

12. ABSURDITY AND SUICIDE: A REEXAMINATION

DANIEL SHAW

GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

ABSTRACT. Camus' central thesis in *The Myth of Sisyphus* is that suicide is not the proper response to, nor is it the solution of, the problem of absurdity. Yet many of his literary protagonists either commit suicide or are self-destructive in other ways. I argue that the protagonists that best live up to the characteristics of the absurd man that Camus outlines in the *Myth* uniformly either commit suicide or consent to their destruction by behaving in such a manner as to invite death. It is my contention that this raises serious questions about the validity of Camus' arguments that suicide is not the proper response to the recognition that life is absurd.

The central query in Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* is simple and dramatic: Is suicide dictated by the recognition of the absurdity of existence? He answers this question in the negative; yet many commentators have remarked on how singularly unconvincing his case appears.¹ Many philosophers (perhaps most) adopt a world view early on in their careers, and spend the rest of their lives working out the articulation of its consequences. Camus is one of the few with the intellectual audacity to "change horses in midstream". The most salient element in Camus' evolution was his affirmation of the supreme value of human life, and the demand for human solidarity which follows therefrom. This represented a considerable advance over the radical individualism (not to say solipsism) which characterized the *Myth* and some of his other early works. This development is widely recognized. Is it possible that Camus' answer to the central question in the *Myth* might also have been quite different at a later date?

Unfortunately, Camus does not directly address the issue of suicide in *The Rebel*. Murder is the action with which he is most concerned in this subsequent work. One must hence turn to his literary endeavors for further insight into his mature views. In what follows I shall argue that the most absurd protagonists in Camus' dramas uniformly either consent to their destruction or effect it themselves. My commentary will focus on the characters of Caligula and Nikolai Stavrogin, with passing remarks on Martha from *The Misunderstanding* and Mersault from *The Stranger*.

The reader should not conclude from the preceding that I consider Camus' plays merely as didactic vehicles, which couch philosophical arguments in dramatic contexts. These protagonists do, however, provide

interesting test cases for his earlier theses. Their acceptances of self-destruction cannot merely be dismissed as the result of a weakness of will or lack of sufficient resolve. Their deaths are highly motivated, if not inevitable, given their respective situations. They follow from a rigorous "logic" which closely follows the argument in the *Myth*, but with precisely the opposite results. I shall argue that once these protagonists reject hierarchical thought, and concern for the future, their destruction is assured by the passionate intensity of their encounter with the absurd.

I. THE LEVELING OF ALL VALUES: THE MYTH OF SISYPHUS

"The absurd", observes Camus, "is essentially a divorce. . . . This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of the absurd".² Humanity has precipitated this divorce by virtue of its impossible demands for eternal life in a rational universe where justice is served and love is permanent. One acting to realize such a world, or as if such an order already exists, is absurd "by virtue of the disproportion between his intentions and the reality he will encounter". (M 22) In the *Myth*, Camus allows for only three possible alternative responses to the recognition of this disproportionality.

One can commit what Camus calls "philosophical suicide", by committing oneself to a "leap of faith" in some absolute, transcendent values. This represents a form of intellectual dishonesty, which flees the consequences of a lucid admission of absurdity. Literal suicide is similarly viewed as escapist, for rather than passively accepting this absurdity, Camus exhorts us to resist it. "The absurd has meaning only insofar as it is not agreed to". (M 24) Rather than a rejection of the absurd, "it is just the contrary by the consent it presupposes. Suicide, like the leap (of faith), is acceptance at its extreme" (M 40).

Absurdity is a two-term relation, so to speak, between the universe and individual human beings. Suicide does settle the absurdity of an individual's life, by *ending it*, and the relation which holds between it and the universe. It does so, however, by cancelling one of the terms. The opposite of such acceptance is what Camus calls "revolt": "Consciousness and revolt, these rejections are the contrary of renunciation. Everything that is indomitable and passionate in the human heart quickens them, on the contrary, with its own life" (M 41). Two prime virtues are lauded here: the indomitability of a resolute will and passionate intensity. From these follow a natural affirmation of lucid consciousness and defiance. Both the literal and the metaphorical forms of suicide are deplorable: "It is essential to die unreconciled and not of one's own free will. Suicide is a repudiation. . . . The absurd man can only drain everything to the bitter end. . . . The absurd is his extreme tension, which he maintains constantly by *solitary effort*. . . ." (*Ibid.*, emphasis added)

The major challenge to such a revolt is the following: "Is it possible to live life *without appeal*?" (M 45). Without appeal to what? To any possible sources of meaning and value, be they theistic or historical, transcendent or immanent. Most fundamentally, the absurd teaches that "there is no future" (M 43). "Before encountering the absurd, the everyday man lives with aims, a concern for the future or for justification (with regard to whom or what is not the question)" (M 42). According to

Camus, these concerns have impoverished humanity and perpetuated our dissatisfactions, by leading us to sacrifice the joys of the present moment for the sake of some future goals. "Belief in the meaning of life always implies a choice, a scale of values, our preferences. Belief in the absurd, according to our definitions, teaches the contrary" (M 44-45).

