

FROM THE SAHARA'S EDGE

FROM THE SAHARA'S EDGE:
THE INFLUENCE OF THE DESERT
ON
GIDE, SAINT-EXUPERY, AND CAMUS

By

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A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree
Master of Arts

McMaster University

May 1967

MASTER OF ARTS (1967)
(Romance Languages)

McMASTER UNIVERSITY

TITLE: From the Sahara's Edge: The Influence of the Desert on Gide,
Saint-Exupéry, and Camus.

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SUPERVISOR: Dr. A. W. Patrick

NUMBER OF PAGES: iv, 74

SCOPE AND CONTENTS: A comparison of the experiences of Gide, Saint-Exupéry,
and Camus in North Africa and the Sahara Desert, and an assessment of the
effect of these experiences on their lives and work.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I should like to acknowledge with gratitude the inspiration and assistance given me by Dr. A. W. Patrick, Dean of Arts and Professor of Romance Languages, and the encouragement which I received from Professor H. A. Freeman, Chairman of the Department of Romance Languages.

R. C. G.

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CHAPTER I

THE QUESTIONS

Since the Dreyfus affair, France has been the conscience of the Western World. For seventy years the great moral issues affecting Europe and America have been vigorously and publicly debated in France. French authors, particularly the novelists, have taken leading roles in the debates. In 1897, it was Emile Zola who deliberately exposed himself to a libel suit for publishing his "J'accuse" letter. In his campaign to redress the injustice done to Dreyfus, Zola was supported by Anatole France. France's books continued, until his death in 1924, to show his pre-occupation with social questions. He presented the left-wing point of view; his contemporary, Barrès, was the champion of the conservative aristocrats and bourgeois. Between the two World Wars, two ardent Christians, Mauriac and Bernanos, wrote novels which illumined spiritual problems in an age of weakening fervour. In the Thirties André Malraux depicted his ideal heroes engaged in conflict with political and social injustice. Jean-Paul Sartre has survived many resounding controversies. Nowhere else in the world have the writers been so ready to inform public opinion and stimulate discussion on the moral questions of the times.

In 1897, the year of "J'accuse", the publication of a book entitled Les Nourritures Terrestres was practically overlooked. Yet the book had substance, and its influence grew slowly for a generation. To the young Frenchmen who survived the bloodiness of the 1914-1918 war, its exhortation to break with the past, and to live the present to its fullest, came at a

time when they were most receptive. They listened to the author, André Gide, more attentively than to their priests. In the decade of the Twenties, Gide aroused vehement disputes. In his own country, his influence on the morals of the young was deplored and defended in the public press. By the Thirties, this influence had spread beyond France. His international importance was acknowledged in 1947, with the award of the Nobel Prize.

By that date, French intelligentsia had recognized a new voice of authority. When France emerged from the Occupation, the young people of the nation had adopted Albert Camus as their "conducteur de conscience". His novel, L'Etranger, which was published during the war, had reflected completely the mood of his generation, bruised and bewildered by defeat, but nursing rebellion. After the liberation of Paris in 1944, Camus was revealed as the writer of editorials in the clandestine Resistance newspaper "Combat". From then on until his death in 1960, in editorials, essays, and stories, Camus took a moral stand on everyday issues, and thousands of young Frenchmen identified themselves with him. In 1957 the award of the Nobel Prize confirmed his international reputation.

Gide and Camus were two writers of the first rank whose leadership in matters of morals was felt beyond the borders of France. However, their influence penetrated into America very slowly, compared to the quick acceptance of a French writer of lesser status. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry became widely known there in 1939; his Terre des Hommes, under the title Wind, Sand and Stars, was adopted by a book club and became a best seller. His name became a household word.

It is not hard to see why Saint-Exupéry was acclaimed so much more readily than Gide or Camus. Gide's sophisticated adventures of the mind have a limited appeal on this continent. Camus wrote in a Europe devastated by war, and a European who has experienced war on his own street is more easily sympathetic to Camus' outlook than an American. On the other hand, the incidents that Saint-Exupéry describes might have happened in America during the pioneering age of aircraft; his heroes are larger than life, in the American tradition. Young North Americans have been brought up on stories of exploits in the air; they find an easy natural access to Saint-Exupéry's mind. In his books thoughtful Americans found moral guidance, just as thoughtful young French people did.

It is true that the names Sartre and Genêt are better known to young America today than Saint-Exupéry. It is true that the heroes of the space age have superseded Kermoz and Guillaumet. Yet in their own times, Gide, Saint-Exupéry and Camus had something to say to the young. They were often disturbing, sometimes exhilarating, occasionally comforting. For fifty years these three helped to mould attitudes and inspire action on two continents.

Moreover they contributed to what is being called today "the new morality". This is a phrase which is occasionally misinterpreted and even misrepresented in the mass media. Fundamentally, it appears to be a shift away from the rigid decalogues of the past to greater individual responsibility for one's conduct, and a new emphasis on dealing with situations separately rather than trying to apply absolute standards indiscriminately. Gide, Saint-Exupéry and Camus certainly did not invent these concepts of

morality, but they did popularize them. They embodied the ideas in stories, essays and plays which were instantly topics of discussion amongst young people. To understand the mores of the modern young generation, it is necessary to understand the "maîtres à penser" of the previous one.

It is curious that all three of these writers spent part of their lives on the rim of the Sahara desert. Camus was born and lived nearly thirty years in Algeria. Saint-Exupéry spent three years in all on the northern and western edge of the desert. André Gide made six visits to North Africa in the course of his life. No trip lasted more than four or five months, yet Gide made extraordinary claims about the effect of these brief visits on his life and work. He had written three slim books before sailing to Africa for the first time. It was in an oasis in the northern Sahara that his first important book, Les Nourritures Terrestres, was conceived and begun. Camus wrote in Algeria the two books, L'Etranger and Le Mythe de Sisyphe, which established his reputation. He took the manuscripts with him when he went to Paris in 1940. Saint-Exupéry wrote his first novel, Courrier Sud, while stationed at the desert air strip at Cap Juby. When he was posted back to France from this lonely outpost of the Sahara, he took the manuscripts to Paris.

Thus in the span of fifty years, three authors arrived in France with significant work that had been written within reach of the desert. In time, all three became established, whether intentionally or not, as mentors to a nation's youth, particularly in the field of morals. Their influence extended geographically beyond France, and has apparently continued to expand after their deaths.

Does the geographical origin of a work of art affect the work itself? In general this would seem obviously true. Malraux without Indo-China, Van Gogh without Provence, Sibelius without Finland, might have produced works of art, but not the ones we know. Geography is, however, only one influence among many -- the artist's education and experiences of life, the society that surrounds him, the stimulus of predecessors or contemporaries are other determining factors.

It is remarkable that the moral codes by which western Europe has tried to live for centuries originated in the desert. Both Judaism and Christianity were born in or near the Palestinian desert. They are not unique in springing from such a source, for Zoroastrianism came from arid central Persia, and Islam was founded in the Arabian desert. Is there some special quality in the landscape which favours insights into man's relationship to God and to his fellow men? Or is it that sand and rock offer no distractions to the serious thinker? Is life so harsh there that men are driven to think of compensations? Whatever the reason, it is an interesting coincidence that some of the world's most sophisticated religions had desert backgrounds at their origin.

Once again, in the first half of the Twentieth Century, serious and influential statements about the good life originated at the edge of the desert. This time it was the Sahara, and the moral philosophers, Gide, Saint-Exupéry, and Camus were also novelists.

Is geography responsible for this phenomenon, or is it mere coincidence? Can it be established from biographies of the three men whether the land compelled them, first to write, and secondly to write

about ethics as they did? Did they find inspiration in the desert? Or was it, perhaps, just a privileged position of detachment from which to meditate on the world's problems? Does the desert appear in their books as an essential background, or as a natural force? Is it necessary to be acquainted with their African periods to appreciate their thought?

Gide, Saint-Exupéry and Camus — how significant was the Sahara to them?

CHAPTER II

ANDRÉ GIDE

In April, 1952, the year after Gide's death, the Holy Office in Rome condemned all his writings and placed them on the Index of prohibited books. According to the charge, they were offensive both to morals and to faith, and young people particularly were susceptible to their fascination.

This condemnation was not unexpected, for Gide had been accused repeatedly of corrupting youth. He wrote in his Journal for July 16, 1940, that a rancorous article entitled "La Jeunesse de France" had just appeared in Le Temps. The writer deplored his wide influence "formant une génération orgueilleuse et déliquescence".¹ Gide refused to protest; he noted in his Journal: "Au surplus cette vieille accusation de 'corrumpere juventutem' met du bon côté de la gloire plus sûrement que les éloges".² He decided to leave it to his young readers to prove that he had not perverted them, knowing perfectly well that many of the young looked upon him as their "directeur de conscience"; they had written to tell him their gratitude.

Gide had not set out to assume any moral leadership. "Je me considérais d'abord comme un simple artiste et ne me préoccupais guère, à la manière de Flaubert, que de la bonne qualité de mon travail. Sa signification profonde, à proprement parler, m'échappait."³ As early as

¹André Gide, Journal 1939-1942 (Paris: Gallimard, 1946), p. 63.

²Ibid.

³André Gide, Journal 1889-1939 (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade; Paris: Gallimard, 1948), p. 1027.

1902, in the preface to L'Immoraliste, Gide stated that he was simply posing a moral problem, not guaranteeing a solution: "Au demeurant, je n'ai cherché de rien prouver, mais de bien peindre et d'éclairer ma peinture."⁴ In 1918, he wrote in his Journal: "Le point de vue esthétique est le seul où il faille se placer pour parler de mon oeuvre sagement."⁵

In these statements, Gide the artist is recognizing that artistic creations must have a life of their own in order to survive.

However, between 1924 and 1928, Gide published Corydon, Les Faux-Monnayeurs, and Si le grain ne meurt in quick succession. Each book was intended to disturb the moral order. In Le Voyage au Congo and Le Retour du Tchad, Gide set out to stir some social consciences. These books had the desired result; on January 30, 1931, he admitted to his Journal that, whatever his ambitions at the beginning of his career, he was by this time determined to make changes in his world. The occasion was the publication of the magazine Latinité, which devoted its January, 1931 issue to a symposium on Gide. Contributors had submitted articles from most of the countries of Western Europe, and several of them were frankly hostile:

Reçu enfin le numéro de Latinité, annoncé depuis si longtemps et contenant une 'impartiale' enquête sur mon 'influence' en Europe. Il est encore de nombreux critiques qui s'imaginent que, de tout temps, je me suis beaucoup occupé et préoccupé de mon influence et que j'écrivais dans le but d'incliner et me soumettre l'esprit de mes lecteurs. J'espérais avoir donné les preuves du contraire, mon unique désir ayant été jusqu'à ces derniers temps d'écrire des oeuvres d'art....

