absurdism share an impartial way of looking at the world that does not mollify man's essential condition. Instead it is an impetus to his conscious awakening and rebellion.

Camus' tragic humanism emerges out of the confluence of beauty and despair he first found in Greek tragedy and which he would throughout his life connect with the culture surrounding the Mediterranean. For Camus, modernity denies this confluence and instead prays at the altar of technology and efficiency creating a void in the heart of man. Camus juxtaposes Hellenism with modernity to emphasize this void. Modern man must dispossess himself of excess and a tendency to escape to illusion through technology and instead like the protagonists

of tragedy, face down the challenge of a world devoid of inherent meaning. Camus' tragic heroes bare both the anxieties of modernity and a desperate need to revolt against their essential condition. Their struggle teaches us that ultimately the modern rebel, in solidarity with others, is not just an agent willing to confront the absurd, but like his tragic predecessors, he is an affirmer of values. For Camus, the resurrection of myth is also a resurrection of those values. Camus in this sense is a preserver of myth, connecting ancient images to modern heroes, reminding us that our age, like the age of Aeschylus and Sophocles, is also tragic.

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