It must be noted here that Camus is denying the value of all potential goals, either transcendent or immanent in nature. He is not just rejecting notions of eternal life; attempts to establish a more just and equitable human society are equally meaningless. No scale of values is adequate to meet the challenge of absurdity. The only viable option is continuous revolt: "The theme of permanent revolution is thus carried into individual experience" (M 40). Permanent revolution precludes adherence to any scale of values for a sustained period of time. Rejecting such hierarchical concerns, Camus seeks to supplant traditional systems of ethics, and their qualitative considerations, with a standard that is merely quantitative in nature.

This point is controversial enough to require further development. John Cruickshank, in his widely respected book *Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt*, claims that Camus does not interpret the absurd in the manner outlined above. Cruickshank thinks he detects an inconsistency in Camus' assertion that the chaste man can live as closely in accordance with the absurd as the seducer, or that the civil servant who is lucid can be considered the equal of the conqueror. He continues:

This view would be reasonable, of course, if Camus meant by the absurd simply the utter meaningless of everything. If he interpreted the absurd in the most radical terms, then all forms of behavior would be equally valid. But that is not what he is saying here, nor does he interpret the absurd in this manner. *By the absurd he means only the mind's inability to make contact with absolute truth*, and this is not at all the same as saying that the world is utterly meaningless in itself.³ (emphasis added)

This interpretation flies in the face of the passage cited above, where Camus clearly indicates that the belief in the absurd "teaches the contrary" of the belief that life has any meaning. In the absence of any scale of values, all forms of behavior are indeed equally valid. Rather than prohibiting any type of action, Camus contends that belief in the absurd merely entails a certain attitude towards life, one which maintains a resolute lucidity about the human condition, which should lead the absurd hero to revolt against this condition with a passionate intensity.

The tension in Cruickshank's interpretation is revealed in some of his subsequent comments, where he (correctly) observes that Camus had "second thoughts" about his concept of absurd heroism. Cruickshank's concluding remarks about these "second thoughts" hit the mark: "It is difficult not to believe that he does so because of the practical moral consequences to which his abstract theory of the absurd has led."⁴ It is precisely the implication that all forms of behavior are equally valid that has led to these troublesome "practical moral consequences", as demonstrated in the literary figures Camus subsequently created.

Returning to Camus' specifications, an absurd approach to living entails "indifference to the future" and immersion in the present moment. Ideals, which generate hierarchies of value, entail sacrifices for the sake of achieving them; in their absence "... then I must say that what counts is not the best living but the most living" (M 45). The pointlessness of the search for unity dictates the pursuit of diversity. Merely living a diverse existence is not in itself, however, constitutive of the "ideal" of the absurd hero. One must constantly remain conscious of the absurdity of one's state. Diversity must be linked to a calm, indifferent lucidity. This lucidity is the prime virtue of the absurd man, for it can make the civil servant the equal of Don Juan or the Conqueror.

Dissatisfaction with that most sublime of literary figures, the tragic hero, follows directly from the foregoing, for such protagonists consistently sacrifice all for the sake of the values which they hold. Camus envisions a different model: "They make us imagine that adventurer of the everyday who through mere quantity of experiences would break all records (I am purposely using this sports expression) and would thus win his own code of ethics" (M 46). In light of this, it is not surprising that one of the archetypes which Camus praises is Don Juan, interpreted as a "common seducer". The greatest benefit of such a life style is the enhancement of our freedom of action. To the extent that one believes that there is some purpose in or value to life, one's actions are limited by the demands which the attainment of that purpose or respect for that value entails. Rejection of any such values, according to Camus, represents a welcome freedom from bondage. Camus is here most concerned with the question "Free from what?", without considering the tougher challenge, "Free for what?"

What sort of life is Camus envisioning? He offers a number of examples in the section entitled "The Absurd Man". He clearly indicates that these are not to be considered role models in the traditional sense: "... an example is not necessarily an example to be followed (even less so, if possible, in an absurd world) and that these illustrations are therefore not models" (M 50-51). Yet they do provide the clearest indication of the content of the absurd life. Furthermore, his choices do seem to reflect his "preferences": Don Juan; the conqueror who seeks to transform existence; the actor who immerses himself in a wide variety of roles; and the creative artist. His discussions of Don Juan and the creative artist need not concern us here, but his outlines of the actor and the conqueror will be crucial to the subsequent analyses of Caligula and Nikolai Stavrogin.

