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H-France Review Vol. 14 (November 2014), No. 188

Robert Zaretsky, *A Life Worth Living: Albert Camus and the Quest for Meaning*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013. 240 pp. \$22.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-674-72476-1.

Review by Mark Orme, University of Central Lancashire.

2013 saw the centenary of the birth of Albert Camus (1913-1960) and, in France and elsewhere, the author of *L'Étranger*, *La Peste* and *La Chute* is currently enjoying a resurgence of interest and popularity.<sup>[1]</sup> Indeed, Camus's voice is all the more compelling in today's era of global insecurity where the moral sensitivities apparent in his own lifetime are becoming even more of a pressing concern. It is against this interesting background that Robert Zaretsky's new book on Camus appears, making a welcome contribution to studies examining the writer's ongoing relevance in the modern world and its concomitant challenges and questions. This is not Zaretsky's first book on Camus—his volume, *Albert Camus: Elements to a Life* was published by Cornell University Press in 2000—and it is clear that the author is well informed about his subject-matter. In fact, Zaretsky deserves a double accolade in producing an immensely readable and concise book, written in a highly accessible style.

After a suitably contextual "Prologue," in which the author situates Camus's status as "the man whose life stands as witness to a kind of desperate heroism" (p. 6), Zaretsky proceeds to analyse Camus's work through the prism of five key themes: "Absurdity," "Silence," "Measure," "Fidelity," and "Revolt". While it is true that, in choosing this trajectory, Zaretsky is following a well-trodden path which will be very familiar to Camus specialists, the value of Zaretsky's approach lies in its analytical precision, anchored in rich socio-political detail which provides the reader with a useful historical context as the book progresses.

In the first chapter, "Absurdity," Zaretsky begins his analysis with an appreciation of Camus's *cycle absurde*. Describing the key "philosophical" work from this period, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, as "a salvo of impressions, some intimate, others literary, all of them urgent and lucid" (p. 13), the author immediately shines a light on Camus's empirical approach to philosophical inquiry. Throughout, Zaretsky weaves a useful biographical thread into his narrative, enabling the reader to situate Camus's ideas within the context of the writer's own autobiography. "Though young, Camus was a veteran of the absurd," Zaretsky notes—a reference to the challenges faced by Camus, both personal and professional, throughout his formative years. Zaretsky's scrutiny of appropriate secondary material is particularly apposite here, as is the primary material afforded by Camus's personal diaries and correspondence, all of which is well marshaled to provide an insight into the private individual behind the public writer. In this section of the book, Zaretsky's comments on Sisyphus are particularly insightful: in his resolve to highlight the mythological figure as the *héro absurde*, Camus, Zaretsky contends, is inclined to overlook "Sisyphus's ploys and hoaxes, swindles and impostures—all of which loomed so large for the ancient Greeks" (p. 33). Equally noteworthy is Zaretsky's discussion of the response to *Le Mythe* from philosophers such as A. J. Ayer and Thomas Nagel, both of whom identified perceived shortcomings in the essay's philosophical argumentation. In such passages, Zaretsky is a useful arbitrator, guiding the reader through a maze of intellectual hurdles while retaining a somewhat stubborn admiration for his subject.

The notion of silence permeates much of Camus's work, and Zaretsky's analysis of this concept in the second chapter is a particularly strong section of the present volume. Recalling the silence that pervaded the writer's formative years with the figure of the silent mother playing a pivotal role in Camus's thinking and throughout his work in general, Zaretsky skillfully uses this idea to chart the young Albert's intellectual development. Commenting on Camus's early experiences of journalism, when he witnesses the humanitarian effects of colonial injustice, Zaretsky observes how "[h]is earlier perception of silence as a condition crucial to self-understanding is overtaken by the recollection that silence also serves political and ideological ends" (p. 70). This preoccupation in turn ignites Camus's lifelong concern for justice on behalf of those lacking the means to voice their anxieties for themselves; or, as Zaretsky calls them, "the voiceless ones, silenced by administrative fiat and codified violence" (p. 71).

This chapter of the book proceeds to study expressions of silence in Camus's life and work, embracing the intellectual fall-out following the hostile reception of Camus's *L'Homme révolté* and the accompanying split with sometime companion Jean-Paul Sartre; the association of natural silence and moral distress ("silence not only reflected a kind of inhuman majesty but also collaborated in forms of human injustice," Zaretsky observes [p. 76]); the short story "Les Muets", from *L'Exil et le royaume*, which portrays the devastating consequences of silence as a psychological barrier to dignity; and the Algerian War of Independence, where Camus's ensuing silence over the conflict in his homeland overwhelms him both personally and professionally. "In effect," observes Zaretsky, "his position on Algeria had returned to the world of Aeschylean tragedy" (p. 115).

