

*THE REBEL: THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF
ALBERT CAMUS'S L'HOMME RÉVOLTÉ AND THE
EXPRESSION OF HOPE AND DESPAIR*

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When Albert Camus's *L'homme révolté* was published in 1951, it encountered huge popular success: more than 70,000 copies were sold in one year. The essay was also praised in some intellectual and literary circles. In his foreword to *The Rebel*, the 1953 translation of *L'homme révolté*, Sir Herbert Read wrote: 'With the publication of this book a cloud that has oppressed the European mind for more than a century begins to lift' (Camus, 1953 edition: 3).

The 'cloud' Sir Herbert Read talks about obviously refers to the series of tragic, bloody events that Europe experienced from the late XVIII century onwards, such as the aftermath of the 1789 French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, World War I and World War II. Each of these events wreaked havoc upon Europe. Therefore they weighed as painful memories on the European collective consciousness - to use Sir Herbert Read's own words, they 'oppressed the European mind'. Not only does

the author of the preface claim that the weight of the past ‘begins to lift’ thanks to *L’homme révolté*, but he also believed that the essay itself was able to unleash a wave of optimism across Europe in the early 1950s.

Our task will be to find out whether it is possible to agree with Sir Herbert Read. In other words, we will look for an answer to this particular question: did *The Rebel* create hope in Europe after an era of general despair? Some elements of our analysis will enable us to agree with this hypothesis, whilst others will lead us to negate Sir Herbert Read’s point of view.

In *L’homme révolté*, Camus exposes historical facts and philosophical ideas dating back from the Ancients. But he also deals with the events that have recently affected Europe, such as World War II in the section on ‘State Terrorism and Irrational Terror’ (Camus, 2000 edition: 146-155). In other words, *The Rebel* provides its readers with a reflection on contemporary issues. In fact, Camus expresses his anxiety regarding the future of Europe, particularly in the section on the Soviet Union, ‘State Terrorism and Rational Terror’ (Camus, 2000: 156-211). He also proclaims his desire for a better world in the very last section, ‘Beyond Nihilism’ (Camus, 2000: 266-270). Therefore Camus’s essay echoes European people’s utmost anxieties and wishes and expresses them on their behalf to the rest of the world. In John Cruickshank’s view, Camus gives ‘expression to the aspirations and fears of thousands of ordinary men and women’ (Cruickshank, 1959: 42). In this sense Camus became the spokesman for a whole part of European society through *The Rebel*.

Moreover, Camus pinpoints certain philosophical doctrines that are, according to him, ‘guilty’ and responsible for chaos in Europe. His criticisms are brilliantly argued - as Sir Herbert Read writes in his foreword to *The Rebel*, ‘His book is a work of logic’ (Camus, 1953: 5). One example of Camus’s maestra is his explanation for the aftermath of the 1789 French Revolution. A régime of ‘Terror’ was indeed established in France in the early 1790s: the Jacobin Convention, led by Saint-Just, made good use of the guillotine. In his eyes, the French Revolution did not deliver the goods because of Rousseau’s doctrine. In ‘The Regicides’ (Camus, 2000: 82-102), the author recalls that Rousseau puts forward the idea of a ‘Social Contract’, according to which monarchs are rejected while infallible,

unlimited power is given to the general will of the people. Yet Camus asserts that this philosophy paved the way for murder, since it justified a regicide, the execution of King Louis XVI in 1793 - 'The only purpose of Saint-Just's speech is [...] to block every egress for the king, except the one leading to the scaffold' (Camus, 2000: 89). Moreover, according to Rousseau's 'Social Contract', the people agree on a common government with common values: common duties and common rights. If there are opponents, these are obviously jeopardising the unity and stability of the government. In Camus's view, this engendered the fanatical idea that it is necessary to kill in the name of the law - the dreadful idea that one has to murder dissenters in order to protect the state and the common good. In Saint-Just's own words, 'All [the political opponents] shall be fought to the death' (Camus, 2000: 88). Thanks to Camus's demonstration, the reader now knows that the totalitarian French régime of the early 1790s is partly due to Rousseau's philosophy. Camus puts his finger on the ideology that is responsible for one of the most tragic events of the past two centuries. He gives coherent explanations for one of the 'clouds' obscuring the European sky. He provides his readers with a new, proper understanding of events. He unravels the cogs of history: he demystifies history. In this sense Camus might be seen as an enlightened writer.