Camus' notion of the conqueror does not entail a Napoleonic quest to master the world; perhaps the term cannot be freed from these unfortunate connotations. The conqueror's actions do have a majestic scope, however:

Conquerors know that action is in itself useless. There is but one useful action, that of remaking men and the earth. I shall never remake men. But one must do "as if". . . Knowing that there are no victorious causes, I have a liking for lost causes: they require an uncontaminated soul, equal to its defeat as to its temporary victories. (M 64)

The conqueror may be the epitomal example of the absurd man. His aims are the highest, and hence the certainty of his failure has the potential of being the most profoundly crushing to his spirit of revolt. It is in his refusal to be crushed that his greatness lies: "It lies in protest and blind-alley sacrifice. There, too, it is not through a preference for defeat. Victory would be desirable" (M 65). It is just that ultimate victory is impossible. The absurd conqueror must constantly maintain this tension between the grandeur of his designs and their ultimate unattainability. He must enter the stage of history and seek to transform mankind in his own image, knowing that his project is doomed to failure.

The absurdity of the conqueror is once again seen to be the disproportion between the nature of his goals and the limitations of his ability to attain them. As Sartre has observed, in a universe devoid of faith in a deity, men must seek to be gods. This, indeed, is the task of the conqueror:

Every man has felt himself to be the equal of a god at certain moments. At least, this is the way it is expressed. But this comes from the fact that in a flash he felt the amazing grandeur of the human mind. The conquerors are merely those among men who are conscious enough of their strength to be sure of constantly living on those heights and fully aware of that grandeur (M 65).

The conqueror must also remain lucid about the limits of this grandeur, carefully avoiding delusions. The "as if" nature of his actions must never be forgotten: "We do not want a strength that is apart from lucidity" (M 67). Like Sisyphus rolling his rock, the conqueror must never deceive himself that his task can ever be completed.

The actor, on the other hand, does not seek to transform the world, but rather, like a chameleon, to transform himself: ". . . ceasing to admire the play, the mind wants to enter in. Entering in to all these lives, experiencing them in their diversity, amounts to acting them out" (M 57). The key demand here is that the actor (and the truly sensitive spectator) must enter into these lives. "For that is his art--to simulate absolutely, to project himself as deeply as possible into lives that are not his own" (M 59). Acting is not a cold, calculating manipulation of thespian tools, an ideal that many theorists, most notably Diderot, have advocated. Such an approach would distance the actor from his role, in a manner which violates Camus' demand for intensity. Furthermore, the absurd actor, that "mime of the ephemeral", lives the life in which the ethics of quantity finds its most complete realization. Who, indeed, could satisfy the demand for diversity more successfully than an actor, with his panoply of roles? To discern the authentically absurd actor, the important thing ". . . is merely a matter of knowing how far he identifies himself with those irreplaceable lives" which he characterizes (*Ibid.*).

John Cruickshank thinks he detects a weakness in Camus' approach here. While this account satisfies the demand for intensity, "By insisting on the need for the actor to identify himself as completely as possible with the dramatic character whom he portrays, Camus largely ignores the conception of lucidity and weakens the actor's symbolic role as an absurdist hero".⁵ The technique urged by Diderot would be more conducive to maintaining lucidity, since it is a way of acting "mainly with the head" and not with the heart. Camus describes acting as a

process of "losing oneself to find oneself". Yet it is precisely such a loss of self that is prohibited by the demand for lucidity. I agree with Cruickshank that Camus has here failed to reconcile the demands of lucidity and intensity. I shall subsequently argue that these tensions are reconciled in the career of Nikolai Stavrogin, who assumes a multiplicity of roles, not on the stage, but in life.

What all of the examples of absurd men have in common is a lucid awareness of the pointlessness of existence, a leveling of all hierarchies of value, and a refusal to hope (which Camus contends is not to be confused with despair, and need not result in passive acceptance). While he confesses that his examples constitute extreme cases, he contends that in the extreme "the absurd gives them a royal power" (M 67).

At the end of "An Absurd Reasoning", Camus alludes to the passage in Nietzsche⁶ which asserts that obedience to some rule of conduct, at length and in a single direction, is the source of all values (albeit relative and transitory ones) for the sake of which it is worth the trouble of living on this earth. While Camus recognizes that such a principle could be the source of a truly profound ethic, he transforms this dictum into a blueprint of life for the absurd man. One must be resolute in one's lucidity, never allowing oneself the consolations of either philosophical or literal suicide. Revolt must be maintained at all costs. Such resoluteness is the source of man's true nobility, for "obeying the flame is both the easiest and the hardest thing to do" (M 48). The only irredeemable fate in such a life is premature death. Avoiding this, the absurd man, in all of Camus' examples and in his version of the Sisyphean legend, must be thought of as happy.