In chapter three, "Measure," Zaretsky concerns himself with what, in his response to Camus's own rebuttal of Francis Jeanson's critical review of *L'Homme révolté*, Sartre perceives to be a rather nebulous concept. [2] Camus's interest in Greek mythology is well known and, here, Zaretsky usefully recalls the writer's fascination with Greek mythological figures such as Prometheus, representing a conduit for exploring Camus's interests in freedom and responsibility, whence the notion of measure, or moderation. Camus's early lyrical essays, with their sensual excess, are also analysed, making way for his journalistic writings which temper such excess with colonial reality.

The theme of "Fidelity" provides the fulcrum for the following chapter. Quoting the philosopher André Comte-Sponville's claim that fidelity is the one virtue that makes the others possible, Zaretsky examines the notion in relation to Camus's wartime journalism, where loyalty to moral principles risked being compromised by the ambiguities of socio-political reality. Of particular interest in this section is the passage acknowledging Camus's enthusiasm for Montaigne, the sixteenth-century writer whose reflections on morality and death find resonance in Camus's *Chroniques algériennes* (1958) and his associated call, beginning in his editorials for *Combat* in the context of the Second World War, for politics to be imbued with morality. As Zaretsky sees it, "Camus was exceptional in remaining faithful to an ethical stance that Montaigne would have recognized" (p. 131). Equally, Camus's fidelity to the mentality of a death penalty abolitionist is comprehensively examined: culminating in the 1957 essay "Reflections sur la Guillotine", Camus's lifelong campaign against capital punishment is one of the writer's moral standards—even though, as Zaretsky rightly chronicles, his public dispute with François Mauriac over the purge trials and executions did shake this conviction to its very foundations.

Zaretsky's final chapter, "Revolt", puts another key Camusian concept under the spotlight. Making reference to Mohamed Bouazizi, the Tunisian grocer who set fire to himself in December 2010 in protest of his perceived unjust treatment at the hands of corrupt leaders, Zaretsky situates the notion of revolt in a contemporary context where an assault on human dignity continues to attract acts of defiance and rebellion. "Mohamed Bouazizi had most probably not read Camus", Zaretsky concedes. "But if he had, would he have disputed the claim that suicide is tantamount to acceptance of the way things are—a gesture of despair?" (p. 149). Zaretsky also trawls through the controversial claims of whether the ends of revolutionary campaigns can ever be used to justify morally ambiguous means—a

key theme of *L'Homme révolté*--and concludes that Camus was a "peculiar sort of revolutionary, less a Proudhonian, or a Marxist, than a moralist" (p. 161).

In the final analysis, Zaretsky's book amounts to a very worthwhile addition to the ongoing debate surrounding Camus's intellectual credentials as the twenty-first century progresses. Sensitive to the claims that Camus may have often "played to the gallery" ("[c]elebrity might have been thrust on him", Zaretsky notes in his Epilogue, "but Camus was not an accidental public intellectual" (p. 185)), Zaretsky concludes that Camus remains a beacon of moral optimism in an era of moral uncertainty. As such, this little book, filled with well-argued content, is highly recommended to all readers who share an interest in the history of ideas and the links between philosophy, morality and politics. Meticulously researched using up-to-date secondary sources and written with useful notes and index (notwithstanding a couple of unfortunate slips in the text when the writer erroneously details the date and place of Camus's death (pp. 88 and 110)), Zaretsky's work provides a useful and timely re-evaluation of a writer wedded to, and torn by, the dilemmas of his--and our--time.

## NOTES

[1] For an overview of Camus's status at the time of his centenary, see Mark Orme, "Camus: Still the Outsider?," *French Studies Bulletin* 129(2013): 85-87.

[2] It is worth recalling the full details of the notorious controversy, following the publication of *L'Homme révolté*, between Camus and *Les Temps modernes*: Francis Jeanson, "Albert Camus ou l'âme révoltée," *Les Temps modernes* 79(1952): 2070-2090; Albert Camus, "Lettre au Directeur des *Temps modernes*," *Les Temps modernes* 82(1952): 317-333; Jean-Paul Sartre, "Réponse à Albert Camus," *Les Temps modernes* 82(1952): 334-353; and Francis Jeanson, "Pour tout vous dire," *Les Temps modernes* 82(1952): 354-383.

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ISSN 1553-9172