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Brent C. Sleasman, ed., *Creating Albert Camus: Foundations and Explorations of his Philosophy of Communication*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2016. xvii + 168 pp. Notes. \$70.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9-781611-478877.

Review by John Krapp, Hofstra University.

Considering his enormous influence on mid- and late twentieth-century philosophy and aesthetics, any scholarly work on Albert Camus published in the twenty-first century deserves serious attention, particularly one that aims to bring so many strands of Camusean criticism into conversation. I come to Brent C. Sleasman's collection with a substantial background in Camus's writing and western intellectual history but slight knowledge of the philosophy of communication; hence my initial interest in *Creating Albert Camus* was to gain a more precise, concrete understanding of a field important enough to justify such a critical enterprise. I note this agenda up front because my assessment of this collection depends as much on it as it does on the many other ways that the essays here collected make contributions of varying merit to our appreciation of Camus's enduring relevance to contemporary culture and the ideologies that inform it.

In his introductory essay, Sleasman notes that the scholars included in *Creating Albert Camus* are committed to a "constructive hermeneutic" (p. viii), one that aims to open and explore possibilities in an artist's work without condemning it for limitations and shortcomings imposed by its historical moment, thus, in effect, moving the work into the future rather than ossifying it in some irremediable past. I found the promise of this methodology exciting, as it matches my general sympathies about how to engage in interpretive practice, and I believe that the contributors to Sleasman's volume achieve this goal with unequivocal success. Sleasman also offers to assist those without background in the philosophy of communication by delineating the fundamental theoretical coordinates of the discipline. This seemed to me less successfully accomplished in the opening pages; upon concluding his introduction, I did not feel that I had any more firm a grasp on what precisely the philosophy of communication is. What makes it distinct from the study of how ideology is produced, gains traction, informs human beings? How does it differ from dialogism and the inter-subjective production of meaning, or from investigating the contingencies of value that issue from speech-acts? What, in short, makes it its own corner of academia? This general lack of definitional clarity on the parameters of the philosophy binding the volume's essays together is, with several exceptions I will indicate below, a consistent feature of the collection. It need not necessarily be judged a flaw, but it does suggest that *Creating Albert Camus* may appeal, at least on one important level, to those readers already in the field, and less to a general audience.

One of the most rewarding qualities of the eight essays that follow Sleasman's introduction is the breadth of information that each contains. This compositional feature nearly assures that any student of Camus will find something interesting in every chapter. While the text is broken into two parts, the first entitled "Foundations of Camus' Philosophy of Communication," and the second "Explorations of Camus' Philosophy of Communication," all of the essays include some component of either intellectual

history or literary analysis or both. Each essay is clearly written. Technical, conceptual language is generally kept to a minimum. There is no oppressive jargon. The essays are also typically divided into sections to make the focus even sharper. All of these aesthetic decisions combine to make reading a pleasure. Moreover, the scholarly apparatus in each is relevant and, at times, quite impressive, providing a strong reminder of Camus's intellectual forebears as well as the reach of his intellectual legacy.

The volume's lead essay in part one belongs to Ronald C. Arnett, who explores how Camus "embraced both monologue and dialogue with existential clarity" (p. 4). Despite a detailed recollection of Camus's biography that relies very heavily on Olivier Todd's excellent *Albert Camus: A Life* (Cambridge, 2000), Arnett produces a thoughtful description of what he calls "existential dialogue," in which he embeds the philosophy of communication by elaborating on the dynamics of "dialogic movements," and he concludes with the succinct, astute observation that "[e]xistential dialogue is a communicative version of Sisyphus in daily action . . . [i]t is performative action that meets the absurdity of existence with a dialogic rebellion that persists...until the end" (p. 20). Following Arnett both chronologically and thematically, Gina L. Ercolini also situates Camus in the climate of existentialism as she recalls his relationship with, and break from, Sartre. There are few relationships as important in the history of philosophy, few that have been as well documented, yet Ercolini offers insights that are fresh and compelling, including a wonderful portrait of Camus's Paris as context for Paris's Camus in 1945, and a discussion of how "fundamental and substantive differences between Camus and Sartre [on existentialism] . . . underscor[e] an important distinction that in some ways partially enabled a differential political appropriation and legacy particularly in the 1960s in America" (p. 36).