I have reserved comments critical of this view for a later section. In what immediately follows, I shall contend that the clearest examples of such absurd figures in Camus' literary creations are Caligula and Nikolai Stavrogin. They are consistently lucid about the absurdity of existence; in fact, the issue is the main focus of their conscious considerations. They consistently eschew any appeal to a future rendered meaningful by the pursuit of goals or ideals. Despite such resoluteness, they are the embodiments of self-hatred rather than happiness, and in the context of their respective plays, are seen to move inevitably towards self-destruction.

II. CALIGULA THE CONQUEROR

Caligula, Camus' first original play, is widely regarded as his best. Based on Suetonius' episodic account in *Twelve Caesars*, Camus is true to the events depicted therein, but explains their significance in absurd terms. Rejecting historical indications that Caligula's erratic behavior was physiological in origin, he interprets these bloody deeds as stemming from the emperor's recognition of the meaninglessness of existence.

In the play, Caligula's reign of terror is touched off by the death of his sister Drusilla, with whom he had an intense incestuous relationship. Beginning with the simple recognition that "Men die, and they are not happy", Caligula refuses to accept this fact, unlike most people who seem to come to terms with it without much trouble. Caligula considers such a "coming to terms" as escapism, and announces the project that will animate all his future actions:

I'm surrounded by lies and self-deception. But I've had enough of that. I wish men to live by the light of truth. And I've the power to make them do so. For I know what they need and haven't got. They're without understanding and they need a teacher, someone who knows what he's talking about.⁷

From this starting point, Caligula pursues an absurd logic, deducing theorems and postulates, and attempting to impose his conclusions on an unsuspecting populace. In this regard, his career is a perfect example of the character type which Camus calls the conqueror.

The first theorem which he deduces is that all actions and concerns are of equal significance: "Everything's of cardinal importance, I assure you. And everything is on an equal footing; the grandeur of Rome and your attacks of arthritis . . . all these . . . have an equal importance, from which it follows that none has any" (C 11-12). What this consequence amounts to is precisely a rejection of hierarchical thought and valuation.

Having rejected such qualitative concerns, Caligula claims that he has attained an absolute freedom hitherto unknown to mankind. As conqueror, with the power of an emperor behind him, he seeks to impose this freedom on all his subjects. In Caligula's mind, the way to do so is to violate all traditional values as radically as possible. The litany of outrages that he perpetrates to achieve this is horrible and unrelenting. He creates famine, executes innocents, violates marriage vows, confiscates private property and creates a state brothel, staffed by senator's wives. He kills virtually all those who could be close to him, culminating in his strangulation of his other sister (and mistress) Caesonia.

The only exceptions to this unrelenting series of horrors are linked to the only "virtue" which he seems to recognize: courage. He handsomely rewards a slave who would not admit his guilt in a theft under torture. He also spares the life of the man who poses the greatest threat to him, Cherea. Caligula himself destroys evidence that implicates Cherea in a plot to assassinate the emperor. This action has some further significance that will be subsequently discussed.

Caligula's pedagogical enterprise is, of course, doomed to failure. He never seems to delude himself on that point. He is merely giving the impossible a run for its money. True, the security of the patricians' lives is shattered by the chaos of his reign. Their only concern, however, is to rid themselves of the cause of their discomfort, and return to their secure existences. Only two characters seem to understand the profundity of Caligula's enterprise. Scipio, a young and talented poet, is perhaps most sympathetic to Caligula's world view. This, in spite of the fact that Caligula had his father killed before the play begins. When asked to join the assassins, Scipio can only reply "I can never, never again take anybody's side". In spite of this, however, Scipio is shoulder to shoulder with Cherea in the actual assassination, stabbing Caligula in the face. This has been overlooked by a number of commentators.⁸

Cherea, on the other hand, resists Caligula's absurd logic from the beginning. While acknowledging that he, too, has had fleeting desires to commit the outrages Caligula perpetrates, Cherea recognizes that happi-

ness in this world be would unattainable if everyone acted on such whims. The following exchange reveals the essence of their difference:

Caligula: So, I take it, you believe in some higher principle?

Cherea: Certainly, I believe that some actions--shall I say--are more praiseworthy than others.

Caligula: And I believe that all are on an equal footing (C 52).

Cherea, like Caligula, rejects the notion that life has some absolute, transcendent justification. This does not, however, lead him to assent to Caligula's conclusion that all actions are of equal significance. Prefiguring Camus' notion of true rebellion in *The Rebel*, Cherea affirms the value of human happiness, and hence is forced to reject the brutalities of Caligula's reign. Such an affirmation implies that some actions are better, and hence more praiseworthy, than others. Cherea kills Caligula without the hatred that characterizes the latter's actions, for he only sees it as required by his respect for human life and happiness.