⁴ André Gide, L'Immoraliste (Paris: Mercure de France, 1902), p. 9.

⁵ Gide, Journal 1889-1939, p. 652.

Mais il est certain que depuis peu, ma position n'est pas la même. C'est aussi que j'y vois plus clair en moi-même, et veux beaucoup plus précisément et fortement ce qui me paraît beaucoup plus nettement le préférable.... Car dès que l'on entrevoit la possibilité d'un progrès, comment ne point souhaiter l'obtenir? C'est cette entrevue d'un progrès possible qui a si profondément labouré mes pensées, et modifié mon allure.

Gide may claim that his original purposes were artistic; the fact remains that it is one of his earliest books which excited the most commotion among youth. In the pre-World War I generation, this influence was mostly underground; but after World War I, young people looked to him for leadership. Society was stuffy, dominated by the authority of parents and the Church. In Gide's books the post-war generation found its inspiration and justification for rebellion. The Surrealists (the Existentialists of the first war) seized on his Le Voyage d'Urien and Les Caves du Vatican as precursors of their movement; furthermore, Gide publicly supported the Dadaists, who felt betrayed when his first post-war book was La Symphonie Pastorale, on the theme of self-deception.

When the first war ended, André Gide was in his fiftieth year. Chronologically, he belonged to the generation under scrutiny by people half his age. Moreover, the book which caused such disquiet among the young was older than most of its readers. Les Nourritures Terrestres had been published in 1897. Its circulation had been very slow; it had sold only 500 copies in its first eleven years, 1007 in the next eight. Until Roger Martin du Gard mentioned it in a novel in 1923, it had reached only a handful of readers each year. In 1966 this book is one of the four or

⁶Ibid., pp. 1026-1027.

five by which Gide is popularly known, and it still enjoys a steady sale.

What is there in Les Nourritures Terrestres which captivated the young, and, astonishingly, has continued to interest them? In irresistibly fervent language, the book sets down some impressions of a traveller in Europe and Algeria. It has this message for idealistic youth: Purify your heart, and follow its guidance.

One begins the purification by peeling off all the accretions that education and social life have left:

Tandis que d'autres publient ou travaillent, j'ai passé trois années de voyage à oublier au contraire tout ce que j'avais appris par la tête. Cette désinstruction fut lente et difficile; elle me fut plus utile que toutes les instructions imposées par les hommes, et vraiment le commencement d'une éducation.⁷

An illness had given the traveller an obsessive desire for a fuller life:

Il semblait que tout mon être eût comme un immense besoin de se retremper dans le neuf. J'attendais une seconde puberté. Ah! refaire à mes yeux une vision neuve, les laver de la salissure des livres, les rendre plus pareils à l'azur qu'ils regardent....

During his convalescent wanderings he met the shadowy figure Ménalque, under whose tutelage there occurred a renaissance in body and spirit. Now the traveller is impelled to tell what he has learned to young Nathanaël -- that is, to all the young: "Nathanaël, je voudrais te faire naître à la vie... afin que dans la volupté tu t'éveilles... puis me laisses... pour une vie palpitante et déréglée."⁹

⁷ André Gide, Les Nourritures Terrestres et les Nouvelles Nourritures (Paris: Gallimard, 1917-1936), p. 19.

⁸ Ibid., p. 29.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 47-48.

The object of stripping the self of all the overlay of civilization is twofold. First, under the veneer is the sincere being -- "l'être authentique".¹⁰ This sincere individual is valuable for what differentiates him from others. He holds within himself infinite possibilities which are repressed by education and codes of behaviour. Nathanaël is urged to remake himself by favouring the development of one facet of his unique self: "Ne t'attache en toi qu'à ce que tu sens qui n'est nulle part ailleurs qu'en toi-même, et crée de toi, impatiemment ou patiemment, ah! le plus irremplaçable des êtres."¹¹

This advice reflects Gide's profound conviction that man is capable of progress. Having rid himself of preconceptions, he can, by deliberate choice of activity, perfect himself.

Secondly, once detached from its cultural and social background, the self can hold itself available for any experiment, any experience which appears to promise satisfaction: "chaque nouveauté doit nous trouver toujours tout entiers disponibles."¹² The accumulation of culture, particularly of moral culture, impedes the full impact of a pleasure. Only the sincere self can experience sensually perfect enjoyment.

Not only is the baggage of the past to be abandoned -- Nathanaël is to be careful to travel light in the present and the future and to avoid responsibilities such as possessions, family or work. This advice is nicely

¹⁰Gide, L'Immoraliste, p. 61.

¹¹Gide, Nourritures Terrestres, p. 186.

¹²Ibid., p. 72.

tuned to the wanderlust of youth. Gide himself followed it to some extent; he travelled more than most Frenchmen; he avoided commitments which would compromise his freedom of action. His one departure from his rule was a brief and regretted conversion to Communism. His was the mobility which he advocated for others: "Jamais je n'ai su m'installer dans la vie. Toujours assis de guingois, comme sur un bras de fauteuil; prêt à me lever, à partir."¹³

The rewards for this rigorous "dénouement" are beyond price. The person who has sloughed his shell of acquired learning is ready to enjoy the myriad satisfactions that the world offers. The light of the sun, the music of fountains, the caress of the breeze, the sharp taste of fruit -- these intoxicate with restored freshness. Every landscape offers delight; every garden a multitude of satisfactions:

Tu ne t'imagines pas, Nathanaël, ce que peut devenir cet abreuvement de lumière; et la sensuelle extase que donne cette persistante chaleur -- Une branche d'olivier dans le ciel; le ciel au-dessus des collines; un chant de flûte à la porte d'un café -- à Blidah, où je me¹⁴ réfugiais, j'ai trouvé les orangers tout en fleurs.

The exotic is forever at hand. The sensitive youth is free to follow his desires, to drink at any spring. The summum bonum of life is the acceptance of a continuous succession of pleasures: "la perpétuelle nouveauté."¹⁵

¹³Gide, Journal 1889-1939, p. 997.

¹⁴Gide, Nourritures Terrestres, p. 153.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 133.

Withholding satisfaction increases desire, and the postponement generates a succession of desires:

Je vivais dans la perpétuelle attente, délicieuse, de n'importe quel avenir. Je m'apprais, comme des questions devant les attendantes réponses, à ce que la soif d'en jouir, née devant chaque volupté, en précédât d'aussitôt la jouissance. Mon bonheur venait de ce que chaque source me révélait une soif....¹⁶

This idea of exacerbating desire by tantalizing it, is frequently symbolized by fasting:

Ivresses -- de jeûne, quand on a marché de très bon matin, et que la faim n'est plus un appétit mais un vertige. Ivresse de la soif, lorsqu'on a marché jusqu'au soir.

Le plus frugal repas me devenait alors excessif comme une débauche et je goûtais lyriquement l'intense sensation de ma vie.¹⁷

This feature of Nourritures Terrestres displeased young Camus, whose uncle had handed him the book. Camus was not impressed. Yet it is basic to Gide's conviction that man can progress if he remains mobile and receptive. To Gide the hunt is more significant than the quarry. The pursuit of truth is more valuable than the truth itself. The life-long battle to reconcile the hedonism of Nourritures Terrestres with the Puritanism of his upbringing, every skirmish of which Gide detailed in successive books, is more important than the serenity achieved at the end of it. Man moves toward perfection. God is not at the beginning of creation, he is at the end of evolution. In Nourritures, Gide seems to have adopted a kind of pantheism. He was to become a non-believer some twenty years later:

¹⁶Ibid., p. 72.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 112.

Ne souhaite pas, Nathanaël, trouver Dieu ailleurs que partout.¹⁸

Où que tu ailles, tu ne peux rencontrer que Dieu.¹⁹
Dieu, disait Ménalque, c'est ce qui est devant nous.

For Gide there are no fixed positions. There are no immutable moral codes, no rigid social conventions. Gide's importance in the field of morals was to question what had been accepted for too long without question. It is interesting to remember that in the year of the publication of the book, the Dreyfus scandal broke. The Army Party in France was willing to overlook a terrible injustice for the sake of the principle of authority -- which in origin was perfectly legitimate. It was time to re-examine the principle. Gide was not a crusader, but in his circle he took a stand with Dreyfus. His target was to be the moral order, whose commandment "Do nothing to offend God" had degenerated into "Do nothing to offend". As applied to the Dreyfus case, this meant "Don't upset the Establishment". Les Nourritures Terrestres was to disturb Twentieth Century Establishments.

The book is not simply a handbook of hedonism. Paralleling the instructions to enjoy the fruits of the earth is an ethic of spontaneity in conduct. The pleasure Gide takes in doing an action is proof that it is good:

Je n'aime point ceux qui se font un mérite d'avoir péniblement oeuvré. Car si c'était pénible, ils auraient mieux fait de faire autre chose. La joie que l'on y trouve est signe de l'appropriation du travail et la sincérité de mon plaisir, Nathanaël, m'est le plus important des guides.²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 21.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 41.

Pleasure is the only trustworthy avenue for knowledge: "Toute connaissance que n'a pas précédée une sensation m'est inutile".²¹ One of the first truths that he recognized was that the morality of his youth had no more validity for him than the outgrown shreds of bark on the eucalyptus trees of the oasis: "leur vieille écorce pendait, protection usée, comme un habit que le soleil rend inutile, comme ma vieille morale qui ne valait que pour l'hiver."²²

Gide has drawn an exciting picture of the adolescent, free from the integument of instruction, free from the restraints of codes of behaviour, from church and family or property. This fortunate youth can roam the earth, justifying his actions only by the pleasure he takes in doing them.

But this is not all. Attractive as the picture is, there is not enough here to explain why Les Nourritures Terrestres caught and held generations of idealist youth. The secret lies in its final asceticism — after self-realization, self-transcendence.

The youth who has followed Gide's instructions to expose himself to all happiness, all vocations ("Assumer le plus possible d'humanité, voilà la bonne formule")²³ will know hitherto impossible joys. There will come a time when his capacity to absorb is overwhelmed. Then he will learn the joy of renunciation: "Le lendemain je n'aimai plus que le

²¹Ibid., p. 35.

²²Ibid., p. 63.

²³Ibid., p. 25.

désert."²⁴ The desert is the symbol of discipline and "dénuelement":

Après terre; terre sans bonté, sans douceur; terre de passion, de ferveur, terre aimée des prophètes -- ah! douloureux désert, désert de gloire, je t'ai passionnément aimé.

Life is harsh in the desert; its joys are brief and intense.

