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Robert Zaretsky, *Albert Camus: Elements of a Life*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2010, x + 181 pp. Notes and index. \$24.95 U.S (cl.) ISBN 978-0-8014-4805-8.

Review by William E. Duvall, Willamette University.

Robert Zaretsky's *Camus* is a humanist, a moralist uncomfortable in that role, an advocate of a politics of dialogue, and a man of integrity and lucidity—a bundle of qualities sorely lacking in our world. But *Camus*, Zaretsky insists, speaks to us and to our present. The book he offers us is neither a full biography nor a critical scholarly work; rather it is, as Jeffrey Isaac notes on the back cover, a personal, thoughtful and keenly perceptive essay about Camus the writer and thinker.

The “elements” of Albert Camus's life that Zaretsky centers on are four: Camus's visit to the Kabylia in 1939, his change of mind to support the commuting of Robert Brasillach's death sentence in 1945, his quarrel and break with Jean-Paul Sartre in 1952, and his agonized silence after 1956 over the French Algerian war. Through these moments, we watch Camus become Camus as moralist, and we sense his passionate discomforts and agonies.

One of the qualities Zaretsky finds most attractive in Camus is his attentiveness, to others and to the world around him. His attentiveness to others yields a need for dialogue in which humans don't just talk but listen to each other. His attentiveness to the world around him results in his profound sense of the beauty of his native Algeria but also in his sense of the absurd as he listens to the silence of the universe when humans demand meaning. Camus the moralist, refusing to capitulate to this silence and absurdity, insists that it is possible to live and act in such a world. The tension he feels as thinker and writer, Zaretsky rightly perceives, emerges as a problem of language, of language's inability to say what is most meaningful. For Zaretsky, Camus's developing work consisted of “words plowing ever closer to the silences at the core of our lives and worlds” (p. 16).

Zaretsky begins the first chapter with Camus as young actor, suggesting that via his work in the theatre, he was creating himself, staging himself. To make his argument and to illuminate Camus's “becoming,” he surrounds Camus with figures like Rousseau and Diderot, Malraux and Orwell, even the Irish playwright, J. M. Synge. For this reader, the presence around Camus of all these folks feels a bit cluttered, and the absence of Nietzsche with his notions of self-creation and “become who you are” is a bit surprising given Camus's relationship to the German thinker. Still as Zaretsky moves Camus through his early exploration of the theater, his confrontation with tuberculosis, his engagement with and rejection of communism, and his writing of a thesis on Augustine and Neo-Platonism, we watch Camus struggling to inhabit his thought (p. 27), and we see the outlines taking shape of the political/moral position Camus will later develop in *The Rebel*, a book which Zaretsky happily seems to take seriously.

The first chapter culminates with the articles Camus wrote for *Alger-Républicain* following his visit to the Kabylia. In these pieces he reveals the utter wretchedness of the people there together with his outrage at the hypocrisy of French colonial policy. Zaretsky's *Camus* was a

believer in the universalism of French republican ideals, but he was also committed to the idea that the enormous gap between those ideals and the practice of French colonial policies toward the Arab and Berber peoples was not insurmountable. Here Zaretsky allows Camus implicitly to speak to contemporary France and the heritage of French colonial attitudes still being lived out. It is hard not to feel that Camus's voice is also directed toward the conduct of the U.S in the world today and its two wars. But neither Zaretsky nor his Camus preaches to us directly; the reader is left to think through implications.

Zaretsky's second chapter is not so tightly focused as the first, I think, but we are nonetheless able to see Camus mature in his political/moral reflections. After laying out a brief background of France's experience of the Second World War, occupation, and resistance, Zaretsky offers a reading of *The Stranger*. He sees Meursault as "other," the sort of character that enables a critique of the society that judges him. But then he stretches this in a way that seems uncomfortable and unnecessary by paralleling Meursault and French Jewry as "other." If this move is not compelling, it does provoke reflection and a desire to argue. Like Camus, Zaretsky's goal seems to be dialogue. Interestingly, when he comments briefly in this same section on the fact that in 1942 Camus was seeking to care for his tuberculosis in the mountain air of the Vivarais not far from the village of Chambon-sur-Lignon, Zaretsky seems unaware of Patrick Henry's recent book on the actions of the people of that village to protect French Jews.[1]

We then follow Camus to *Combat* and on to the post-war purge of collaborators. As he touches on the articles that became the "Letters to a German Friend," Zaretsky points to Camus's growing commitment to human solidarity in the face of his sense of the absurd. The irony here is double: Zaretsky acknowledges the influence of Nietzsche in these letters, and he shows Camus calling, in the name of absolute justice and moral certainty, for vengeance against those who had collaborated with the Germans. But it is Camus's maturation that most interests Zaretsky, as Camus, through his public dialogue with François Mauriac about the death sentence for Robert Brasillach, had the courage to reverse himself and sign a petition seeking to commute Brasillach's sentence. Camus, in Zaretsky's eyes, employed his own notion of "moral imagination" (p. 72) in refusing to participate in the murder of another human.