This hatred for others leads inexorably to hatred of self. In the author's retrospective preface to *Caligula*, penned in December, 1957, Camus remarks that "*Caligula* is the story of a superior suicide" (C vi). Though he does not take his own life, he does acquiesce in his own destruction. Although he knew well in advance of its execution of the plot to assassinate him, he did nothing about it, and even spared the ring-leader's life, as noted above. In fact, he welcomes it, an attitude which is an anathema to Camus' conception of the absurd hero. He expresses his longing for death in Act IV: "Soon I shall attain that emptiness beyond all understanding in which the heart has rest" (C 73). A strange comment from one who had observed, in the immediately preceding scene:

. . . there must be two kinds of happiness, and I've chosen the murderous kind. For I am happy. There was a time when I thought I'd reached the extremity of pain. But no, one can go further yet. Beyond the frontier of pain lies a splendid, sterile happiness. . . (C 71)

The word "sterile" is precisely the one Camus used to describe the happiness of the absurd hero. Yet this kind of happiness does not insulate Caligula from the desire for death; it merely enhances it.

Caligula's self destructiveness stems directly from his warped notion of absolute freedom. He declares that "One is always free at someone else's expense" (C 28). He creates a famine because it is one of the ways in which this freedom can be expressed. By the end of the play, Caligula recognizes that this freedom has become a hideous compulsion to kill: "When I don't kill, I feel alone. . . . I'm at ease only in the company of the dead. . . . Only the dead are real. They are of my kind" (C 68). His twisted campaign to free mankind has turned into an alliance with the forces of death and destruction.

Caligula comes to this realization in his final soliloquy. Standing before a mirror, a recurrent motif which underscores his narcissism, he admits that his quest was not only impossible, but horribly miscon-

ceived: ". . . I stretch out my hands, but it is always you I find, you only, confronting me, and I've come to hate you. I have chosen the wrong path, a path that leads to nothing. My freedom isn't the right one" (C 73). Immediately after this, he is murdered. I have hence interpreted his dying shriek "I'm still alive" as an exhortation to his assassins to be sure and finish the job. As Camus observes in the preface: "Unfaithful to mankind through fidelity to himself, Caligula accepts his death because he understood that no one can save himself all alone and that one cannot be free at the expense of others" (C vi).

Does Caligula accept death out of cowardice? Was he insufficiently resolute in his pedagogical project? He pursued this reign of terror for over three years, and to such an extreme that it cost him his life. Surely this constitutes resoluteness. He had his doubts, but rejected them firmly in the following passage:

You decided to be logical, poor simpleton? Logic forever!
The question now is, where will that take you? . . . Too many dead, too many dead--that makes an emptiness . . .
Logic, Caligula; follow where logic leads. Power to the uttermost, willfulness without end. . . . No, there's no return.
I must go on and on, until the consummation (C 49).

His deeds proved to be the equal of his words. Even Cherea, his avowed enemy, must admit ". . . I cannot scorn you, because I know you are no coward" (51). Foreseeing his own death, however, Caligula takes no measures to avoid it. Only here does he depart from the specifications of Camus' conqueror type. What is the significance of this departure?

In my estimation, Caligula welcomes death because he has no more respect for his own life than he has shown for other's lives. He realizes that his project has caused too many deaths, and that the freedom he has sought is merely a license to kill without reflection. His revolt is purely negative, lacking the affirmation of some value besides egotistic brutality. In this regard, he falls short of Camus' subsequent account of true rebellion.⁹ More importantly, perhaps, he allies himself with the forces of nihilism, where his original protest against the absurdity and meaningless suffering in existence is transformed into acts of complicity with the forces of destruction.

This is the crux of the case I am trying to develop. In the absence of such an affirmation, it is impossible to answer the threat of nihilism. As Nietzsche showed in his allegory of the wisdom of Silenus, the true challenge is to offer some positive reason why the best thing that could happen is not that one had never been born, and the second best is not that one should die as soon as possible.¹⁰ Men do die, and they are not happy, and if suffering is meaningless, why prolong the agony? Caligula, in his willingness to die, expresses his inability to provide reason not to do so.