Death lies in wait, and the bleaching camel bones remind us to seize the present. "L'homme n'a qu'un printemps dans la vie, et le souvenir d'une joie n'est pas une nouvelle approche du bonheur."²⁶ It is this exhortation to dispense with the past, to discard the accumulated heritage of convention, which exerts a continuous spell on the young. The security of society has no appeal to them; the adventurous will risk crossing the desert in search of the oasis. Readers who saw only a list of sensual satisfactions missed the point. When Gide wrote a new preface for the 1927 edition of the book he reproached those who found it only "une glorification du désir et des instincts. Il me semble que c'est une vue un peu courte. Pour moi, lorsque je le rouvre, c'est plus encore une apologie du dénuelement que j'y mis."²⁷

At first Camus was repelled by the spectacle of Gide's hugging desire to himself in order to intensify its satisfaction. Later he felt the book's deeper value:

²⁴ Ibid., p. 161.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 164.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 54.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 13.

Bien avant que Gide lui-même eût confirmé cette interprétation, j'appris à lire dans Les Nourritures Terrestres l'évangile de denusement²⁸ dont j'avais besoin. Gide a régné ensuite sur ma jeunesse.

A fuller, richer life is the promise of Les Nourritures Terrestres, and a freedom regulated only by a personal, interior dynamic. But the promise is extended to those who take the advice of the Preface: "Et quand tu m'auras lu, jette ce livre et sors."²⁹

André Gide was the first to follow his own advice. The writing of Nourritures represented a position that he had achieved -- the extreme of sensuous desire. He had started from the opposite extreme -- an adolescent puritanism. All his life he oscillated like a pendulum between these two extremes. As soon as he reached one stand he abandoned it, as he now abandoned Nourritures Terrestres, to search for truth in the other direction. To Gide the search was a progress more exciting than the discovery.

His autobiography, Si le grain ne meurt, traces his life to his twenty-seventh year; the climax of the book lies in the metamorphosis of Gide the shy puritanical youth to Gide the bold immoralist of Nourritures.

André Gide was born in Paris in 1869. His father, a Professor of Law at the University, came of a Provençal Huguenot family. His mother's people were also Protestants, but from northern France. Gide liked to attribute his dualism to the combination of north and south in his makeup. He exaggerated; his Protestant background was the significant factor. When

²⁸ Albert Camus, "Rencontres avec André Gide", in Hommages à André Gide 1869-1951 (Paris: Nouvelle Revue Française, 1951), p. 225.

²⁹ Gide, Nourritures Terrestres, p. 15.

his father died, André was left, an only child eleven years of age, to be brought up by pious women.

His mother is pictured in Si le grain ne meurt as an uncompromising puritan. Close at hand was Anna Shackleton, who had been his mother's governess, and was now her esteemed companion. Miss Shackleton was an intelligent woman of the highest moral integrity. Not so intelligent, but free with advice, was Madame Gide's sister, Claire. Claire made sure that appearances were maintained.

André Gide became extremely critical of his mother when he was in his twenties. According to him she was never willing to relax her despotic control over all his actions. It is easy to see how her concern for her sickly boy could grow into domination. She saw that he had private tutors and trips to health resorts. She shielded him when she probably should have encouraged his independence:

à vrai dire je ne concevais pas que toute mère, consciente de son devoir, ne cherchât point à soumettre son fils; mais comme aussi je trouvais tout naturel que le fils n'acceptât point de se laisser réduire, et comme il me semblait qu'il en devait être ainsi, j'en venais à m'étonner lorsque, autour de moi, je rencontrais quelque exemple d'entente parfaite entre parents et enfants, comme celui que m'offraient Paul Laurens et sa mère.³⁰

In his early teens Gide came under the influence of two impulses which nourished each other. The first was love for his cousin, Madeleine Rondeaux. He saw her during summer vacations which he spent with his mother at her family home in Rouen. Madeleine was two years older than

³⁰ André Gide, Si le grain ne meurt (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), p. 357.

André, a reserved and serious girl who was determined to lead a virtuous life. He learned later that her aversion to any suspicion of sin came of carrying the secret knowledge of her mother's infidelity. At the same time that human love was awakening, he was experiencing a tremendous drive toward moral purity.

Since birth, his environment had been devoutly Christian; in his seventeenth year he was given instruction in his parents' faith, prior to his first communion. As many of his questions were left unanswered by the instructor, he was impelled to search the Scriptures:

Chaque soir, dans la chambre de ma mère et près d'elle, je lisais ainsi un chapitre ou plusieurs dans les livres historiques, un ou plusieurs dans les poétiques, un ou plusieurs dans les prophètes. Ainsi faisant, je connus bientôt de part en part toute l'Écriture....

Mais l'Évangile....Ah! je trouvais enfin la raison, l'occupation, l'épuisement sans fin de l'amour. Le sentiment que j'éprouvais ici m'expliquait en le renforçant le sentiment que j'éprouvais pour Emmanuele; il n'en différait point; on eût dit qu'il l'approfondissait simplement et lui conférerait dans mon cœur sa situation véritable.³¹

This reverent love for Madeleine, who is referred to in this passage as Emmanuele, persisted all his life. She represented his yearning for purity; after their marriage, he often left her in Cuverville while he went off to enjoy the sensuous pleasures of North Africa and elsewhere, but he always returned. She was one of the poles between which he oscillated.

At age fifteen, André began keeping a diary. His bookishness increased as he met with more success at school. Within a year he became

³¹Ibid., p. 211.

convinced of his own vocation of writing, and his first published book (Les Cahiers d'André Walter, 1891) incorporated pages of his diary. He intended it as a proposal of marriage to Madeleine; however, she refused his offer at this time.

His early twenties were years of increasing restlessness. He was convinced that he would never marry anyone but Madeleine, but she continued to reject him. He began to frequent the salons of Mallarmé and other Symbolists, and his writings showed their influence. Psychologists who examine Les Cahiers d'André Walter and the other books he wrote at this time find evidence of repression of normal sex urges. According to his autobiography, Gide had suffered since early adolescence from his impulses. They were associated with guilt and sin. He had tried, during the year of religious fervour, to repress them with cold baths and frequent prayer. Gide came to blame his puritan upbringing for his misery:

Jusqu'à présent j'avais accepté la morale du Christ, ou du moins certain puritanisme que l'on m'avait enseigné comme étant la morale du Christ. Par m'efforcer de m'y soumettre je n'avais obtenu qu'un profond désarroi de tout mon être. Je n'acceptais point de vivre sans règles, et les revendications de ma chair ne savaient se passer de l'assentiment de mon esprit.³²

He made up his mind to escape from this situation, and the opportunity arose when, in 1893, Paul-Albert Laurens invited him along on a painting trip to North Africa. Weeks before the boat was to sail, Gide sounded out Laurens, and both were of a mind to normalize their sex lives: "Et dans les conversations que nous avons avant le départ, nous nous

³²Ibid., pp. 280-281.

poussions, je me souviens, vers un idéal d'équilibre de plénitude et de santé."³³

The two young men sailed for Tunis on October 18, 1893. On an excursion south from Tunis, Gide caught a heavy cold which apparently led to a serious attack of tuberculosis during the winter. He also had his first experience of sex with an Arab boy. Laurens and he continued their journey to Biskra, an oasis on the northern edge of the Sahara in Algiers.

Here Gide's illness developed into a frightening condition. He was coughing blood, and his letters indicate nervous strain. The doctors diagnosed tuberculosis, the disease which had caused his father's death. Laurens revealed some of the situation to Gide's mother, who promptly rushed to Biskra to care for her son.

Madame Gide accidentally discovered that André and Paul-Albert were sharing an Ouled Nail prostitute in a "ménage à trois". There was a difficult scene, particularly when André maintained his intention to continue in the path he had chosen.

As spring came to the oasis, Gide began to recover. His convalescence made him wild with joy. In these weeks of ecstatic return to health are found the origins of Les Nourritures Terrestres. He had passed through the valley of the shadow of death, and the smallest detail of life was filled with fresh appeal:

³³Ibid., p. 283.

Certain matin, je risquai une promenade beaucoup plus longue; ce pays monotone était pour moi d'inépuisable attrait: ainsi que lui, je me sentais revivre; et même il me semblait que pour la première fois je vivais, sorti de la vallée de l'ombre de la mort, que je naissais à la vraie vie. Oui, j'entrais dans une existence nouvelle, toute d'accueil et d'abandon. Une légère brume azurée distançait les plans les plus proches, dépondérait, immatérialisait chaque objet. Moi-même, échappé de tout poids, j'avançais à pas lents, comme Renaud dans le jardin d'Armide, frissonnant tout entier d'un étonnement, d'un éblouissement indicibles. J'entendais, je voyais, je respirais, comme je n'avais jamais fait jusqu'alors; et tandis que sons, parfums, couleurs, profusément en moi s'épousaient, je sentais mon coeur desoeuvre, sanglotant de reconnaissance, fondre en adoration pour un Apollon inconnu.³⁴

On leaving Siskra, Gide travelled slowly north through Italy to Switzerland, where he consulted a well-known doctor about his health. As his strength grew, so did his delight in nature: "Depuis ma résurrection, un ardent désir s'était emparé de moi, un forcené désir de vivre."³⁵ Swimming and sunbathing gave him more sensuous pleasure to be distilled into Nourritures Terrestres. When he finally returned to France he took with him "un secret de ressuscité".³⁶

In France he read to his Symbolist friends a poem, La Ronde de la Grenade, subsequently incorporated into Nourritures. They could make nothing of the poem. Gide found that the "art-for-art's sake" salons were not interested in the vision of life he had brought back from Africa. On returning to Switzerland to convalesce in a mountain village, Gide used

³⁴ Ibid., p. 307.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 313.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 314.

the time to satirize their stagnation in Paludes: "Je passai à Neuchâtel un des plus heureux temps, dont il me souviendra. J'avais repris espoir en la vie."³⁷ Nevertheless, in his exalted state of mind he was repelled by the stern Calvinist Swiss, and in January, 1895 he fled to Algiers for the second time.

It was on this trip that Gide met Oscar Wilde. He had known him before in Paris and had admired his charm and his wit. Under the tutelage of this glamorous, luxury-loving Ménalque, André Gide decided that homosexuality was the norm for him.

The decision not to conform was of critical importance in Gide's life and work. By his resolution, he assumed the responsibility for a measure of human freedom which had previously been under the control of the Church. In effect, his rejection of one of the Church's prohibitions led him to question the rest of its authority. Gide felt that sincerity compelled him to be frank with his readers. Defending one non-conformity involved him in others. It is not surprising that the Church finally retaliated by banning his books.

From the moment that Gide concluded that he was a homosexual, this decision became the cornerstone of his immoralist protest against the absolute moral codes of his youth. Later on, his studies of Nietzsche and Dostoevski, both of whom suffered from neuroses, convinced him that an anomaly is at the heart of all creation, and that creative work is to some extent compensation for human difference. Shortly after his public lectures

³⁷Ibid., p. 316.

on Dostoevski in 1922, Gide published Corydon. This was a reasoned justification for his deviation that had been written much earlier. Naturally the publication led to renewed accusations that Gide was corrupting a nation's youth. The new outcries had the effect of hardening Gide's resolution to disturb the status quo.