In Camus's view, all the historical attempts to revolt have failed until now: these rebellions have never delivered their goods. The French revolutionaries for instance turned out to be tyrants. That is why Camus gives in his essay a definition of what the true spirit of rebellion should be. Firstly, rebellion is simultaneously an act of acceptance and an act of refusal. *The Rebel* says 'no' to any form of oppression but he also says 'yes' to himself and the values that lie within him - 'He stubbornly insists that there are certain things in him that are "worthwhile..." and which must be taken into consideration' (Camus, 1953: 9). Secondly, the rebel is ready to die for his rights and dignity, and for the rights and dignity of all human beings. In this sense, rebellion is not an individualistic but an altruistic act. It brings a group into being, it gives birth to a collective showing of solidarity, as suggested by Camus's new version of Descartes's cogito: 'I rebel - therefore we exist'. Thirdly, we have to distinguish true revolt, or rebellion, from revolution. In 'Rebellion and

Revolution' (Camus, 2000: 212-218), he contends that revolution is a fake rebellion that brings death and destruction. The history of Europe is therefore an accumulation of revolutions, not revolts, since the European upheavals have always been bloody. On the contrary, real rebellion gives rise to life and creation. And above all, true revolt implies measure and limits. In 'Moderation and Excess' (Camus, 2000: 258-265), we are told that rebellion is synonymous with moderation - revolt is a 'thought which recognises limits'. It is actually a gradual movement of protest, a wish for reforms, very similar to trade unionism. The same thing goes for the true rebel: he is obviously not a 'yogi' (an abstentionist), nor is he a 'commissaire' (an extremist, a bloodthirsty bull). He is a moderate and clever man who analyses the situation and reflects upon it before acting. Camus adds with lyricism that this sense of measure is not a Nordic but a Southern way of thinking. The Greeks indeed worshipped 'Némésis, la déesse de la mesure'. That is why he uses the metaphor of mediterranean sunshine and calls this concept of moderation 'The Thought at the Meridian' (Camus, 2000: 243-270) - 'La Pensée de Midi'. In defining the essence of true rebellion, Camus provides his reader with a new moral conduct. As such, Camus appears to be a moral leader, 'one of the chief mentors of a new generation' (Cruikshank, 1959, 50) in John Cruikshank's words.

Though Camus occasionally maintained that he was only an artist, he definitely was a committed writer: he wrote pieces of 'littérature engagée'. And with *The Rebel*, he gained even more social and political responsibilities. We have indeed shown that with the publication of this book, he became a spokesman, an enlightened writer and a moral leader. At last the European people had found somebody who still loved them enough to speak in their name, to teach them and to define for them. As such, *The Rebel* might have created a revival of hope among its readers. Therefore it seems possible to agree with Sir Herbert Read.

L'homme révolté gave rise to a great deal of controversies in the French intellectual circles, to such an extent that Camus felt he had to write a *Défense de L'homme révolté*.

A first controversy opposed André Breton and the Surrealists to Camus. Both sides exchanged letters that were published in the columns of the magazine *Arts*. Another controversy opposed Camus to Merleau-Ponty

regarding the essayist's comments on the Soviet Union. Merleau-Ponty saw Camus as a traitor whereas Camus reproached Merleau-Ponty for supporting Stalin and the Moscow trials. But the most important controversy was the one that opposed Camus to Jean-Paul Sartre and the team of the latter's periodical *Les Temps Modernes*. Here, as before, the reason for the dispute was their diverging attitudes to Soviet Communism. Sartre and his friends, convinced that Marxism should be implemented at all costs, were supporting Stalinist Russia. Therefore they could simply not tolerate the ideas discussed in *L'homme révolté*. Sartre chose one of his collaborators, Francis Jeanson, to write a literary review of the essay. His article, entitled 'Albert Camus ou l'âme révoltée', was published in May 1952 in *Les Temps Modernes*. It was a harsh criticism of the book. Camus decided to reply and defend himself, but he ignored Jeanson and wrote a letter to Sartre himself, calling him 'Monsieur le directeur'. His article was published in August 1952 in *Les Temps Modernes*. Sartre retaliated in the same issue, in a text called 'Réponse à Albert Camus'. This exchange of letters marked the end of the friendship that had formerly united Camus and Sartre. As Sartre himself concludes, 'Notre amitié n'était pas facile mais je la regretterai'. This was the great quarrel in the intellectual France of the early 1950s.