Camus' experience in World War II led him to recognize the necessity of such an affirmation. When first performed in the postwar Paris of 1945, *Caligula* was naturally taken to be an allegory of Nazi domination. The parallels are obvious, and do not bear repeating here. But Camus' affirmation of the value of human life, in the fourth of his *Letters to a German Friend* composed during the occupation, is particularly appropriate in this context. After accusing his imaginary German acquaint-

tance of complicity with the forces of nihilism and death, he eloquently asserts:

This world has at least the truth of man, and our task is to provide its justification against fate itself. And it has no justification but man, hence he must be saved if we are to save the idea that we have of life. . . . What do you mean by saving man? . . . I shout to you that I mean not mutilating him and yet giving a chance to the justice that man alone can conceive.¹¹

This is his answer to the challenge of nihilism. In the absence of some such justification for suffering, the confrontation with absurdity can only lead to an alliance with the forces of death, and to suicide. But perhaps this point can be made more clearly by analyzing the next work to be considered, Camus' adaptation of Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*.

III. POSSESSED BY ABSURDITY

In his preface to the play, Camus exclaims that Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* ". . . is one of the four or five works that I rank above all others. In many ways I can claim that I grew up on it and took sustenance from it".¹² This interest was also evidenced in the *Myth*, which contains an extensive analysis of Stavrogin and Kirilov. It is for these reasons that I take the significance of this story to be great in Camus' own understanding of the confrontation with absurdity and nihilism. Suicide is central to that confrontation, for both Stavrogin and Kirilov kill themselves as a direct response thereto. Yet the significance of their respective suicides differs greatly. For Kirilov, suicide is a gesture of defiance which he thinks will serve as an example to all humanity of how to overcome the fear of death and of God's retribution.¹³ Rather than a sign of despair, it is a messianic act of rejecting the superstitions which he sees enslaving mankind.

Nicholas Stavrogin, on the other hand, shows no concern for future causes, or for the well-being of humanity. His is the story of a man in search of convictions, of something to believe in that will give his life some sense of value. In the process, Stavrogin certainly has the greatest quantity of experiences of all of Dostoevsky's protagonists. He exhibits all of the "virtues" which Camus extols as constituting the proper response to the absurd, yet he hangs himself in utter despair and desolation.

His self destruction cannot be said to have resulted from a lack of courage. Stavrogin was a proven warrior, a cavalry officer discharged for constantly fighting duels (which he invariably won). Social scorn meant nothing to him, as the incident where he pulled the governor around by his nose, and then bit his ear, evidences. Yet he was not consistently outrageous or bloodthirsty. When Shatov strikes him full in the face, Stavrogin merely takes it. When the governor's son challenges him to a duel, Stavrogin fires his shots in the air, then stands there impassively while his opponent fires at him three separate times.

The diversity of the roles which he adopts suggests Camus' portrait of the actor, except that Stavrogin is playing at life, not on the stage. He tries on these roles temporarily, speaking as a political radical

or religious advocate in a convincing and charismatic manner. Yet he never truly believes in the positions he advocates; he always maintains the cynical reserve which considers all such affirmative views as illusory. In so doing, he maintains the lucidity which is so important to Camus' conception of the proper response to absurdity. This lucidity precludes any sustained convictions, and dooms Stavrogin's search for something in which to believe to inevitable failure. Camus quotes a passage from the novel that characterizes this dilemma thusly: "If Stavrogin believes, he does not think he believes. If he does not believe, he does not think he does not believe" (M 49).

His passionate intensity is evidenced by the galvanizing effect he has on all around him. All of the young women in the play are in love with him. Stavrogin is no Don Juan, however, but rather one who seeks to love, and to have that love give him some sense of hope. This is clearly expressed in his final exchange with Lisa:

I knew also that I didn't love you and yet I took you. I have never felt love for anyone. I desire, that's all . . . But I have always hoped that someday I could love, and I have always hoped that it would be you. The fact that you are willing to follow me gave strength to that hope.¹⁴

But his hope here, as in other cases, is not rooted in his own character. Stavrogin knows he cannot love, yet he also knows that it is this illusory hope that stands between him and suicide.

His intensity is also manifest in the influence he has on many of the male *dramatis personae*. Stavrogin will take a position, strictly on a whim, and argue it logically and passionately. Yet he never believes in any of these positions, although perhaps he might like to at times. In so doing, he plants the seeds for all of the main actions in the play, from Kirilov's sacrifice to Shatov's murder. He has no convictions that would lead him to revolutionary or messianic action. It is proof of his power over others that, without this conviction, he can move them to act on ideas he (temporarily) advocates.

Stavrogin's influence is incredibly destructive, albeit on a much smaller scale than Caligula. Although he never actually kills anyone in the play, his actions nonetheless leads to many deaths. Thinking a small child has stolen his pocket knife, he accuses her to his landlady, who beats the child severely. Stavrogin subsequently finds his knife, yet does nothing about it. The child commits suicide (as Stavrogin had foreseen).