It is apparent that Gide's experiences in Algeria had far-reaching effects.

At the time that André Gide was invited to go to North Africa in 1893, he was considering a trip to Iceland. If he had chosen the latter, would things have turned out the same? It is interesting (and completely futile) to speculate. The answer is: probably not. Modern medicine puts Gide, in his adolescence, within the range considered "normal" for youths. The long domination by women over his growing up, and his transfer of religious idealism to his feeling for Madeleine Rondeaux might have pushed him into abnormality. But he fathered a child, Catherine, born in 1922. His autobiography is biased evidence -- he wrote it long afterwards to justify the decision.

In his La Jeunesse d'André Gide, 1869-1895, M. Jean Delay suggests that Gide identified the puritanism of his upbringing and the inflexibility of the Protestant moral code with his mother, and that at this time relations between the two had become so strained that he had determined to harden his conduct toward her. In doing so he rejected all authority.

It is true that Madame Gide was importunate -- she had reason to be concerned. For one thing, André showed no inclination to settle down. Yet both his mother's and his father's families were hard-working people; his

uncles still did an honest day's work although they were fairly wealthy. Besides, she knew that, as far back as 1891, André had met and admired Oscar Wilde, and she could hardly have been unaware of the scandal that was circulating about Wilde months before his arrest in April, 1895. She opposed her son's scheme of bringing an Arab youth back to France. She changed her mind about the suitability of Madeleine as a wife for her son, and began to encourage the idea. It may be that she suspected that André's life was taking a direction that she condemned.

Yet it is hard to find, in a couple of pages of Si le grain ne meurt and in complete letters, the vehement quarrel which M. Delay demonstrates by quotations. André Gide is asserting his independence with some exasperation. Had he spent his teens in more normal circumstances, with brothers and sisters, and especially a father at the head of the family, he might have loosened the apron strings more gradually and far earlier. His independence had been delayed so long that he left France for North Africa deliberately expecting to make the experience a crossroads.

The events in North Africa were completely fortuitous. It is true that pederasty is not looked upon as particularly reprehensible there, but it was a complete accident that a boy initiated Gide. It was also an accident that Wilde was at hand. With another combination of accidents who can guess?

In Nourritures Terrestres, the gardens of Italy and France hold more experiences of sensuous joy than do the oases of Algeria. But it was in Biskra when the spring returned across the Sahara that Gide felt the surge of health that restored him to life. It was in Algiers that he decided for nonconformity and an independent morality.

When his mother, in March, 1895, wrote to him begging him to come back to France to make a break with his life in Algiers (Gide quotes the word "rompre" from her letter),³⁸ he had begun to claim for himself the right to establish his own moral code:

ce n'est pas à l'instant où je commençais à me découvrir, que je pouvais souhaiter me quitter, sur le point de découvrir en moi les tables de ma loi nouvelle. Car il ne me suffisait pas de m'émanciper de la règle; je prétendais légitimer mon délire, donner raison à ma folie.³⁹

Having taken this stand upon his right to his own morals, Gide returned to France. His mother died that May, and in October of the same year he married Madeleine. He acknowledges that his marriage cannot be easily explained:

Nos actes les plus sincères sont aussi les moins calculés; l'explication qu'on en cherche après coup reste vaine. Une fatalité me menait; peut-être aussi le secret besoin de mettre au défi ma nature; car, Emmanuele, n'était-ce pas la vertu même que j'aimais? C'était le ciel que mon enfer épousait.

It is hard not to believe that, to some extent, Gide postures before posterity in his autobiography.

All Gide's books were written in self-defence. In them he justified one after another of the contradictions of his nature. Les Nourritures Terrestres was a book exalting desire and individualism. If a character

³⁸ Ibid., p. 355.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 364.

could be created who carried out Gide's advice, beyond reason, what would be the result?

Gide deliberately isolated the tendency to individualism which he found inside himself and embodied it in a character. This was his ordinary method of germinating a book -- later he took the opposite tendency, renunciation, and created Aliissa of La Porte Etroite. However, the embodiment of nonconformity is Michel of L'Immoraliste. This récit not only explores a part of Gide's nature; it also contains details which are obviously autobiographical.

Michel, the devout scholar, undergoes the experience of falling ill in the desert and recovering. From his brush with death, he returns with a new vision of the world. Things which had been important no longer seem so -- Michel resolves to discard his learning because it is concerned with the past, which is dead. He trims away all the veneer which education has given him, and uncovers his primitive, unique self. Once this elemental self has taken charge, the process of dénuement proceeds furiously -- work, estates, friends, wealth disappear, and finally Michel's wife, who has suffered both physical and mental torture in this ruin, dies abandoned. Michel is free -- but it is a pointless freedom since he has no idea what to do with it. In addition, it has cost a great deal of suffering to other people.

Gide seems to be taking back, in L'Immoraliste, the freedom and joy he promised in Nourritures. Really, he is pointing out that the individualism of Nourritures must not be carried to extremes; that the moral code must be examined and tested as minutely as any other.

From the oases of North Africa, Gide returned to France with his discoveries for his generation. The self, he proclaimed, needs constant refinement, to keep it supple and receptive for the warm pleasures of nature. Eventually, in the course of living, we acquire so many habits, so many prejudices, that they form a shell inside which we stagnate. We must regularly test our ideas for validity. For the world outside the mind, his advice is the same -- no matter how dignified with age our laws and institutions are, they need constant re-examination.

CHAPTER III

ANTOINE DE SAINT-EXUPÉRY

On March 31, 1931, André Gide noted in his Journal that he had enjoyed seeing Antoine de Saint-Exupéry again. The pilot was visiting his sister at Agay on the Riviera; he had just returned from South America, bringing with him his fiancée and the manuscript of Vol de Nuit, for which Gide was to write the preface.

On this occasion Saint-Exupéry related the story of Guillaumet's forced landing in the Andes. Guillaumet's obstinate courage kept him struggling towards civilization, through rugged mountains in midwinter for five days and four nights. Gide was one of the first to be thrilled by this heroism; when Saint-Exupéry incorporated the account into Terre des Hommes, thousands of readers rejoiced that man is capable of such nobility.

Later that year, in the preface for Vol de Nuit, Gide wrote:

Je crois que ce qui me plaît surtout dans ce récit frémissant, c'est sa noblesse. Les faiblesses, les abandons, les déchéances de l'homme, nous les connaissons de reste et la littérature de nos jours n'est que trop habile à les dénoncer; mais ce surassement de soi qu'obtient la volonté tendue c'est là ce que nous avons surtout besoin qu'on nous montre.¹

What attracted Gide in Saint-Exupéry's stories is what still attracts us all -- their nobility. His characters are virile, courageous; their actions are generous. The tone of his work is optimistic. Both in

¹ Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Vol de Nuit, Préface d'André Gide (Paris: Gallimard, 1931), pp. xii-xiii.

his career and in his books Saint-Exupéry seems a modern knight-errant.

Where Camus and Sartre looked at the world and saw absurdity and despair, Saint-Exupéry found hope and meaning. It was the same world that all three saw -- for Saint-Exupéry, as for the others, no Providence protected solitary man from the hostility of nature, no immortality justified his sufferings. But Saint-Exupéry had a different point of view. From an aircraft, he saw the world in a new perspective. No longer obliged to stick to the highways, the pilot could strike off in a straight line to his destination. Once away from the roads, and the river valleys they serve, he becomes sharply aware that the earth is only partly hospitable to man: "Cette planète, nous l'avons crue humide et tendre."² Most of the earth's surface is rock and sand, a mineral landscape "où la vie, quelquefois, comme un peu de mousse au creux des ruines, ici et là se hasarde à fleurir".³

Moreover, this earth is swept by elemental forces. Sandstorms swirl out of the desert, cyclones in Patagonia scour every vestige of life off the rocks. Blizzards in the mountains isolate the adventurous pioneers in their valleys. In the intense heat of the Libyan desert, a man can last only nineteen hours without water. Man is at home only in scattered settlements.

At night, above the pampas of Argentina, a lonely light marks an outpost on the frontier of man's domain. But by night a pilot looks away

²Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Terre des Hommes (Paris: Gallimard, 1939), p. 71.

³Ibid., p. 72.

from man to the universe. The aviator who flies at night looks up to the stars to aid his navigation. The constellations lead to meditation on our own planet; when one has been gravely strolling "les cent pas de la Grande Course au Sagittaire",⁴ the earth diminishes to a small ball sailing through space.

From an aircraft man seems to have a precarious foothold on this planet. His villages are dispersed and inconsequential. Time destroys his work -- twenty centuries for a temple, twenty seconds for an aircraft lost above the clouds. Man is pathetically vulnerable: "Maladie, accident, razou, combien de menaces chement! L'homme est cible sur terre pour des tireurs secrets."⁵

It is precisely this vulnerability which gives living its value. Life is rare and precious on the earth when one searches for it from the cockpit of a plane; life is a miracle on this moonscape of lava and salt. The optimism of Saint-Exupéry's work, the noble qualities of his people have their origin in this: the aviator saw that by their own efforts men have sustained themselves for generations in a hostile environment. Before he began to write, Saint-Exupéry the pilot knew that life was good. If life is intrinsically good, it follows that what prolongs life must be good. Machines, which are tools to subdue nature -- and the aircraft is just another tool -- help to master the physical world. Courage, responsibility, tolerance, obedience -- these qualities build the Citadel

⁴Ibid., p. 32.

⁵Ibid., p. 110.

which shelters man from his enemies. Institutions which nurture the generations make the Empire outlast the individual. Whatever effort promotes civilization has value because it serves life.

High over the desert, Saint-Exupéry looked down to discern the frailty of man; in his vocation of flying, he discovered man's salvation. As a pilot for the Lignes Latécoère, Saint-Exupéry spent about three years in the Sahara. For about eighteen months he flew the mail between Toulouse and Dakar, and for the rest of the time he supervised the landing-field at Cape Juby, in unsubdued Spanish territory.

It is difficult to imagine the monotony of three thousand kilometres of desert. The tired old Breguet aircraft frequently broke down in flight, "dans un grand tintamarre de vaisselle brisée".⁶ The pilot who was lucky enough to find a smooth spot to land was stranded without radio, to perish of heat stroke or thirst or to die at the hands of a Moor. For a Moor, killing an infidel was a passport to Paradise. At Juby, it was Saint-Exupéry's job to find the forced-down machines before the Moors did, and to rescue crew and craft from the sands. If he were late, he had to try to ransom the pilot; this meant venturing into tribal territory, in a country where Spanish control stopped at a distance of a rifle shot from their forts.

