

## BOOKS

### Albert Camus: The Life of Dialogue

RESISTANCE, REBELLION, AND DEATH, by Albert Camus. Knopf. 272 pp. \$4.00.

By comparison with the work of men like Koestler, Silone and Orwell, Albert Camus' writing has always seemed to me somewhat grandiose and porous. He lacked Koestler's capacity for sustained argument, Silone's mixture of humor and humaneness, Orwell's gritty concern for facts. To be sure, Camus never succumbed to the casuistry of the later Koestler or the occasional anti-intellectualism of Orwell; but except for *The Stranger*, his one first-rate novel and his deepest exploration of the problem of nihilism, Camus' work had a disturbing quality: all too often he seemed to be making a speech.

To note these reservations is to do that, and no more; it is surely not to deny that Camus deserved much of the praise that has been rendered him. As a man reflecting upon the life of our time, Camus could be, in his very bewilderment, an enormously sympathetic figure. His mind was not really fecund, like Sartre's, but then he never became infatuated, again like Sartre, with his own dilemmas and agilities. Camus really preferred the truth to everything else, even to his own security as an intellectual. In defense of the values by which he tried to live, he could be properly intransigent; but he was also ready to bend before

the waywardness of impulse, the needs of personal feeling, the claims of the body. Real virtues, and in our time among the greatest a writer could have. But they were virtues that also brought with them two significant weaknesses: a temptation to reduce humanism to a mere literary device and an incapacity to embody his moral sentiments as political ideas.

To some extent, these weaknesses reflect the dilemma of the post-Resistance intellectuals in France who refused to surrender themselves to any total ideology yet felt a need for some principle by which to guide their public life. The hopes nurtured by the Resistance having been so sadly dissipated, they began to fall back upon large and unprovisioned sentiments of fraternity, sentiments without which little else can be worth while but which in themselves seldom lead to concrete realizations in life or art. Perhaps that is one reason Camus' reflections tend to go soft and his fiction seems thin-blooded.

THESE VIEWS were reinforced when I started to read *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, a collection of Camus' journalism beginning with war-time statements in behalf of the Resistance, reaching a point of climax in the mag-

nificent essay denouncing capital punishment, and ending with some recent declarations on the place of the artist in modern society. There is a disconcerting sameness of tone in these articles, a fondness for the glittering epigram and oratorical lilt which seem to belie Camus' claim to be writing from the very edge of despair. In part my objection is simply to the tradition of French journalism, which seems permanently infatuated with operatic grandeur; but in part it raises the more serious problem of the extent to which the moral pronouncement can satisfy a political need.

And here, trying to imagine once again the situations in which Camus had written these overwrought pieces, I had to acknowledge that the force of my objections was not very great. For his journalism makes clear that Camus was not really a "political man," even to the limited extent that Silone is; Camus drove himself to return to journalism whenever he could no longer bear his detachment as an artist, whenever, that is, he suffered too much from the "bad faith" of silence. And recalling these occasions—the Resistance, the post-war struggle in France, the Algerian war, the Hungarian revolution—one is struck (as if it were some sort of discovery!) with the fact that it was the moral response which was the essential one, the moral response which now *became* a kind of politics.

The traditional competition between socialists and liberals, as even at times between socialists and conservatives, had rested on a tacit assumption of *some* shared values as to the needs and nature of man. But in the age of the total state, when this consensus was broken by terror, the first task of radical intellectuals who still believed in human freedom was to articulate the

assumptions — assumptions often violated, yet operative as both checks upon evil and inducements to good—which had in the past been at the foundation of the human order. And this Camus did superbly:

The world I live in is loathsome to me, but I feel at one with the men who suffer in it . . . it seems to me that there is [an] ambition that ought to belong to all writers: to bear witness and shout aloud, every time it is possible, insofar as our talent allows, for those who are enslaved as we are.

And again:

Yes, the great event of the twentieth century was the forsaking of the values of freedom by the revolutionary movement, the progressive retreat of socialism based on freedom before the attacks of Caesarian and military socialism. Since that moment a certain hope has disappeared from the world and a solitude has begun for each and every man.

The scores of similar passages in Camus' writing testify to the fact that, as far as he could, he helped preserve the idea of freedom in a dark age, and equally important, preserve the idea of human possibility. *As far as he could*—that phrase bulks large at the moment, since these past few decades the dilemma of the democratic left, which Camus shared, has been its inability to move from abstract position to a concrete program and then from a concrete program to an active politics. But this was *our* dilemma: the one we felt to be an essential part of our experience. What Camus, clearly sensing the depth and range of that dilemma, tried meanwhile to do was to keep alive the possibility of a renewed radicalism, with or without the socialist label and vocabulary, for the decades to come.

