

Robert Zaretsky. *A Life Worth Living: Albert Camus and the Quest for Meaning*. Belknap Press-Harvard University Press 2013. 240 pp. \$22.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780674724761).

Robert Zaretsky's *A Life Worth Living: Albert Camus and the Quest for Meaning* is his second book on Camus. He previously published *Albert Camus: Elements of a Life* (2010). So why has Zaretsky written a second book on Camus? He answers this question himself as follows: 'When I wrote my first book on Camus, *Albert Camus: Elements of a Life*, I tried to situate his thought and writings in four pivotal moments to his life.... But by the time I had completed the book, I was also dissatisfied: bound to the historical context, I felt I had slighted certain intellectual or moral themes we have long associated with Camus' work' (10). Here Zaretsky engages the reader by weaving biography with thematic analysis. He does so using a spare, elegant style of writing admirably suited to its subject matter. If it achieved nothing else, his book offers an excellent introduction to Camus for the novice reader. In this review I shall concentrate on some points of disagreement over Camus's political philosophy, Camus's views on French Algeria, Camus as a moralist, and Camus on hope and the absurd.

It is widely held that Camus had no fully theorized political philosophy, and that to the limited extent that he did make his political views known, he was innately conservative, addicted to abstract moral rhetoric, a doctrinaire pacifist, and an ally of right-wing causes. 'You shun politics and take refuge in morality', wrote ex-resistance leader Emmanuel d'Astier de La Vigerie. The Communist paper *Action*, notes Patrick McCarthy in his *Albert Camus: A Critical Study of his Life and Work* (1982), 'regularly denounced Camus as a "jackal" of the ruling classes' (236). McCarthy himself adopts a more measured approach to Camus' politics. 'Camus', he says, 'never worked out a coherent political position, never resolved the dilemma of the moralist in politics', but, he later adds, '[h]e would have liked to offer Scandinavian social-democracy as an ideal but Sweden had clearly not accomplished the political and moral renovation which he advocated in his editorials' (96; 213). Zaretsky reads Camus in much the same way. Comparing Camus and Orwell, he notes that 'both were journalists and essayists as well as novelists; both men, though despised by many on the European Left, never surrendered their identification with the values of democratic socialism' (190). Unfortunately, Zaretsky doesn't delve further into Camus' political philosophy, since Camus himself was very vocal on these matters. He wrote extensively about politics during his time writing for *Combat*, for instance. Camus even went so far as the map out the steps to be taken during the transitional phase of the new socialist democracy, and lamented continuously in his editorials for *Combat* that the post-liberation French administration was not taking these steps, or was dragging its heels in doing so. His step-by-step socialism would stamp out the black market; commence widespread nationalization, starting with the banks, insurance companies and key sections of production (such as the Renault car company); supply its citizens with a steady supply of information; initiate a housing program for unemployed workers; and put an end to 'absurd income disparities'.

Commentators sometimes give the impression that had Camus been more politically astute, more alert to the political currents of his time, he could, almost single-handedly, have prevented the Algerian War. Stephen Eric Bronner (*Camus: Portrait of a Moralist*, 1999) goes so far as to say that Camus' 'vacillations were less than irrelevant: *they actually hindered bringing the conflict to a close*' (116). What is almost as misleading is the impression that because his 'final' position on the war was one of silence, Camus had nothing substantive to say about it, which is created by statements like the following from Zaretsky: 'Before he wrapped himself in silence over the mounting horrors of civil

war, Camus continued to hammer at the crimes France was committing in its doomed effort to maintain its century-old status quo in Algeria' (182). The truth, of course, is that Camus was blue in the face writing and talking about the Algerian situation, that he tried (unsuccessfully) to bring about a civilian truce, and that he worked tirelessly behind the scenes on behalf of prisoners and internees, seeking to have death sentences commuted and prison sentences reduced. His final position on the war was one of silence only in the sense that he had nothing further to add to everything he had already said and published about it. My argument is not that Camus had a viable political solution to the Algerian crisis. Indeed, I agree with Bronner's assessment that Camus' federalist solution 'had no chance of acceptance from either party to the conflict' (115). I simply wish to counter the impression generated by Zaretsky and many others that because Camus ceased to speak publicly about the war after 1958, he had no solution to offer. The truth is that after 1958 he simply ceased repeating what he had been saying all along, and during the remaining twenty months or so of his life he concentrated on other matters. As it happens, however, Camus did speak publicly again about the Algerian War, by way of his posthumous draft novel *The First Man* (1994). Here he depicts the Algerian War as an orgy of mutual destruction, doing so by way of the allegory of a *pied-noir* farmer who uproots all his vines on a bouncing tractor, and lets the wine pour out of the vats, while the Arab field hands watch, mute and helpless, from a distance. As Veillard, the farmer who lived in the house where Camus had been born, puts it: 'We were made to understand each other. Fools and brutes like us, but with the same blood of men. We'll kill each other for a little longer, cut off each other's balls and torture each other a bit. And then we'll go back to living as men together. The country wants it that way' (141). In the Preface to *Chroniques Algeriennes* (1958), however, Camus did not envisage a return to things as normal. At any rate, he warned that if the nationalists were successful, they would set up an Islamic state that would show no mercy to non-believers. It would 'tear the French population from its secular roots'.