In this sense the publication of *The Rebel* did not really lift a cloud. Rather it gave birth to a crisis among the French post-war intelligentsia. How could this book create hope among people, when it led their intellectual leaders to divide over the issues it dealt with? We might then question Sir Herbert Read's assertion.

Albert Camus was a man of contrasts. In other words, the most important feature of his complex personality was an ambiguous combination of optimism and despair. His vision of life was therefore influenced by this dualism. As Jean Grenier writes in his biography of Camus: 'Soleil et ombre. Si j'emploie ces deux mots, [...] c'est qu'il peuvent aussi résumer sa pensée et son oeuvre, sa façon de comprendre la vie' (Grenier, 1991: 12).

Yet Camus was more often prone to give way to his sense of pessimism. This was certainly due to his own experience of life. He had indeed been raised in poverty and suffered from an incurable disease, tuberculosis.

Camus became even more given to despair towards the end of his life. This was due to two main factors. In 1949, a severe TB attack worsened his tragic vision of life. Moreover, as a man born in Mondovi, Eastern Algeria, Camus was deeply affected by the troubles in his mother country between the French colonists and the natives. In the early 1950s, Camus was therefore going through a personal crisis: worried by both his health and the situation in his country, he was a profoundly unhappy man.

It is in this gloomy state of mind that Camus wrote *L'homme révolté*. No wonder then that it should appear to be a bleak book.

In fact, Camus's pessimism can be felt right from the start in *The Rebel*. In his 'Introduction' (Camus, 2000: 11-17), Camus asserts that we live in a world where murder has become a principle: 'There are crimes of passion and crimes of logic [...]. We are living in the era of premeditation and perfect crimes' (Camus, 2000: 11). Elsewhere in his demonstration, he condemns Europe, stating that it is 'ignoble' and only driven by one thing: 'slavery'. Therefore Camus thinks that we live in a criminal and tyrannical world.

Moreover, he claims that crime finds its justification in various nihilistic thoughts and ideas: 'Our criminals [...] have a perfect alibi: philosophy' (Camus, 2000: 11). That is why he barely writes any positive literary comments in his essay. For instance, he presents Sade as a 'Man of Letters' who believed that God is evil - 'The idea that Sade conceives for himself is, thus, of a criminal divinity who oppresses and denies mankind'. Sade then concluded that if He is an unjust and a bad creature, crime is permitted: in his own view, 'If God kills and repudiates mankind there is nothing to stop one repudiating and killing one's fellow-men' (Camus, 2000: 12). In Camus's eyes, Sade's doctrine of cruelty therefore engendered contemporary atrocities: 'With him really begin the history and the tragedy of our times'. In 'The Dandy's Rebellion' (Camus, 2000: 43-49), Camus recalls that the romantic poets such as Baudelaire claimed that men shall kill since God Himself dares take life from men: to them, 'Since violence is at the root of all creation, deliberate violence shall be its answer' (Camus, 2000: 47). Therefore they justified crime: 'This [...] authorizes murder' (Camus, 2000: 47). In a word, Sade and Baudelaire

legitimized evil. Their 'Metaphysical Rebellion', their nihilistic protest against a merciless God, has proved to end in some evil philosophy or philosophy of evil. It is true that these 'revolts' were not harmful per se since they were imaginary, being the products of writers. Yet Camus believes that they did pave the way for this era of crime. From Camus's viewpoint, they are in a way responsible for the disorder and chaos in this world.

There is now no denying that Camus's handling of the historical and literary past of Europe is rather sombre. When reproached for his pervasive sense of pessimism, Camus claimed that his attitude was rather that of an honest and lucid man than that of a chronic pessimist... It is true that as a thinker with intellectual integrity, he could not deny that Europe had been travelling on a gloomy road. Yet he definitely was a pessimist, and *The Rebel* shows signs of its author's feature: a general feeling of despair is at the core of *L'homme révolté*. Smiles are scarce in the essay - puns such as 'Sade's republic is not founded on liberty but on libertinism' do not abound. How could such a pessimistic book, written by a pessimist, instil genuine hope? Once again, it is possible to challenge Sir Herbert Read's point of view.