This unfortunate incident sticks with Nikolai, yet even here he cannot feel true guilt. The monk Tihon discerns this immediately. By the end of the play, Stavrogin has caused the deaths of many more innocents. To do penance for the death of the child, he marries a crippled girl who worships him. When this marriage stands in the way of his dalliance with Lisa, Stavrogin acquiesces in the murder of the cripple and her father by the escaped convict Fedka. Shatov is killed by Peter Verkhovensky in an attempt to cement the loyalties of his revolutionary cell. The idea that murder solidifies a group came from Stavrogin. Lisa is killed after fleeing from Stavrogin's admission that he cannot love her. An angry mob formed around the house where the murders had

been committed, and they kill Lisa on suspicion that she was implicated in the crime that would free Stavrogin to marry her.

Stavrogin's suicide is not, however, motivated by an overwhelming sense of guilt. Rather, it is the result of his recognition that he cannot believe in anything and that life without convictions has become unbearable to him. He reveals this in his final conversation with Dasha, the maid who has loved him throughout:

Yes, I am strong. . . . I can do anything. I have infinite strength. But I don't know where to apply it. Everything is foreign to me. . . . I have never been able to hate anything. Hence, I shall never love. I am capable of only negation, of petty negation. If I could believe in something, I could perhaps kill myself.¹⁵

Since he does kill himself, he must have found some conviction which made this possible. From the foregoing, I would suggest that he came to the conclusion that life was not worth living in the absence of love, of hope and of value. Once again the theme of insignificance, of the leveling of all valuations, is sounded. If you cannot hate, you cannot love, for love entails that some things are more valuable than others, and that one must hate that which destroys what one loves. Affirm one thing as significant, and the flat plain of an absurd existence takes on relief, has peaks and valleys. Stavrogin had trudged that unrelieved plain too long and, despairing of the possibility of changing it, forsook life very quietly, in such a way that, "After Stavrogin's death, the doctors conferred and pronounced that he showed not the slightest signs of insanity".

Once again, the inability to affirm anything as valuable has led Stavrogin to suicide. Furthermore, Caligula and Stavrogin are not the only protagonists in Camus' works to reach such a bankrupt end. Martha, who aids her mother in murdering her own brother in *The Misunderstanding*, also commits suicide. Lest the reader think that she reaches such an end as a result of a cruel and unusual twist of fate, Camus has her pronounce the following generalization to her brother's naive wife, Maria:

But before I go to die, I must rid you of the illusion that you are right, that love isn't futile, and that what has happened was an accident. On the contrary, it's now that we are in the normal order of things, and I must convince you of that.¹⁶

It is her belief that such meaninglessness is "the moral order of things" that leads her to also end her suffering with a rope tied to the ceiling of her room.

Even Meursault, though he is to die at the hands of the state's executioner, may be seen as a self-destructive individual, precisely as the result of his indifference to everything around him. Why else would he pump four extra shots into the inert Arab's body? Meursault himself describes the import of those extra shots as follows: "And each successive shot was another loud, fateful rap on the door of my undoing".¹⁷ Maurice Friedman, in his book, *Problematic Rebel*, puts it aptly: "What is this murder-suicide but the involuntary protest of the self which has

been pressed in on itself so far that it has no choice but to explode?"¹⁸ This description of "the self pressed in on itself . . ." is a perfect characterization of the state of the absurd man, bereft of anything positive to affirm, lost in his own solipsistic nihilism.

IV. BEYOND ABSURDITY; HIERARCHICAL THOUGHT AND FUTURE CONCERN

The import of the foregoing analysis must be carefully delineated. I have tried to return to the central question of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and to argue, by using examples from Camus' own works, that suicide is the logical result of accepting the absurdity of existence, as it is characterized in his essay. Noting that his "arguments" against suicide are singularly unconvincing in that context, I have shown that a typical pattern emerges from examining the most absurd of his literary protagonists. These figures exhibit an indifference to the future, and a leveling of all valuations, which denies that any action is of any more or less significance than any other one. Such an attitude has been seen to lead to heinous and brutal acts, which are motivated by a disdain of, if not absolute hatred of, human life. The revolt which Camus advocates in the *Myth* is revealed as quickly degenerating into an inhuman life of crime, which results in these protagonists developing a self-loathing that is promptly transformed into self-destructiveness.

Camus' later conception of rebellion, as opposed to the revolt urged in the *Myth*, recognizes the necessity of affirming some value for the sake of which one is willing to rebel. One rebels against totalitarian governments, for example, for the sake of the value of individual human lives which such governments inevitably violate. The central argument of *The Rebel*, which seeks to establish a prohibition against murder, depends on this claim, for murder constitutes a denial of the value for the sake of which one has rebelled in the first place. Murder is hence anathema to true rebellion, for it contradicts the very basis of the original rejection.