Camus was a moralist, not a moralizer, insists Zaretsky: 'A moralist is not a moralizer. The latter has the answer before he is asked the question, while the former has only questions after she hears the available answers... Camus was, in this respect, a moralist' (8). But he is not the first to insist this. Herbert Lottman (*Albert Camus: A Biography*, 1979), Bronner, McCarthy, and Sartre have all done so already. In his generous obituary notice of Camus, Sartre wrote: 'He represented in this century, and against History, the present-day heir of that long line of moralists whose work constitutes what is perhaps most original in French literature. His stubborn humanism, strict and pure, austere and sensual, delivered uncertain combat against the massive and deformed events of the day. But inversely, by the unexpectedness of his refusals, he reaffirmed, at the heart of our era, against the Machiavellians, against the golden calf of realism, the existence of the moral act' (*France-Observateur*, 7 January, 1960, my translation). My main concern with Zaretsky's claim that Camus was a moralist has to do with the meaning that he ascribes to 'moralist'. He defines 'moralist' as someone who has no moral answers, only questions about moral answers. As applied to Camus, this creates the impression that he did not have, or adopt, clear moral stances, that he lacked strong moral principles, and was unable to offer moral guidance. This is not how I read Camus. He decries corruption, exploitation, oppression, inequality, torture, colonial policy, and maladministration repeatedly in his *Combat* editorials. Two of his major fictional creations—Dr. Rieux in and Jean Tarrou in *The Plague* (1947)—are men of the strongest moral character, even if they possess a rather limited moral vocabulary. Camus' long essay on capital punishment (*Reflections on the Guillotine*, 1957) is a minor masterpiece of moral reasoning (in my opinion, the best thing yet written on that issue). And the man who wrote as follows in the Preface to his *Chroniques Algeriennes* was not unsure of his moral positions, nor reluctant to make them known to the wider world: '[T]hese texts document the

position of a man who, having been exposed since childhood to the miseries of Algeria, has unsuccessfully, on a growing number of occasions, issued warnings about this situation; and cognizant for many a day of his country's responsibilities, cannot approve of a policy of preservation or oppression in Algeria. But equally, having for long been alerted to the Algerian situation, I cannot support, either, a policy of acquiescence which would abandon the Arab population to an even greater misery and, without being of benefit to anyone, would tear the French population from its secular roots, and advance the cause solely of the new imperialism now threatening the liberty of France and of the West' (11-12, my translation).

Zaretsky claims that Camus' persistent philosophical stance, since the late 1930s, was 'that while we have no reason to hope, we must also never despair' (195). He correctly read Camus as saying that we are not condemned to despair. But he is not correct to read Camus as saying that in a world without hope we must not cease to hope, since that kind of hope would be completely irrational. Camus did not urge hope in a hopeless situation, because that is not how he saw the situation. In the fourth of his *Letters to a German Friend* (written between 1943 and 1944) he remarks that the difference between them is that unlike his German 'friend' he had never yielded to despair. He had not yielded to despair, he explains, because he believed that something in the world has meaning, even if the world as such is devoid of meaning. In a world without meaning each human being still insists on giving his or her own life a meaning. That is what is precious about us, and that is what 'must be saved if we want to save the idea we have of life' (*Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, 1960, 28) So, while the world as such offers no hope, something in the world—the human quest for meaning, justice, and happiness—does offer hope, and in this situation we should not succumb to despair. From this metaphysical and moral perspective, Camus wrote as follows in an editorial for *Combat* on 25 August 1944: 'Those who have never despaired of themselves or of their country find their reward under this sky... Nothing is given to men, and the little they can conquer is paid for with unjust deaths. But man's greatness lies elsewhere. It lies in his decision to be stronger than his condition. And if his condition is unjust, he has only one way of overcoming it, which is to be just himself' (*Camus at Combat: Writing 1944-1947*, 2006, 39-40).

Zaretsky gives a useful summary of Thomas Nagel's reply to Camus in his 1971 article 'The Absurd', but does not engage head-on with Nagel's argument, pleading for a more nuanced approach to Camus: 'The world, for Camus, was a stage for two forms of absurdity: the metaphysical sort, based on the world's refusal to offer meaning to a human race that demands it; and political absurdity, resulting from a state's insistence to give meaning to the unjustifiable suffering it inflicts on its citizens. The rebel, affirms Camus, rejects both kinds of absurdity' (177). Yet it may still be possible to defend Camus by means of analytical argument as well. Our situation is absurd (metaphysically) because we search for meaning in a world, or from a world, that refuses to offer meaning. Nagel responds to Camus as follows: even if the world did furnish the meaning we crave, our situation would be no less absurd. This is because our absurd condition arises from 'the collision between the seriousness with which we take our lives and the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary, or open to doubt'. But, is it possible to doubt everything about which we are serious? In their *Moral Practices* (1970), D. Z. Phillips and H. O. Mounce argue—convincingly in my opinion—that we can doubt the seriousness of some things only because there are other things whose seriousness is not open to doubt. Doubting the seriousness of everything, they would argue, is unintelligible.

I conclude by drawing attention to some minor errors in Zaretsky's text. First, Camus' father wasn't killed in the battle of the Marne. He was severely wounded by shell fragments during that

battle, and died a few weeks later in a hospital in the northern Brittany town of Saint-Brieuc. Second, Zaretsky persists in calling the Algerian war a civil war, when it is universally categorized as a war of independence (or a war of national liberation, as these wars came to be called in the Sixties). Third, Pascal Pia was editor-in-chief of *Alger républicain* when it was launched, not Camus; Camus was hired as an investigative reporter for the paper, and he later came to share some of the editorial workload with Pia. (Later still, Camus became editor in chief of *Le Soir républicain*, the two-page afternoon sister paper of *Alger républicain*, until the latter was closed down due to a shortage of newsprint). And finally, Petit Villeblevin, a hamlet close to where Camus was killed in a car crash on the *route nationale* from Sens to Paris, is just south of Paris, but it is not remotely in the south of France.

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