Initially I was surprised by the absence of comment on *The Plague* as Zaretsky unfolded this second chapter. My thought was that the dialogue in that novel between Rieux and Tarrou about human action and solidarity would have strengthened Zaretsky's tracing of Camus's growing clarity and lucidity about holding a moral position in the face of absurdity. But Zaretsky was way ahead of me. He had saved his reflection on this dialogue for the next chapter as context for the emergence of Camus's philosophy of measure and limits as articulated in *The Rebel*. Then we arrive at the third "element," the break between Sartre and Camus prompted by Camus's essay. Zaretsky sees this break and Camus's agony in terms of tragedy, and to set the tone he invokes Aeschylus's character, Orestes. Even more effective is Zaretsky's parallel between Thucydides's emplotment of the story of Athens and its *hubris* during the Peloponnesian wars and the conclusions Rieux, Tarrou and Camus come to about measure, limits and humility in *The Plague*. All of this pulls chapters two and three together quite nicely and sets the stage for what Zaretsky sees as genuine tragedy, the Sartre-Camus break. After pointing to the irony that Sartre "became" Camus as he emerged in the post-war world as engaged intellectual, though he went well beyond Camus in espousing violence as a means for political change, Zaretsky offers a brief recounting of the attack leveled on *The Rebel* and on Camus in Sartre's journal, *Les Temps modernes*. He acknowledges openly his debt to Ronald Aronson,[2] but makes no mention of David Sprintzen's translations of the Jeanson, Camus and Sartre essays that appeared in the journal.[3] His quotations from the various essays are taken from other secondary sources, for this reader a disconcerting strategy.

The last lines of this chapter on the third “element” lead one to feel pity for a broken Camus, not a very redeeming sentiment. Zaretsky’s Camus seems here to be the moralist defeated, crushed! There is also no comment on Camus’s, *The Fall*, and how that novel reflects Camus’s processing and digestion of the break. This is a significant silence. If Clamence, the novel’s monologist, falls into subjugation, Camus himself makes clear that he never had.

The final “element” is Camus’s self-imposed silence as the war in Algeria developed and his efforts at a civil truce failed. The circumstances make clear the difficulty of living and acting a philosophy of measure, limits and dialogue in a world dominated by absolutes, certainties and violence. *The Rebel*, Zaretsky suggests, had been an essay about “being impolite” (p. 104) and the need to disrupt such absolutes and certainties, and Camus, in the face of the brutal war in Algeria, still could not lie; but he decided that he could really say nothing further. Zaretsky at this point links him nicely to Wittgenstein’s sense of the inability of language to say the most important things. Then in a fitting conclusion to his essay, Zaretsky looks at Camus’s story, “The Guest,” set in Algeria, and reflects on the consistency of Camus’s values—attentiveness, humaneness, integrity. At the heart of Camus’s life and work, for Zaretsky, is that urge to moral imagination that the absurdity of the world demands.

I recently attended the performance of a theatre piece here in Angers, France, a play about the French Algerian war. It was constructed based on the voices of the various participants/victims in that conflict. Interestingly, the voice of the “intellectual” was largely based on Camus and the ideas Zaretsky has emphasized. However, this intellectual was staged suspended in the air, à la Socrates in Aristophanes’s *The Clouds*. This is not Zaretsky’s Camus, removed from the grit of life. Quite the contrary, his Camus was lucidly and confrontationally engaged in and sometimes bruised by the world, and that is why he still speaks so clearly. Zaretsky’s essay shows beautifully how Camus came to be the voice that he was and still is.

NOTES

[1] Patrick Henry, *We Only Know Men: The Rescue of Jews in France During the Holocaust* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2007).

[2] Ronald Aronson, *Camus and Sartre: The Story of a Friendship and the Quarrel That Ended It* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

[3] See David Sprintzen and Adrian Van den Hoven, *Sartre and Camus: A Historic Confrontation* (Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity Books, 2004).

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