The risks were high, but the rewards were precious. The Air Line enterprise was idealistic; but to one who had observed man's lonely condition, what satisfaction in pioneering a network that annihilated

⁶Ibid., p. 6.

distance and time! Love letters or business, the mail was a sacred trust, and the pilot was a modern Hermes:

Chaque camarade, ainsi, confondu dans l'équipe anonyme sous le sombre ciel d'hiver de Toulouse, avait senti grandir en lui le souverain qui, cinq heures plus tard, abandonnant derrière lui les pluies et les neiges du Nord, répudiant l'hiver, réduirait le régime du moteur et commencerait sa descente en plein été, dans le soleil éclatant d'Alicante.⁷

This is a god-like creature who can step across mountain ranges and seas, from one season to another, in the service of humanity.

Such a vocation gives meaning to life. The pilot is responsible for the success of this undertaking and is conscious of contributing to his civilization. Or he is responsible for the rescue of a pilot comrade. The mechanic who tunes the motor and the clerk who works all night to ensure the trans-shipment of the cargo may not be fully aware of their importance in the scheme of things, but they know that they belong: "C'est sentir, en posant sa pierre, que l'on contribue à bâtir le monde."⁸

This sense of belonging, of being needed, is a by-product of a life of action: "La grandeur d'un métier est peut-être, avant tout, d'unir des hommes; il n'est qu'un luxe véritable, et c'est celui des relations humaines."⁹ Both Saint-Exupery and Camus offer the same warm advice to the man who feels isolated from his contemporaries: lend a hand in worthwhile work.

⁷ Ibid., p. 20.

⁸ Ibid., p. 62.

⁹ Ibid., p. 44.

If the endeavour has an element of risk, comrades who share the danger are conscious of the ties which bind them. These exciting moments hold a kind of exaltation. Saint-Exupéry describes one such experience in Terre des Hommes. A mail plane had been forced down, by a broken piston, in unsubdued territory. The first rescue plane which landed beside it had a slight accident which prevented it from taking off again. Finally Saint-Exupéry landed in the second rescue plane. They decided to repair the first, but doing so meant waiting until dawn.

They lit candles and put them in packing boxes, partly to protect the flames from the wind and partly to conceal them from the eyes of any passing Moor. Here, grouped together "sur l'écorce nue de la planète, dans un isolement des premières années du monde",¹⁰ they spent the night, recalling memories, joking and singing. The occasion had all the fervour of Christmas:

Et cependant nous étions infiniment pauvres. Du vent, du sable, des étoiles. Un style dur pour trappistes. Mais sur cette nappe mal éclairée, six ou sept hommes qui ne possédaient plus rien au monde, sinon leurs souvenirs, se partageaient d'invisibles richesses.

On occasions like this the fliers had a sense of penetrating a world where each man communed with all men, effortlessly, with love. From such experiences they returned refreshed, to bear witness to their solidarity.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 46.

¹¹Ibid., p. 47.

Saint-Exupéry realized still another virtue from his "métier". Flying for an Airline in the mid 1920's was hazardous -- the equipment was old, the landing fields were primitive, the meteorological services non-existent. Yet it was essential for the mail to get through regularly, on time. No one was allowed to fail. The chief executive of the company was M. Didier Daurat, who enforced a strict discipline. In Vol de Nuit, Saint-Exupéry pictured M. Daurat in the character Rivière. Rivière was harsh. Carelessness on the part of a mechanic, even though it did no harm, was punished by a stiff fine. A late take-off meant an automatic deduction. Stern measures were justified: "Suis-je juste ou injuste? Je l'ignore. Si je frappe, les pannes diminuent....Si j'étais très juste, un vol de nuit serait chaque fois une chance de mort."¹²

The men accepted this discipline which was so obviously grounded in reason. At the same time, in the exact performance of their duty, they were forced to give their best. Mediocrity was abhorrent. Mermoz, assigned to find a route through the Andes amid peaks 21,000 feet high, in an aircraft whose ceiling was 16,000, repeatedly tried to thread his way through valleys, skimming over passes, never knowing when he would be dashed to earth in a down-draft or cut off by a snow squall. Once he was forced down on a plateau at 12,000 feet. After two days of fruitless searching for a way down the precipitous walls, he started his motor and launched himself over the edge. His luck held, and he reached the Chilean plain. He had found a route.

¹²Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Vol de Nuit, p. 69.

Such challenges made Mermoz one of the great fliers of history. Few vocations require an equal heroism, but those which require a man to be creative elevate him to his highest development. Man is a creature of infinite possibilities. Those vocations which constrain him to use all his talents contribute most to his growth. Happiness is incidental.

The patriarch of Citadelle said: "Le bonheur n'est que chaleur des actes et contentement de la création."¹³

In the service of a vocation a man exchanges his time, his skill and his effort to make a gift to his civilization. It may be a thing of beauty — an altar cloth or a silver ewer for the temple or the Citadel. It may be a tool, such as a machine, or an institution, such as an Air Line. After his death, which is simply a natural consequence of life, the best of man lives on. Civilization is "la somme des dons".¹⁴ From generation to generation, individual efforts are helping man's slow evolution upward: "Quelle mystérieuse ascension! D'une lave en fusion, d'une pâte d'étoile, d'une cellule vivante germée par miracle nous sommes issus, et, peu à peu nous nous sommes élevés jusqu'à écrire des cantates et à peser des voies lactées."¹⁵ The evolution remains unfinished: "Il faut, dans la nuit, lancer des passerelles."¹⁶

¹³ Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Citadelle (277^e éd., Paris: Gallimard, 1948), p. 45.

¹⁴ Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Pilote de Guerre (Paris: Gallimard, 1942), p. 233.

¹⁵ Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Terre des Hommes, p. 247.

¹⁶ Ibid.

How does one discover the sovereign vocation? Saint-Exupéry does not know. Some men he has seen who rose to great heights, once in their lives in a time of emergency, only to slump back into the mass: "faute d'occasions nouvelles, faute de terrain favorable, faute de religion exigeante, ils se sont rendormis sans avoir cru en leur propre grandeur."¹⁷ How he came into his own calling he cannot explain, but he knows it is exceptional: "Nuits aériennes, nuits du désert...ce sont là des occasions rares, qui ne s'offrent pas à tous les hommes."¹⁸

One thing is certain -- war is not a vocation. True, it produces comradeship, and devotion to duty, but it serves death:

La guerre n'est point une aventure véritable, elle n'est qu'un ersatz d'aventure. L'aventure repose sur la richesse des liens qu'elle établit, des problèmes qu'elle pose, des créations qu'elle provoque. Il ne suffit pas, pour transformer en aventure le simple jeu de pile ou face, d'engager sur lui la vie et la mort. La guerre n'est pas une aventure. La guerre est une maladie. Comme le typhus.¹⁹

Yet Saint-Exupéry chose deliberately to fight in World War II, and three times used the influence of powerful friends to arrange a posting to a fighting unit. In 1939, he wrote:

Je n'ai pas le goût de la guerre, mais il m'est impossible de rester à l'arrière et de ne pas prendre ma part de risques. Je veux faire la guerre par amour et par religion intérieure. Je ne puis pas ne pas participer.²⁰

¹⁷Ibid., p. 221.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Pilote de Guerre, p. 10.

²⁰Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Lettres à sa mère (53 éd., Paris: Gallimard, 1955), pp. 26-27.

He was posted to 2/33 Reconnaissance Squadron, and through his participation he confirmed and clarified and enlarged some of the insights he had glimpsed in the desert.

In the desert he had at times felt moments of intense joy, especially under the stimulus of danger and in the act of helping his fellow pilots. Such a radiant sense of communion occurred on a mission to Arras. He was sullen and discouraged at take-off; the futility of the mission in this moment of chaotic retreat was plain to everyone, even to those who ordered it; death was all but inevitable. The world had turned absurd in the existential sense; refugees streamed down the roads like a black syrup, leaving behind village churches where the clocks had all stopped. Life was running wild: "C'est un été qui se détraque. Un été en panne."²¹ He felt that he was performing some ritual for a dead god.

Yet in the course of the flight, harried by fighters and anti-aircraft fire, he felt his despair ebb away, to be replaced by a tired elation. By choosing this vocation of reconnaissance pilot, by participating even to the point of sacrifice, if need be, he was forging ties to bind himself to his fellow airmen, to his village, to France -- in fact, to the Universal Man incarnated in all men. This sense of fusion was not rational, but emotional. Analytic reason holds aloof from what it is examining and dissecting; Saint-Exupéry felt a swelling emotion of plenitude, of the cohesive force of love.

The turning point in his mind between the chaos of absurdity and the oneness of his vision came with a memory of childhood. He had been

²¹ Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Pilote de Guerre, p. 10.

happy in the big old house surrounded by a walled garden, with a brother and three sisters to lead in play. He had been safe and protected then. Not so now: "Une fois homme, on vous laisse aller."²² Nevertheless he was exposing his fragile flesh to the shrapnel in defense of the values that the house represented:

Il me semble désormais entrevoir mieux ce qu'est une civilisation. Une civilisation est un héritage de croyances, de coutumes et de connaissances, lentement acquises au cours des siècles, difficiles parfois à justifier par la logique, mais qui se justifient d'elles-mêmes.²³

His civilization is the heir of Christian values and he consented to the risks involved in defending it:

On meurt pour une maison. Non pour des objets et des murs. On meurt pour une cathédrale. Non pour des pierres. On meurt pour un peuple. Non pour une foule. On meurt par amour de l'Homme, s'il est clef de voûte d'une Communauté. On meurt pour cela seul dont on peut vivre.²⁴

At the moment when the aircraft is forging links to bind all men together, the western world has lost the comprehensive view of Mankind. In the scramble for material possessions we have forgotten man's spiritual nature. War is a disease that attacks the unitive Spirit.

By his participation in the war Saint-Exupéry renewed his perception, first experienced in the desert, of the spiritual union of all men. By his sacrifice, he earned the right to assert this solidarity.

²² Ibid., p. 157.

²³ Ibid., p. 105.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 237-238.

The word "Homme", capitalized in this connection by Saint-Exupéry, represents the universal Man, united in Spirit, greater than the sum of individuals. The "Communauté" or Society through which, in diverse ways, the universal Man is expressed, has rights which often conflict with the individual's rights, and Saint-Exupéry was almost alone amongst writers in maintaining the rights of the Collective. He had a horror of such collectives as Fascism or Communism. He brooded over these ant-hill civilizations which crush creativity. In what is probably his last letter before his death in action, he wrote of his distrust of the future under such organizations: "Si je suis descendu, je ne regretterai absolument rien. La termitière future m'épouvante et je hais leur vertu de robots. Moi, j'étais fait pour être jardinier."²⁵ In the society which he envisaged, the individual consented to a certain abridgement of his liberty, but he found a compensating freedom in creative activity.