The beginning of the Cold War between the two super-powers, the US and the USSR, marked the late 1940s.

At that time there were still many European intellectuals who supported Russia against North America. Albert Camus made an exception with *L'homme révolté*. Like George Orwell in *1984* or *Animal Farm*, he clearly attacks Soviet Communism.

He initiates his sharp criticism of the USSR by presenting the philosophers on whose theories the Soviet system was based, Hegel and Marx (the latter being inspired by the former), as 'devils'. In 'The Deicides' (Camus, 2000: 103-117), Camus recalls that the Hegelian theory deifies history: it is a form of 'Messianism' since it claims that there is an end to history, and that the finality in question is synonymous with a flawless society. This attitude obviously leads to political cynicism: all types of evil are then justified, people's lives barely matter that much, all that matters is to reach the end of history - 'The end justifies the means'. Hegel then appears as a 'villain'. The same thing goes for Marx whose theory also

proclaims that history has an end. And in Marx's view this historical finale means the death of Capitalism and the birth of a classless society where the proles would exercise the power and where the whole community would live in peace and harmony. But in 'The Check to the Prophecy' (Camus, 2000: 177-191), Camus indicates that what Marx had announced did not happen: his society still does not exist. Marxism is a failure. Yet it is only logical that it should fail: Camus explains that it is impossible to imagine the end of history, it is a lie. The essayist therefore presents the main creator of the Soviet system as a liar.

Camus then goes on with his attack on the USSR, recalling that all the Russian revolutionaries who have tried to ensure the implementation of Marxist theories have ended up as murderers or tyrants. In 'Three of the Possessed' (Camus, 2000: 122-132), the reader learns that Pisarev, Bakunin and Nechayev took as their motto terrorism, cynicism and crime. In 'The Path of Chigalev' (Camus, 2000: 142-145), Camus claims that Lenin, the leader of the 1917 Revolution, strengthened the power of the state and crushed every single rebellion against the régime. The essayist then deals with the Soviet government of the time, led by Stalin. He asserts that Stalin exercises an authoritarian Socialism, which he calls 'State Terrorism and Rational Terror'. In Camus's view, the Soviet people are more oppressed and coerced than ever. He thinks that the Soviet government is not tolerant towards the individual but rather inhumane. Under the pretext of ensuring the implementation of Communism, Stalin has created an arbitrary state in which there is no freedom but deportation, torture and murder. During the Moscow trials, or 'purges', in the 1930s, Russian intellectuals and political opponents were indeed sent to concentration camps (gulags), or simply executed. Camus even draws a parallel between Soviet Communism and Nazism: to him, Stalin and Hitler do not have the same aims, but they use the same means - slave camps for instance. In fact, Camus presents Soviet Russia as a police state, a dictatorship. He claims that the USSR has become a 'Caesarian' (totalitarian) state.

Let us note that through this indictment of totalitarianism, Camus indulges in a plea for life: he extols human life. In this sense he expresses his love for mankind. As such, he behaves as a humanist.

However, in *The Rebel*, Camus deplores both the very philosophy which is at the heart of the Soviet régime and its actual application in the USSR... In other words, he speaks in very sombre tones of the past and present of Russia. When one reads his comments, it seems virtually impossible to have any hope regarding the fate of the Soviet Union and its people. Contrary to what Sir Herbert Read asserts, the essay must rather have unleashed a wave of pessimism as to the future of Europe's biggest eastern territory.

It is impossible to give a clear-cut answer to the question we raised at the beginning of this discussion. In fact, *The Rebel* is true to its writer's personality - like Camus, it oscilates between optimism and despair. It is a book of contrasts: its sense of pessimism is emphasised by a background of sunshine, and vice-versa. As such, *The Rebel* might have generated hope or enhanced despair among its readers, depending on the latter's personality, state of mind and interpretation when discovering the essay. Nevertheless we can assert that Sir Herbert Read went too far: he probably exaggerated the positive impact of the book.

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