

The Tender Indifference of the World: Revisiting Albert Camus

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In an innovative study that returns Albert Camus' early works to their rightful place in the canon, Laurent Bove suggests we should view Camus as a philosopher of immanence and of acquiescence to the joy of the world. This reading is enlightening as far as Camus' thoughts on history are concerned, but tends to gloss over the ruptures that run through his work, which is driven with multiple tensions.

Reviewed: Laurent Bove, *Albert Camus. De la transfiguration – Pour une expérimentation vitale de l'immanence*, Publications de la Sorbonne, collection « La philosophie et l'œuvre », Paris, 2014. 168 p., €19.

Critics often locate the starting point of Camus' philosophy in his realisation of the meaninglessness of existence (according to this view, his first truly philosophical text is *The Myth of Sisyphus*, illustrated by its literary counterparts, *Caligula* and *The Outsider*). They view his concept of revolt as the exploration of an act of overcoming, of an escape from the Absurd which Camus claims can never be more than a threshold, a state in which nobody can ever remain for very long. This, supposedly, is Camus' philosophy: a tragic fissure that forcefully turns back on itself, a divorce from the world that leads to a universal fraternity made manifest through revolt. According to this view, texts such as *Betwixt and Between* and *Nuptials*, which portray the luminous beauty of Algeria and the treasured places of childhood, cannot be read as anything more than literary essays in which the author is indulging in careless pleasure and contemplation, far below or beyond any philosophical thought.

Laurent Bove's book takes position against such a binary interpretation, and it is significant because it reveals a central philosophical thread running through all of Camus' work, from his very early writings onwards. The aim here is not however so much to add a youthful philosophy to the two major stages (the Absurd and revolt) that are usually identified in Camus' philosophy, but rather to reveal one and the same philosophical spirit running through his entire body of work, from *Betwixt and Between* through to *The First Man*, and feeding into its central themes: the Absurd, revolt, love.

Camus, a Philosopher of Immanence

According to Laurent Bove, Camus' writings are characterised by a “subversive process of immanent power” (p. 14), a process that is subversive because it deconstructs the chimera that are engendered by desire being subjugated to an object – for example, a love that crystallises the loved one into a subject created by the lover's imagination, or a love that assimilates the other's body to an object that one can possess and exploit for one's own pleasure – in order to develop a concept of a being-in-the-present that reveals the truth of bodies and of the sympathy that binds them together, a carnal truth that “must rot” (p. 49), just as these bodies do. This philosophy of immanence, which translates and celebrates a world in which “this is the way things are”, and in which Laurent Bove detects Spinozist tendencies, is

developed throughout Camus' works through the image of a detheologised Christ who, "from Piero della Francesca's Resuscitating Christ to the transfiguration in *The Rebel*, through the character of Meursault, this 'only Christ we deserve', experiences and explores the plane of dynamic immanence that is, in effect, created by Camus' body of work" (p. 15). The breadcrumb trail that Laurent Bove thus detects not only has the advantage of revealing a philosophy that is omnipresent in Camus' writings, it also shows how vital it is for us to reread the texts that we often mistakenly believe we know well, starting with *The Outsider*. Taking position against an excessively unilateral interpretation that views *The Outsider* as the novel of the Absurd, and Meursault as the archetype of the Absurd man rejecting the illusory codes imposed on him by society at the cost of progressively sinking into passive nihilism, Laurent Bove reveals a different aspect of the character, which becomes more and more convincing the further you get into the novel, as a man who is abandoning himself to "the tender indifference of the world", embracing the truth of mortal bodies and thereby freeing himself from other people's hopes and illusions, an outsider not in relation to the world itself, but in relation to the skewed and pointless image that mankind has of it. As Laurent Bove points out: "Meursault's journey thus goes from an experience of emptiness, of his ability to disconnect the universe from the myths and feelings that are subject to it, to the experience of the density and diversity of reality, in himself and outside of him" (p. 36), since, in the same way as the expressions of Piero della Francesca's characters, "'witnesses' of a life without hope of consolation" (p. 62), display the most authentically human essence far more faithfully than would have done the tears that Meursault's fellow countrymen rebuke him for not having shed, Meursault may never have felt as free as during his stay in prison. Freed from the falseness of myths and social stereotypes, he is returned to the essential truth of bodies and of silent sympathy, as shared, fleetingly, by the mother and her son in the visiting room scene.

The analysis put forward by Laurent Bove is made all the more important by the fact that it extends its rereading to the text of Camus' that is probably the least well understood, and was the most controversial in its day, namely *The Rebel*. In contrast with the biased readings of Sartre or Jeanson, who saw in this 1951 essay a useless cry from the heart of a beautiful spirit who preferred to remain on the margins of history rather than compromise himself by taking part in it, Laurent Bove shows that the essential articulation of the philosophy of immanence and acquiescence to the world on the one hand, with the philosophy of revolt on the other, far from making this revolt inefficient and ethereal, constitutes the only possible firm foundation for a living human community. Indeed, it is only by falsely conflating history (as civilisation) with History as defined by the major nihilist ideologies (Soviet totalitarianism, Nazism, Francoism) that one can accuse Camus of being ahistorical, when in reality all he is doing is reasserting the rights of the first type of history, which is properly human and creative, over the second one, which is murderous and dishonest. By opposing the fantasy of totality, which renders any real relationship impossible by sacrificing bodies on the altar of a hypothetical humanity unified by revolution, Camus, through his concept of revolt, theorises the idea of a being-with that is ontologically anchored in a spontaneous empathy in the face of human suffering and shared emotions. The Camusian cogito, "I rebel therefore I am" should thus not be understood as an abstract moral principle, but rather as the affirmation of an equality of being that creates the basis for solidarity between men. It is this spirit of an immanent human community, freed from the illusions inherent to totalitarian ideologies, that Camus recognises in those historical events that influenced his writing of *The Rebel*: the Resistance, the Paris Commune, libertarian socialism and the actions of the Russian revolutionaries of 1905.