This society is suggested, rather than described, in the diffuse posthumous book Citadelle. In some respects, it was a disservice to Saint-Exupéry to publish the book in its present form. Much of it was dictated late at night to a tape recorder, to be typed and filed by a secretary. Some of the chapters were written during the last months of Saint-Exupéry's life. He had been removed from active service for crashing a fast plane. His books were banned in Algeria. Dr. Pelissier, who saw a good deal of him at this time, reports that he was suffering from a neurotic anxiety before he succeeded in persuading the authorities to post

²⁵Pierre Dalloz, "Dernières Rencontres", in Saint-Exupéry, Textes de L.-F. Fargue, et al. (Confluences, Nos. 12-14, Paris, 1944), p. 166.

him back to active operational duties. It seems hardly fair to publish work produced in such circumstances, especially since he did not edit, before his death, the trunk full of manuscripts which went into the book.

Citadelle depicts a mediaeval patriarch ruling a remote desert kingdom. This king imposes order and directs the activities of his subjects. He envelops his people in his love; nevertheless, he is arbitrary and careless of justice. He is a later development of Rivière, the Air Line Director of Vol de Nuit. Rivière was responsible for the success of a vast enterprise. When he disciplined a workman, or ordered a pilot into danger, he did so without showing emotion: "L'événement en marche compte seul."²⁶ He was aware of Fabien's right, as an individual, to the warmth and love of his home; but this did not interfere with any decision affecting the rights of his company to Fabien's services as a pilot.

The desert chieftain has despotic power, compared to Rivière. A sentinel, exhausted by excessive duty, dozed on the wall of the Citadelle. Though the extenuating circumstances were well-known, and though no harm had come of his lapse of duty, the king ordered his death without compunction. The sentinel had placed in jeopardy the civilization that he had sworn to guard.

The desert people did not grumble at this exercise of power. They muttered because the authoritarian chieftain forced them to realize their own greatness. In his mind there was no doubt that his mission was to

²⁶ Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Vol de Nuit, p. 171.

direct their activities. How else would the temple be built and the Citadelle founded to shelter succeeding generations? For him, freedom could not exist without constraint:

Je n'ai point compris que l'on distingue les contraintes de la liberté. Plus je trace de routes, plus tu es libre de choisir. Or chaque route est une contrainte car je l'ai flanquée d'une barrière. Mais qu'appelles-tu liberté s'il n'est point de routes entre lesquelles il te soit possible de choisir? Appelles-tu liberté le droit d'errer dans le vide?²⁷

This is one of the century's dilemmas: how far do an individual's rights go in the face of the demands of society? In Terre des Hommes, Saint-Exupéry accorded men complete liberty and choice:

Si, dans ce terrain, et non dans un autre, les orangers développent de solides racines et se chargent de fruits, ce terrain-là c'est la vérité des orangers. Si cette religion, si cette culture, si cette échelle de valeurs, si cette forme d'activité et non telles autres, favorisent dans l'homme cette plénitude, délivrent en lui un grand seigneur qui s'ignorait, c'est que cette échelle des valeurs, cette culture, cette forme d'activité sont la vérité de l'homme. La logique? Qu'elle se débrouille pour rendre compte de la vie.²⁸

This is a pragmatic way of defining the ideal society and the ideal relationship between a man and his environment -- if he develops into a hero, then that situation is perfect. Would it not matter whether "le grand seigneur" was a Nazi hero, or a Communist, or a Democrat? As if to indicate that such a system could lead only to anarchy, Saint-Exupéry immediately added to this definition the story of the sergeant in the dugout during the Spanish Civil War. He was tenderly awakened to lead a

²⁷ Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Citadelle, p. 222.

²⁸ Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Terre des Hommes, p. 221.

forlorn hope, and he smiled involuntarily in the deep warmth of comradeship. In that smile he assumed the role of leader, and his men followed him confidently to certain death. By invisible promptings of his heart, an obscure little bookkeeper, without any interest in politics, had felt that he must leave an ignoble life of safety. As the sergeant he fulfilled his destiny as a hero:

Si tu étais pauvre à Barcelone, seul peut-être après le travail, si ton corps même n'avait point de refuge, tu éprouvais ici le sentiment de t'accomplir, tu rejoignais l'universel; voici que toi, le paria, tu étais reçu par l'amour.²⁹

By his participation in the risks of battle, the sergeant had created for himself a network of relationships that made his life -- and his death -- significant. He sacrificed himself for the men of his regiment.

In this profound sentiment of love and concern for one's fellow men, Saint-Exupéry saw hope for the future. To the pilot who had observed from above our human efforts to subsist on the globe, it seemed obvious that all mankind ought to unite to subdue nature; to one who had travelled widely between our scattered communities, it was plain that our similarities are infinitely more numerous than our differences:

Pourquoi nous haïr? Nous sommes solidaires, emportés par la même planète, équipage d'un même navire. Et s'il est bon que des civilisations s'opposent pour favoriser des synthèses nouvelles, il est monstrueux qu'elles s'entre-dévorent.³⁰

²⁹ Ibid., p. 234.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 242-243.

On the flight to Arras, the pilot rediscovered the unitive force of love. In the chaos and futility of war, he had lost sight of it; when he offered himself as a sacrifice, he felt restored to communion with his squadron, with his village, and with France. In fact, that evening, as he broke bread at the table with the farmer's family, he caught a glimpse, in the glow of a child's fleeting smile, of a universal humanity transcending national borders. A man who is wholly penetrated by this concept of the oneness of mankind cannot conceivably do wrong. This love of his fellow men, regulating his every action from within, will prevent him from doing harm. Instead, this deep-rooted devotion will inspire him to develop all his talents and make a gift of his creativity to succeeding generations.

Such dedicated men need no Rivière, no desert prince to direct their efforts. They have an inward impulsion to serve others, and in this service they find happiness. Their values are courage, loyalty, and responsibility, and their lives are meaningful. The anguish of the Existentialists dissipates in exhilarating action.

The themes of self-discipline and duty, of submission of the individual to the larger entity without loss of individuality, are found throughout the book Citadelle. However, they seem overshadowed by the personality of the desert patriarch, perhaps because Saint-Exupéry had no opportunity to refine his abundant raw material, perhaps because the chief's character is the only feature which gives the book what unity it has. His presence on every page tends to emphasize his dictatorial powers: it is only upon reflection that one sees that he is completely selfless; he is spending all his strength to raise his people to a higher stage of evolution.

Citadelle has some romantic descriptions of caravans and mirages, of raids and beleaguered oases. Yet if it survives at all, it will not be on its own merits, but because Antoine de Saint-Exupéry wrote two or three others of permanent worth. The one which may survive the longest is the charming Le Petit Prince. This book, too, has a desert setting. Its desert has cool mornings, rare flowers that smell, and happy animals. It has wells situated so far apart that, as in the real desert, the traveller is faint before reaching them. Death can be sudden here -- the desert adders are swift. And if we demand from this little book a comment on the good life, we can find one there also. It is a message which permeates the New Testament -- the Little Prince himself is Christ-like, in many ways. Saint-Exupéry never found his way back to the unquestioning childhood faith in God, but he never lost his faith in the efficacy of the second of Jesus' commandments: "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." Consciously or not, he was expressing, in Twentieth-Century idiom, in every book that he wrote, the necessity for modern man to look outward with genuine compassion for his neighbours: "Voici mon secret. Il est très simple: on ne voit bien qu'avec le coeur. L'essentiel est invisible pour les yeux."³¹

³¹Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Le Petit Prince (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1946), p. 47.

CHAPTER IV

ALBERT CAMUS

Jean-Claude Brisville asked Camus in 1959: "Quel est le compliment qui vous irrite le plus?" Camus replied: "L'honnêteté, la conscience, l'humain, enfin, vous savez, le gargarisme moderne."¹ His answer indicates the impatience of a modest man who has listened to too many fulsome compliments. Two years earlier, when Camus was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, the newspapers and periodicals of the world had been almost unanimous in his praise. Although he was only forty-three, he had written an impressive number of essays, novels, short stories, editorials and plays. His books were being read; his plays were reaching an audience, and his ideas, which had first caught the attention of Occupied France in 1943, were being discussed beyond the coasts of Europe.

Young people particularly had taken him and his work to their hearts. He appealed to them in many ways; he was youthful, personable, athletic; he had been a hero of the Resistance; in person he was friendly, modest, rather reserved, although his writings showed that he was capable of the most intense feeling. No one since Gide had written French so stylishly. There remained, perhaps, the most attractive quality of all: in his life and work there was a solid integrity. Camus may well have become impatient with those who found his work "honest"; since the time he

¹Jean-Claude Brisville, Camus (Bibliothèque Idéale; Paris: Gallimard, 1959), p. 260.

began to write, at the age of twenty-two, there was no question of his work being anything else. Without intention, he had become the conscience of Europe. The unassuming Camus was worried by this elevation. One of the themes of the story La Chute is that everyone is guilty of self-deception and that everyone, individually, is responsible for recognizing and eschewing dishonesty. It is possible that Camus is pointing out that he is no more qualified than the next man to set out rules of behaviour. Then, while his prestige was at its highest, his life was snuffed out in an automobile accident, January 4, 1960. What had he written to merit such a reputation?

The first little book was a group of essays, L'Envers et l'Endroit, which Camus began to write in 1935, at the age of twenty-two. They were printed in a very small edition in 1937. When they were reprinted in 1958, Camus could make two statements, which testify to the coherence of his entire life and work: "Je ne renie rien de ce qui est exprimé dans ces écrits",² and "Pour moi, je sais que ma source est dans L'Envers et l'Endroit."³ The vision of life which he held as a youth was still steadfast truth twenty years later.

The first essay contains sketches of three old people: an old woman whom the young people abandon in order to go to the cinema; an old man whom no one listens to any more; and a domineering grandmother, obviously Camus' own, whose death did not atone for her impositions on the

²Albert Camus, L'Envers et l'Endroit (Paris: Gallimard, 1958), p. 11.

³Ibid., p. 13.

family. The grandson wept at her funeral, when everyone else did, but he realized that he was not being sincere; he could see from the graveside:

une belle journée d'hiver, traversée de rayons. Dans le bleu du ciel, on devinait le froid tout pailleté de jaune. Le cimetière dominait la ville et on pouvait voir le beau soleil transparent tomber sur la baie tremblante de lumière, comme une lèvre humide.