Ercolini's presentation holds together very well, though its relevance to the philosophy of communication could, along with Arnett's, be clearer, more explicit. The standout essay in part one is offered by Matthew H. Bowker. This is an ambitious, innovative reading of Camus's early play that develops the challenge that "the kind of miscommunication found in *Le Malentendu* turns out to be *necessary* in order to achieve the hidden aims of absurd revolt, aims that are less noble than Camus and his many champions have so far imagined, and aims that cast doubt upon the possibility of discovering a truly productive theory of communication from within the absurd posture" (p. 46). Bowker's approach to this thesis deftly incorporates a psychoanalytic conceptual vocabulary to frame a careful reading of the play that simultaneously keeps the philosophy of communication in the foreground, as indicated by his summary observation in his introduction that "both the character Jan and Camus's absurd rebel are mistaken in believing that recognition and communication would resolve their dilemmas, for the nature of their actions and advocacies suggest, instead, that they are (perhaps unconsciously) committed to seeking out a melancholy communal experience with lost objects at the expense of separate selves and others" (p. 46). Is it significant that the first essay in the volume that really begins to clarify the philosophy of communication is a literary analysis? Can the act itself of considering this moment of reading and comprehension somehow speak more precisely to what the philosophy of communication is?

I don't know the answers to these questions. I do know that Bowker's interpretive insights and nuanced critical assertions come at a rate too frequent to inventory in a review essay with a word limit. One more, however, deserves inclusion to reiterate the exceptional focus of Bowker's effort: "Jan . . . seems to seek *not* recognition nor communication with his family, but the repetition of a 'morbid' experience of connection and rage that actually requires misrecognition and miscommunication" (p. 55). Perhaps I may also be permitted to address a question Bowker poses as he situates Jan among Camus's "absurd rebels": "why must absurd rebels sacrifice their health and happiness" (p. 59) to earn the title? In addition to Bowker's thoughtful responses, I would offer Camus's own insistence that an authentic life, hence a life of rebellion, is one that is committed to ruthless honesty, whether philosophical or emotional, irrespective of where such honesty leads.

Part two begins with Annette M. Holba's appreciation of Camus's place in intellectual history reaching from the Ancient Greeks to the twentieth century in a chapter that represents a catalogue of

terminology, conceptual vocabulary, and philosophical reflection; as such, it establishes a general context for the volume's remaining chapters. Holba's obvious fluency with the history she recalls strongly suggests that had she brought Camus into more sustained contact with his ideological predecessors, the results would indeed have been fruitful. Jorge M. Lizarzaburu's agenda is exceptionally ambitious. In a relatively short space, Lizarzaburu presents both a comparison of "Camus's ideas on the absurd with Nietzsche's thought, particularly with the *Übermensch* and *die Ewige Wiederkunft* [eternal recurrence] to demonstrate how these fundamental ideas in Nietzsche's philosophy work as precursors of Camus' absurdity" and a "speculative study of communication seen from an absurdist perspective" (pp. 86-87). Hard enough to understand in their original contexts, Nietzsche's ideas are notoriously easy to misrepresent outside them, but throughout the first part of his argument, Lizarzaburu is entirely fair to the Nietzsche he cites, even if I occasionally interpret Nietzsche's meanings differently in spots. For example, Lizarzaburu sees Nietzsche's Zarathustrian exhortation that we must move beyond the "human" as evidence that "we should be careful not to confuse Nietzsche for a humanist" (p. 89), whereas Nietzsche may just as properly be understood as a brilliant voice in a formidable chorus of humanists, those who position the human as the subject and object of intellectual inquiry. Further, while Lizarzaburu is technically correct to assert that Nietzsche never offers a detailed explanation of the *Übermensch* in his *corpus*, he comes pretty close to it in the aphorism entitled "Goethe" in *Twilight of the Idols*.

But let these be quibbles and not distract from the nuanced, convincing comparison Lizarzaburu develops between the *Übermensch* and Sisyphus. When he turns to the second section of his essay, Lizarzaburu becomes more synoptic of Derrida and deconstruction (and includes a gratifying reference to Nietzsche's "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense," an early, very brief, often overlooked meditation on the relationship between truth and language that sets up nearly all of his subsequent writing) whose considerations on the limits of signification he essentially takes for granted; this forces him into occasional claims that are not as convincing as those that underpin his literary analysis. Hyperbole is a hazard of much deconstructive criticism, and Lizarzaburu reproduces a bit of it here, as when he states that "[w]e never fully understand and are not fully understood, nonetheless we keep trying and in doing so our task becomes meaningful" (p. 98). As he constructed such a felicitous analogy between the *Übermensch* and Sisyphus earlier, Lizarzaburu is moving towards equating what he calls "absurd communication" (p. 98) with Sisyphus and his boulder, but the comparison does not adequately cooperate. Without providing a clear, and perhaps unorthodox, definition of what is meant by "fully," the fact is, we can at times fully understand and be fully understood: many of our most basic daily attempts at communication are easily and efficiently executed. The use of more moderate qualifiers would be a simple fix in locutions like these and would hardly hurt Lizarzaburu's contention that sometimes, communication can be a Sisyphian labor.