Regardless of what Sartre may have had to say about him, Camus therefore does not sacrifice political engagement to moral stringency, or history to nature; on the contrary, he reasserts the carnal and immanent reality of this history, of a history that is about “saving our skins” against the ideological and state structures that crush them in the name of a revolutionary messianism. The Camusian revolt is the revolt of “desire without an object”, meaning a desire that refuses to elevate the revolution or its outcome to the rank of a determined end, since this is the point when all means can be justified and the reign of nihilism sets in. This is the transposition that provides the title for Laurent Bove’s book: the subversion of a history that has been corrupted by nihilism into a historical renaissance via the solidarity of bodies.

Transfiguration or Rupture?

Nevertheless, after reading Laurent Bove’s essay, a certain number of questions arise, and it is worth stating them here. The systematic nature of his interpretation, which is what gives it its strength and coherence, does give rise to some question marks. Laurent Bove does not hide the fact that there is a Spinozist framework to his reading, and in fact he provides justification for this, but this framework is so central to his thesis that the reservation he expresses in the introduction, where he specifies that Camus “did admittedly reject the rationalist principle [of Spinozist philosophy] and also its refusal of chance” (p. 12), does not really seem to have been taken into account; it would be worth investigating whether this is merely a minor difference, or whether it allows us to make sense of some of the tensions in Camus’ work, which Laurent Bove sometimes describes as contradictions. Thus, L. Bove claims that Camus’ suspicion of any immanentist metaphysics, which he suspects must inevitably lead to a betrayal of the Absurd, “prevents him from coming to a philosophical wisdom of a materialistic or naturalistic nature” (p. 49, note) and explains the “contradictory philosophical statements in *Betwixt and Between* (written in 1935-1936) and in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (in development from 1938 and finished in early 1941)” (*ibid.*), which prevented Camus from embracing the immanentist wisdom that was nevertheless detectable in his work. Is Bove not assuming here that Camus should have fully and exclusively subscribed to this school of thought, a position that Laurent Bove himself is only able to take by evaluating Camus’ philosophy in the light of someone else’s – an approach that poses an obvious problem? One might think that Camusian philosophy, which is not systematic but rather constructed around tensions and ceaseless questioning, equates these various leanings with real experiences, in which case these contradictions may be viewed as the expression of an existential complexity. Why should it be a contradiction to celebrate the experience of unity with the world in *Betwixt and Between* and to bear witness to the experience of rupture constituted by the Absurd in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, since both these experiences may be lived through at different moments of one’s existence, as is shown by the *Notebooks*, in which passages full of doubt and depression alternate with periods of affirmation and celebration? Unless we want to fix the Absurd and the philosophy of immanence into exclusive doctrines (which would hardly be faithful to Camusian thought), it seems possible to conceive that Camus is articulating the relationship between these two dimensions of his work in a complex manner, and constantly questioning and reworking it. *The Myth of Sisyphus* starts with the problem of suicide, which it would be difficult to exclusively account for on the basis of a philosophy of acquiescence. Can we then be content with setting it aside as a false problem, based on the principle that this radical gesture is founded on an illusory view of the world and of existence, and thus rendering any existential questions irrelevant? We should not forget that, while *The Myth of Sisyphus* was indeed, as the author reminds us, published after *Betwixt and Between*, Camus actually started working on it at the same time as he was writing *The Outsider*, a book in which he identifies the first elements of a philosophy of immanence –

which should lead us to conclude that Camus is not disavowing one philosophy in favour of another, but rather that both philosophies coexist, so to speak, in a perpetual tension that is characteristic of his thought.

The philosophy of the Absurd that is developed in *The Myth of Sisyphus* is pushed into the background in Laurent Bove's book, which ends up substituting it for the Absurd understood as a "spiritual shock" in the face of the detheologised Annunciation that is hinted at at the beginning of *The Outsider* – a shock that leads to an acquiescence to the world and to its truth. But can we legitimately ignore or play down the importance of this aspect of rupture, despite its being central to Camus' work? Can we claim that the Absurd as presented in *The Outsider* has got nothing to do with the same concept as it is portrayed in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, that Meursault's world is simply that of a "strange love" that "distributes everything to life and to his living brothers" (p. 43) and that will serve as an ontological basis for revolt, even though this novel tells the story of a murder, and revolt leads to the affirmation that murder cannot be justified? It is due to these aspects, to these asperities, that Camus' philosophy cannot simply be equated with a Spinozist philosophy of immanence, even though such a philosophy is one of its essential facets – perhaps, in order to push further the fertile thoughts offered by Laurent Bove in his book, we should try to understand how this dimension relates to the other aspects of Camus' thought. In other words, we should once more acknowledge the importance of the philosophy of the Absurd as developed by Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in order to see how it might cross over with the philosophy of transfiguration that is present across all of his work, without one cancelling the other out, and without this confrontation leading us to a contradiction.

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