The sketches are ironic: on the one hand, three insignificant lives come to a meaningless close; on the other hand, the young enjoy "toute la lumière du monde".⁵

In the second essay Camus describes his boyhood in Algiers. He was born in 1913 in Mondovi, but when his father was killed on the Marne in 1914, his mother had to move in with the intolerant grandmother in Belcourt, a poor section of Algiers. Camus' mother supported her children by working as a charwoman; she was deaf and slow of speech and was dominated by her mother. In this second essay Camus pictures her with great compassion as she returns from work at dusk and drops exhausted into a chair. On account of her deafness and her retiring nature, he had difficulty communicating with her; the hero of his first novel failed in the same respect with his mother. Yet the boy, Albert Camus, did not resent the grinding poverty of this joyless family situation. There were compensations. To begin with, there was the sky:

Il y a une solitude dans la pauvreté, mais une solitude qui rend son prix à chaque chose. À un certain degré de richesse, le ciel lui-même et la nuit pleine d'étoiles semblent des biens naturels.... Mais au bas de l'échelle, le ciel reprend son sens: une grâce sans prix.

⁴ Ibid., p. 54.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., p. 63.

That Mediterranean sky! All his life he was sustained by a vision of an ideal land, and in it the sun shone perpetually from the Mediterranean sky. Besides the fact that it compensated for his poverty, it had other values.

As a near-penniless student -- a teacher's interest had secured a bursary to enable him to attend the Lycée d'Alger -- Camus had travelled alone to Frague. Because he could not afford to leave, he had to spend six days in the city, although he was homesick, solitary, a stranger unable to read even the shop-signs. A depressing incident frightened him -- the man in the hotel room next to his was found dead. The body lay on the bed as Camus passed the open door, and the indifferent afternoon sun projected a shadow of it on the wall. The man had been dead for days, and life in the hotel had gone on. Out of this macabre experience in the old grey city came a new appreciation, a new way of looking at the familiar:

Et voici que le rideau des habitudes, le tissage confortable des gestes et des paroles ou le coeur s'accroupit, se relève lentement et dévoile enfin la face blême de l'inquiétude. L'homme est face à face avec lui-même; je le défie d'être heureux....Et c'est pourtant par là que le voyage l'illumine....Dans ce grand dénuement enfin, le moindre arbre isolé⁷ devient la plus tendre et la plus fragile des images.

A few days later, in Italy, the sun was shining from a familiar sky:

Tout la lumière qui en tombait dévalait la pente des collines, habillait les cyprès et les oliviers, les maisons blanches et les toits rouges, de la plus chaleureuse des robes, puis allait se perdre dans la plaine qui fumait au soleil. Et chaque fois, c'était le même dénuement.

⁷Ibid., p. 88.

⁸Ibid., p. 99.

Now that he had been made aware of the fact of death, he felt no more at home in this lovely landscape than he had in Prague. The idea of death was real and present -- and he rejected any immortality which could not perceive the weight of the sun. But out of the confrontation of his own despair and nature's beauty came strength and awareness: "J'y puisais la force d'être courageux et conscient à la fois."⁹

The corpse in Prague was not the first occasion on which Camus had come into contact with death. At the age of seventeen he had suffered a serious attack of tuberculosis. This was a stunning blow to the brilliant student. The illness left him permanently delicate. He did not finish all his University courses because of his health, and for the same reason he was rejected by the Army in 1940. At the time the illness first struck, it must have seemed brutally harsh to curtail his athletic activities. An active life on the beach had made up for the penury of his home. He had won a place on the Racing Universitaire Alger soccer team, and loved the comradeship he found in sport. All that counted for him was the sheer delight in physical well-being and movement. Wordsworth used the expressions "aching joys" and "dizzy raptures" to describe similar sensations. Suddenly Camus was confronted by the imminence of his own death.

His love of life was enhanced by apprehension of death: "une passion silencieuse pour ce qui allait peut-être m'échapper, une amertume sous une flamme."¹⁰ Il n'y a pas d'amour de vivre sans désespoir de

⁹Ibid., p. 101.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 112.

vivre."¹¹ This tension of flesh conscious of its mortality is almost palpable in everything that Camus wrote. On the one side, the beauty of the world as he felt it in the sun and the sea of the glorious Algerian summer: "Je suis comblé avant d'avoir désiré. L'éternité est là et moi je l'espérais. Ce n'est plus d'être heureux que je veux maintenant, mais seulement d'être conscient."¹² On the other side, suffering man, whose fate is a meaningless, hopeless obliteration in death: "Entre cet endroit et cet envers du monde, je ne veux pas choisir, je n'aime pas qu'on choisisse."¹³ At the very beginning of his writing career, Camus has decided to remain constantly aware of this absurdity: "Le grand courage, c'est encore de tenir les yeux ouverts sur la lumière comme sur la mort."¹⁴

On accepting the Nobel Prize, on December 10, 1957, Camus could say with complete integrity:

Je n'ai jamais pu renoncer à la lumière, au bonheur d'être, à la vie libre où j'ai grandi. Mais bien que cette nostalgie explique beaucoup de mes erreurs et de mes fautes, elle m'a aidé sans doute à mieux comprendre mon métier, elle m'aide encore à me tenir, aveuglément, auprès de tous ces hommes silencieux qui ne supportent dans le monde la vie qui leur est faite que par le souvenir ou le retour de brefs et libres bonheurs.¹⁵

¹¹Ibid., p. 113.

¹²Ibid., p. 124.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 125.

¹⁵Albert Camus, Discours de Suède (23 éd., Paris: Gallimard, 1958), p. 20.

Camus' second published book, entitled Noces, was a collection of four essays, published like the first in Algeria in a small edition. The first essay, "Noces à Tipasa", evokes "un jour de noces avec le monde",¹⁶ a day of exultation when colours and scents combined with the cool resistance of the sea and the cascading sunlight to overpower him with delight. It is a candid, pagan happiness: "Il n'y a pas de honte à être heureux."¹⁷ It is more manly, more robust than Les Nourritures Terrestres. Gide's vision was personal and unique. Camus is proud that his triumphant joy is shared with the people of his city:

avec toute une race, née du soleil et de la mer, vivante et savoureuse, qui puise sa grandeur dans sa simplicité, et debout sur les plages, adresse son sourire complice au sourire éclatant de ses ciels.¹⁸

On another occasion, amid the tragic setting of a Roman city abandoned to the wind, Camus identifies himself with the world:

Comme le galet verni par les marées, j'étais poli par le vent, usé jusqu'à l'âme. J'étais un peu de cette force selon laquelle je flottais, puis beaucoup, puis elle enfin, confondant les battements de mon sang et les grands coups sonores de ce coeur partout présent de la nature.¹⁹

The violence of sun and wind exhausts him and he feels detached from self, and yet present in the world. He knows that he can go no farther. It is

¹⁶ Albert Camus, Noces (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), p. 20.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 27.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 34.

not a matter of reason, nor of emotion; he learns instinctively. He is absolutely certain that there is no life after death. In the calm that follows apprehension of this truth, he feels within himself the involuntary surge of refusal. He cannot acquiesce:

Si je refuse obstinément tous les 'plus tard' du monde, c'est qu'il s'agit aussi bien de ne pas renoncer à ma richesse présente. Il ne me plaît pas de croire que la mort ouvre sur une autre vie. Elle est pour moi une porte fermée. Je ne dis pas que c'est un pas qu'il faut franchir; mais que c'est une aventure horrible et sale.²⁰

But nothing will distract him from facing the end of life steadily, romanticizing nothing, hiding nothing: "Pour moi, devant ce monde, je ne veux pas mentir ni qu'on me mente. Je veux porter ma lucidité jusqu'au bout et regarder ma fin avec toute la profusion de la jalousie et de mon horreur."²¹

Death is particularly poignant in this sunny land which offers so much to the living: "A Alger, pour qui est jeune et vivant, tout est refuge et prétexte à triomphes: la baie, le soleil, les jeux en rouge et blanc des terrasses vers la mer, les fleurs et les stades, les filles aux jambes fraîches."²² The youth of Algiers accept this wealth in a spirit of perfect innocence. No myths inhibit them. They have an elementary code of morals based chiefly on the notion that it is unsporting for a strong man to torment the weak. For people preoccupied by the life of the body, the

²⁰Ibid., p. 37.

²¹Ibid., p. 41.

²²Ibid., p. 49.

life of the mind means nothing at all. They are pure; they instinctively feel their kinship with the world "où les coups de sang rejoignent les pulsations violentes du soleil de deux heures".²³ They have not sinned: "Car s'il y a un péché contre la vie, ce n'est peut-être pas tant d'en désespérer que d'espérer une autre vie, et se dérober à l'implacable grandeur de celle-ci. Ces hommes n'ont pas triché."²⁴

"Tricher" means averting one's glance from the end of life. It means having illusions, such as hope. Camus rejected completely the religious doctrine which promises that, in a life after death, man is compensated for all the pain and frustration of this world. For him, such hope is ignoble; it signifies that a man has made his peace with death, has resigned himself. It means a slackening in the tension, a form of cowardice. The surge of physical joy that keeps in balance the horror of death will begin to ebb. Camus is determined never to submit to such a compromise.

"Le monde est beau, et hors de lui, point de salut."²⁵ Our bodies feel at home in this beautiful world, and sensations are all we can be sure of. The starting point for happiness is "cette entente amoureuse de la terre et de l'homme délivré de l'humain".²⁶ The intensity of our happiness depends on our awareness of death. Death is the destruction of all meaning. At this point, the world and life in it become absurd.

²³Ibid., p. 67.

²⁴Ibid., p. 69.

²⁵Ibid., p. 96.

²⁶Ibid., p. 90.

As the symbol of the absurdity of life, Camus chose Sisyphus, and in a group of essays published in Paris in 1943, outlined his philosophy. The main ideas in Le Mythe de Sisyphe had already been expressed in L'Envers et L'Endroit and Noces. However, these two books were unknown in France. It was the book of essays, popularized by the novel L'Etranger, which attracted French youth to Camus.

"Les dieux avaient condamné Sisyphe à rouler sans cesse un rocher jusqu'au sommet d'une montagne d'où la pierre retombait par son propre poids. Ils avaient pensé avec quelque raison qu'il n'y a pas de punition plus terrible que le travail inutile et sans espoir."²⁷ Camus saw in this futile existence the symbol of human life: "Lever, tramway, quatre heures de bureau ou d'usine, repas, tramway, quatre heures de travail, repas, sommeil et lundi mercredi jeudi vendredi et samedi sur le même rythme..."²⁸

Then one day a man questions this monotonous and meaningless routine, and discovers the absurdity in the human situation. For a while he can comfort himself with the idea that "tomorrow" or "later on" when he gets the stone to the top, there will be time to search for a meaning, but sickness or war or accident cause the rock to roll to the bottom again, and finally comes death and the cessation of all activity. Death is the inexorable fate to which we are all condemned. The stone and the hill are indifferent to us; nothing responds when we ask for enlightenment. Even the ordinary gestures of our friends assume the aspect of a meaningless

²⁷ Albert Camus, Le Mythe de Sisyphe (Paris: Gallimard, 1942), p. 162.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 27.

pantomime, like the lips of a man in a telephone booth. We are strangers in an alien world. Logically, if life has no meaning and we are suffering in it, we should commit suicide and be done with it. Yet suicides are comparatively rare.