In doing this Camus was closer to us, more a true friend and comrade, than the vast bulk of party politicians in Europe who, from sheer inertia or petty advantage, clung to the name of socialism. So far as I know, Camus did not call himself a socialist, though he expressed a strong kinship with the traditions of socialism; but to whom does one feel closer: Camus or Guy Mollet, the chauvinist leader of the French Socialist party? Camus or Ollenhauer, the *klein bürgerlich* leader of the German Social Democracy? For that matter, which leader of the socialist movement in the recent years would have had the humane imagination to compose a pamphlet as profoundly stirring and politically significant as Camus' attack on capital punishment? Norman Thomas, Asoka Mehta, perhaps two or three others . . .

THE INADEQUACY of Camus' journalism in regard to concrete politics demonstrates the power of its moral judgment—for without the latter one would not even think to notice the former. When it came to specific proposals, he shared the troubles of everyone else, and shared them with a modesty that bears recommending both to some of his contemporaries in the intellectual world of Paris and to many of the "politicals" who clung to the socialist word even as they were incompetent to perform a socialist deed. Camus, for example, took a position on Algeria that some of us might at first glance reject: he did not favor unconditional Algerian independence, though he did speak out for Algerian self-determination. He called for an end to the terrorization of civilians by both sides, he proposed an autonomous Algerian community linked to France, he spoke for a restoration of civil freedom and order. Perhaps he was wrong in fail-

ing to see that by now it was too late for such proposals: there was no longer any choice but to allow independence to countries like Algeria even if one knew that the leadership of the FLN contained authoritarians and worse, and even if one suspected that an FLN-controlled Algeria would mean the substitution of a new-style dictatorship for old-style colonialism. Perhaps so. But if one goes beyond ready-made "positions" and tries to think about the realities of the Algerian tragedy, then one may be a little more respectful of Camus' opinion, even if still supposing him to be mistaken. He spoke on this subject, as on all others, with that good faith, that commitment to human freedom, which is the essential requirement for modern politics. That the essential is sometimes not the sufficient, is something else again.

To the political life of our time Camus contributed two simple ideas. He kept urging that the traditional ideologies had become bulwarks of misconception and pretexts for a refusal to communicate; he urged people to *talk* to each other, those who really cared about socialism and freedom; he was impatient with dialectics, ideologies and positions. That he was not entirely right in saying all this I have tried to indicate, but anyone familiar with the congealing of traditional leftist opinion in France knows he was primarily right.

And then Camus understood the primacy of the idea of liberty in this age. He was not the kind of intellectual who would sacrifice, in behalf of fidelista rhetoric, his fidelity to the idea of liberty; he was not the kind of intellectual who could be swerved by production statistics, the rapture of mass meetings, and the lure of rising power. Time and again, one comes

across passages that are entirely unoriginal—they could have appeared in *DISSENT* often enough—passages so simple and unambiguous and good that one is tempted to cut them out and mail them to Professor C. Wright Mills:

The first thing to define totalitarian society, whether of the Right or of the Left, is the single party, and the single party has no reason to destroy itself. This is why the only society capable of evolution and liberalization, the only one that deserves both our critical and our active support is the society

that involves a plurality of parties as part of its structure. It alone allows one to denounce, hence to correct, injustice and crime. It alone allows one to denounce torture, disgraceful torture, as contemptible in Algiers as in Budapest.

Utterly familiar; but it goes to the heart of things. Finishing *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death* I felt that whatever its limitations it was the work of a man with whom one could live: that is, live the life worth having, the life of dialogue.

IRVING HOWE

## Aliens in Their Own Land

THE ALIENATED VOTER, by Murray B. Levin. Holt, Rinehart and Winston. (Paper) \$1.25.

Political poll-takers have asked the American people many questions in their years of investigation, but seldom have they tried to find out what the American people think about politics in its everyday form. Do they believe that today's politics is good or bad? Do they believe that it works and that it is useful? Do they believe that politicians are honest or dishonest? These questions are significant just because they are simple, because they reflect the way people think or react to politics and because it is from such fundamental reactions that their specific attitudes emerge. What does it signify to discover the opinion of a citizen on issue X or politician Y if the citizen's general view of politics is that neither issues nor politicians matter since they are crooked, useless, and . . . and a lot of other unprintable things.

The truth may be unpalatable, but

one political scientist has now taken his IBM cards in hand and shuffled them to ask such questions. Professor Murray Levin's *The Alienated Voter* studies the reactions of Boston voters to the mayoralty campaign of 1959 and the results are shocking and even lurid. It turns out that the citizens of Boston—admittedly a discouraged and tired lot—are not only convinced that politicians are crooked but that politics is totally hopeless. The result is alienation on a colossal scale.

Levin's *The Alienated Voter* is an important book which transcends the narrow confines of its subject. It demonstrates concretely and soberly that politics for those who live in cities is what is done to them. The "citizen" may not be an immigrant but he is an alien, literally alien, because he is, or thinks he is, divorced from the political life of the city. But it is not