If Bowker's is the most provocative literary analysis in *Creating Albert Camus*, Bryan Crable's chapter provokes the most philosophical deliberation. Crable also helps clarify the philosophy of communication more concretely than any other contributor besides Bowker. Crable assesses the way Camus's "The Myth of Sisyphus" and Sartre's *The Flies* "draw upon Greek mythology quite explicitly—not just in passing, but as a central part of their portrait of human existence and freedom," adding that his intent "is less to pronounce judgment upon the relationship between Camus and Sartre than to more fully explore the significance of their use of myth for scholars interested in the philosophy of communication" (p. 104). The practical value of this investigation is to enhance the "rhetorical appreciation of our existence as symbolic beings" (p. 105). Reading Crable's goals, I immediately thought of Jean Cocteau and his lifelong fascination with mythology, especially the Orpheus myth, and the way Cocteau constantly redacted ancient stories in order to situate the meaning of human life in contexts that shifted from modernity to postmodernity, from structuralism to an approaching poststructuralism that he was helping to define. At the same moment, I suspected that my recollection of Cocteau was itself a form of realizing the object of the philosophy of communication, especially if the field intersects with theories of dialogism. Crable's essay seemed to confirm my suspicion, as he writes, "[b]y clothing human activity in

the trappings of the legendary past, [Sartre and Camus] are precisely able to introduce the critical distance necessary for a radical scrutiny of human social life. In short . . . the use of myth in Sartre and Camus creates a purifying mirror for the critical interrogation of our human condition” (p. 111). Even if I were not familiar with the works of Sartre and Camus, Crable’s theoretical framework designates a critical space that I can fill with an artist I do know whose work fulfills the purpose of the philosophy of communication as Crable describes it. Crable himself enters this space in the final section of his chapter with smart commentary on how Sisyphus, Electra and Orestes illustrate the limits of communication.

The final two chapters of Sleasman’s text are linked by their concern with ethics. The first, co-authored by Ramsey Eric Ramsey and Jessica N. Sturgess, identifies and explores a link between the philosophy of communication and existential values, the latter expressed by Beauvoir rather than Sartre, who tends to predominate in earlier chapters. An able theoretical study, it articulates ideas that are both interesting on their own and also contain intriguing potential for literary analysis. The volume maintains its focus on the moral relevance of Camus’s art with Patrick F. O’Connell’s beautifully constructed account of Thomas Merton’s conversation with Camus’s ethics. O’Connell is careful to indicate in his notes several authors who have preceded him in some way on this terrain, but his presentation is remarkable for its distillation into a mere twenty pages of Merton’s enthusiasm for Camus’s work. Reading Merton reading Camus is fascinating as we see a lambent mind maneuvering through philosophy and literature to clarify his own thinking on politics and ethics; more specifically, realizing that Merton, a Trappist monk, is being spiritually, even religiously, inspired by Camus as he forges common ideological ground with the atheist is nothing short of enthralling. It is also a profound example of communication with which to conclude Sleasman’s collection.

Creating Albert Camus is, in sum, a most solid collection of critical essays. Sleasman and his contributors demonstrate Camus’s continued relevance to human life as it is lived daily in the twenty-first century in chapters that should have immediate appeal to philosophers, historians, and literary critics, as well as other readers looking to expand their vocabulary on Camus’s life and art. The volume will obviously attract those invested in the philosophy of communication as well, even though a clear, direct definition of the discipline never does appear within its pages. Nevertheless, this absence forced me to think about what such a definition might look like. Surely there is at least a little profit in that.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Ronald C. Arnett, “Camus and Existential Dialogue”

Gina L. Ercolini, “The Visage of Camus: Existentialism in America”

Matthew H. Bowker, “Joke-Work, Melancholy Communion, and Wished-for Misrecognition in *Le Malentendu* and Camus’s Absurd Philosophy”

Annette M. Holba, “Philosophical Lineage: Situating Voices of Self and Other”

Jorge M. Lizarzaburu, “Albert Camus’ Nietzscheanism and Its Implications for an Absurdist Communication Framework”

Bryan Crable, “Camus, Sartre, and the Rhetorical Function of Myth”

Ramsey Eric Ramsey and Jessica N. Sturgess, “Thinking with Camus and Beauvoir toward a Philosophy of Communication”

Patrick F. O’Connell, “Continuing the Dialogue: Thomas Merton and Albert Camus”

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