The revolt advocated in the *Myth*, on the other hand, is a refusal to assent to the absurd, but only for sake of refusal itself. It constitutes an almost adolescent paean to revolt for its own sake, lauding the spectacle of an indomitable will struggling against the impossible. Hence, nothing in the *Myth* provides any ground for decrying the excesses of Caligula or Stavrogin, not to mention the more humble murders of Martha or Meursault. These figures are still at the stage of Ivan Karamazov: if everything is permitted, murder is of no more significance than cleaning one's nails.

In each of these figures, however, one finds a typical pattern. By not extending any respect to others, they end up not respecting themselves. More than that, they all end up in self-hatred. Stavrogin's statement is symptomatic: "I loathe and detest everything that exists in Russia, the people, the Tsar, you (Peter) and Lisa. I hate everything that lives on earth, and myself first of all. So let destruction reign and crush them all, and with them all that ape Stavrogin, and Stavrogin himself . . ."¹⁹

What conclusion is one to draw from this pattern? The self-hatred which results so consistently from these character's confrontation with absurdity leads inexorably to self-destruction. If this is a natural pro-

gression, then one must at least question Camus' original "arguments" against suicide. Perhaps a godlike character like Sisyphus can sustain such meaningless torture indefinitely. But for humans, there must be a reason for such suffering. Camus himself came to affirm this reason, in a passage which makes it clear why he rejected the label "existentialist":

. . . the affirmation implicit in every act of rebellion is extended to something that transcends the individual. . . . Analysis of rebellion leads to the suspicion that, contrary to the postulates of contemporary thought, a human nature exists, as the Greeks believed. Why rebel if there is nothing valuable in oneself worth preserving?²⁰

This affirmation of the significance of human life automatically re-institutes hierarchical valuations. Killing a person is no longer of equal significance to snuffing out a cigarette butt. For Camus, in *The Rebel*, human life occupies the highest rung of the ladder, and other things are to be valued insofar as they preserve and enhance the quality of those lives.

Along with hierarchical thought, rebellion also reinstitutes a concern for the future: "If the individual, in fact, accepts death and happens to die as a consequence of his act of rebellion, he demonstrates by doing so that he is willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of a common good which he considers more important than his own destiny."²¹ Progress towards the unrealizable ideal of perfect justice and respect for human life once again has meaning. In the *Myth*, he simply rejects such ideals because of their unrealizability. But progress takes on meaning when human life is affirmed as valuable.

ENDNOTES

¹ See, e.g., Cruickshank's *Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 46-48. See also Donald Lazere's analysis of the logic of the argument in *The Unique Creation of Albert Camus* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1973), 133-36.

² Albert Camus, *The Myth of the Sisyphus*, Justin O'Brien, translator (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 22-23. Further references to this text will be marked with an "M" followed by the page numbers from which they are taken.

³ *Op. Cit.*, Cruickshank, 84.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 85-86.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁶ Nietzsche is clear that such discipline leads to a "long un-freedom of the spirit", precisely the opposite of the absolute freedom which Camus praises in this context. See *Beyond Good and Evil*, section 188, in the chapter entitled "Natural History of Morals".

⁷ Albert Camus, *Caligula and 3 Other Plays*, Stuart Gilbert, Translator (New York: Vintage Books, 1958), 9. Further references to this text will

be marked with a "C" followed by the page number from which they are taken.

⁸ See, e.g., *Op. Cit.*, Cruickshank, 198 or E. Freeman *The Theater of Albert Camus* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1973), 52-53. The stage directions are explicit: "Caligula swings round to face them with a mad laugh. Scipio and Cherea, who are in front, fling themselves at him and stab his face with their daggers." (C 73-74)

⁹ True rebellion requires "A man who says no, but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation. He is also a man who says yes, from the moment he makes his first gesture of rebellion." Albert Camus *The Rebel* (New York: Vintage books, 1956), 13.

¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Section 3.

¹¹ Albert Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion and Death*, Justin O'Brien translator (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), 28-29.

¹² Albert Camus, *The Possessed*, Justin O'Brien Translator (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), v.

¹³ See Camus' excellent discussion of Kirilov in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 77-81.

¹⁴ *Op. Cit.*, Camus, *The Possessed*, 153.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 177.

¹⁶ *Op. Cit.*, Camus, *Caligula and 3 Other Plays*, 132.

¹⁷ Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, Stuart Gilbert translator (New York: Vintage Books, 1958), 76.

¹⁸ Maurice Friedman, *Problematic Rebel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 423.

¹⁹ *Op. Cit.*, Camus, *The Possessed*, 158.

²⁰ *Op. Cit.*, Camus, *The Rebel*, 16.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 15.