This is the subject of the essays. Can a man who realizes that life is futile and who is honest about it, can such a man continue to live? For the man who rejects both rationally and emotionally the idea of a future life, Christianity is simply an evasion. If the suffering involved in living a good life according to Christian principles is not justified by immortality, then the good life is meaningless. Family, affection, love, friendships, ambition have no meaning. Only the sensation of being alive either remains or seems to matter.

For Camus, provisionally at least, that sensation of being alive is a sufficient reason for denying suicide. What he had instinctively felt and expressed in Noces and L'Envers was that life is beyond price. The world's absurdity is not a cause for despair, but a command to greater happiness. Mortality and meaningless suffering enhance the value of life; we must live it more intensely. Sisyphus continues to carry out his pointless labour. He is acutely conscious of its futility; in his heart he never ceases to rebel and to despise the gods who have bound him to the task. The tension of rebellion is the guarantee of the intensity of feeling. He acquires dignity in his acceptance of the exertion. The struggle for the summit is its own recompense: "Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux."²⁹

²⁹Ibid., p. 166.

The effect of this book, especially on French youth, can hardly be imagined now. In 1943, the world had never appeared more absurd. War, occupation, the apparent triumph of violence and injustice, totalitarianism -- everything gave the most brutal denial to any rational humanist conception of the universe. The paths to the future were closed. A glance at the past was no more comforting. The generation whose memory went back before World War I could remember an era when Sisyphus' stone was near the top of the hill, when men believed in progress, and science promised a better life in the future. From 1914 to 1918, the stone rolled to its lowest point. With the most painful efforts, men seemed to have recovered some of the ground, and then came World War II. It seemed to the French in 1943 that the stone must have crushed the labourer as it fell.

Now a manly voice seemed to be saying: "That's the way it is. The world is absurd. There is nothing to be expected from heaven. And yet the immediate job is to face this destiny squarely, and to refuse to submit. By our efforts we can change the world, and in the process we can find happiness." In a more fortunate country, the appeal had been to "blood, sweat, toil and tears".

Like Gide, Camus took an idea and embodied it in a story. L'Etranger is the incarnation of the ideas of Le Mythe de Sisyphe. Before the story begins, the hero, Meursault, has recognized emotionally, but not intellectually, the absurdity of life. He is not indifferent to the world; sheer physical existence has brought him satisfaction. But the world lacks coherent significance. His apathetic attitude is conveyed by Camus' abrupt, monotonous style. He is an outsider who refused to submit

to society's meaningless rules, and ironically he is condemned to die, not for the real crime he committed, but because he had not wept at his mother's funeral. When, in the prison cell, he is visited by the chaplain, he drops his detachment and asserts violently that this life alone is certain, that death obliterates all significance. To listen to soothing words about a life after death is cowardly. He realizes, after the outburst, that he has been happy, that life was worth living. He would like to live it over. In the intensity of his revolt he feels a mystical union with the world:

"Devant cette nuit chargée de signes et d'étoiles, je m'ouvrais pour la première fois à la tendre indifférence du monde. De l'éprouver si pareil à moi, si fraternel enfin, j'ai senti que j'avais été heureux et que je l'étais encore."³⁰

Thus Meursault, the slave of daily routine, a Sisyphus rolling his rock without thinking, becomes intellectually aware of the absurdity of death, of the indifference of the universe around him. From that moment he can enjoy life in the sounds of the country, the odours of earth and salt that penetrate into his cell. The last day of his life is "le jour de noces avec le monde".

In L'Etranger, Camus depicted an irrational world, indifferent to man's presence. As the title suggests, the emphasis is on man's alienation from his environment and from his fellow man. In the play Caligula Camus explored the idea that the absurd man is free. In a world without meaning, there are no a priori values and no codes to enforce these values. Is this

³⁰ Albert Camus, L'Etranger (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), p. 179.

an invitation to excess? One would hardly expect the student of Greek philosophy to advocate licence. The play, which was written before the war, depicts what happens when a man chooses to exercise his absolute freedom. Caligula was made aware of the world's absurdity through the death of his sister-mistress, and decided to open the eyes of his subjects to the same knowledge. He has limitless power to destroy, and he uses it as a logical absurd man, to wipe out man and everything he has respected. The best men in Rome give in to him; they even write poems in his honour. Hitler had the same slavish adherents, years later, when he was determined to pull the world down on top of himself. Caligula was at least looking for meaning beyond his murders. But the excesses of freedom lead only to failure. Caligula died at the hands of rebels, conscious of his defeat: "Je n'ai pas pris la voie qu'il fallait, je n'aboutis à rien. Ma liberté n'est pas la bonne."³¹

Camus pointed out to a German friend that the path that Germany had taken was also the wrong one. From 1944 on, Camus was editor of the clandestine newspaper Combat. In a series of editorials, "Lettres à un ami allemand", he related that prior to the war, the German and he had discussed and agreed that the world had no final meaning. The German chose to recognize only one good -- the glory of his country -- and cynically justified ruthlessness and cruelty as long as it served the fatherland. All Camus can oppose to this is his own personal and passionately-held conviction that justice must prevail over cruelty. It was a personal

³¹ Albert Camus, Le Malentendu; Caligula (28^e éd., Paris: Gallimard, 1947), p. 211.

ethic, arrived at intuitively in his youth in North Africa. The earth may have no meaning, but man in it has meaning, because he demands it for himself. The nihilism of Germany, which sacrifices men for goals arbitrarily chosen, is inferior. Revolt is positive; there are some values that must always be defended.

In La Peste, Camus revealed further values that exist in this world. As Meursault discovered the beauty of life by a shock which generated his revolt, so a whole city became conscious of it when afflicted by the plague. In La Peste a whole nation of Sisyphuses is crushed by calamity. When the plague vanishes "on apprend au milieu des fléaux, qu'il y a dans les hommes plus de choses à admirer que de choses à mépriser".³² Doctor Rieux goes about his daily work, selflessly doing what he can to alleviate the sufferings of the victims. Others join him, accepting the risks with open eyes simply to do their best in a dangerous time. In addition to the personal dignity, those who join together to fight the plague find a deep satisfaction in friendship and solidarity. As Saint-Exupéry has pointed out, comradeship is a by-product of working together in a worthwhile enterprise.

La Peste is an optimistic book, which seems to promise that a number of values can be established which justify sufferings and exertion. However, La Chute, published in 1956, recalls the cruelty of Caligula. Clamence, the hero, seems to choose to be cruel because he is guilty himself. In Camus saying that man's capability for folly justifies the blackest pessimism? Camus previously had taken a position of unrelieved pessimism, in Le Malentendu. Is it a coincidence that both of these have

³²Albert Camus, La Peste (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), p. 254.

their setting outside of North Africa?

There are several interesting theories about the meaning of La Chute. One has been referred to -- that Camus, alarmed by the adulation of those who called him "the conscience of the post-war world", was reminding his readers that everyone is guilty of self-deception. Another is that he had pursued his thought to a dead end, and that this book indicated that Camus was about to purge his guilt by joining the Church. Those who, like Camus, deny and oppose religion, maintain that its meaning is just the contrary -- that if one believes such a monstrous notion as "guilt", one will believe in anything, even religion. However, read as the embodiment of an idea of L'Homme Révolté, it has a meaning more plausible than any of these.

L'Homme Révolté is a book of essays published in 1951. Although it is long and philosophical, the influence of Camus' boyhood in Algeria is not difficult to trace. The bare theme of the first part, for instance, is similar to the theme of La Peste: the rebel of L'Homme Révolté is the man who says no. By refusing to accept injustices, which can be seen in the world around us, he asserts that there exists such a thing as justice. Justice is one of the values worth living for. He who maintains the existence of values worth living for speaks for all of us. Like Doctor Rieux, he is no longer alone: "Je me révolte, donc nous sommes."³³

The theme of L'Homme Révolté, which is possibly developed in La Chute, is the one which caused such a bitter argument between Camus and

³³Albert Camus, L'Homme Révolté (110 éd., Paris: Gallimard, 1951), p. 36.

the Communists. Camus had an immense compassion for suffering people anywhere. He could never admit that it was right, for instance, for Stalin to inflict suffering and death on thousands of Ukrainian peasants in order to hasten the betterment of millions of men in the rest of Russia. The end, for Camus, could never justify the means.

In his view, Nietzsche's superman had turned into the Nazi storm-trooper simply because the fascist leaders had decided that any violence was justified if it strengthened the arbitrarily selected ideal of fatherland. Marx's dialectician had become the terrorist hastening the arrival of the classless state by means of any horror. To Camus, such efforts to remake the world are based on the false premise that a revolution can eradicate injustice and suffering. Since death exists, suffering and injustice will always exist. We must not be led astray by the promises of great systems.

Does this mean that, since suffering and injustice are permanent, we can do nothing? On the contrary, the rebel must settle for limited and moderate gains in his permanent revolt against them. Similarly in La Chute, everyone is guilty, and permanently so; but we must learn to live with it, and exercise every precaution that we do not increase our own share.

This common-sense attitude can be traced back to Camus' boyhood in Algeria. In the face of deprivation he found treasure in the sun and the sea. In the notebooks he kept between 1935 and 1937, he has jotted: "Si on est bien persuadé de son désespoir, il faut agir comme si on espérait -- ou se tuer. La souffrance ne donne pas de droits."³⁴

³⁴ Albert Camus, Carnets, Mai 1935 - Février 1942 (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), p. 41.

For Camus, the land of North Africa was a sort of ideal landscape to which he seemed to retire in his mind when considering a problem. His comments were sane and fair. For him there could never be facile solutions, but while the gains he suggested were relative, they were never made at the cost of suffering to others. Camus suffered too much from his exile in France to add to humanity's pain. Even after he won recognition and a place in the hearts of all Frenchmen, he felt his separation from the land of his birth.

Camus never strayed far from the personal experience of his youth. Then he had instinctively and emotionally seized on a vision of life. In his vision, great metaphysical philosophies have no meaning; what matters is each individual's clear-sighted refusal to accept the nothingness of death. For those of us who refuse nothingness, working in a task for good ends is a form of revolt against the world as we find it. This each of us can do, to the limit of our modest abilities. Somewhere close at hand there is suffering to relieve or injustice to protest. The critical time is now, this very moment. Voltaire said, "Il faut cultiver notre jardin". Camus adds, "et aider nos voisins".

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

In assessing the effect of the desert on these three men, one must conclude that it varied with the individual. For instance, Gide's abnormality was of greater importance in his life and work than the desert. His decision to be unconventional explains his duality, his restlessness, and his undulating development. He had moved a long way toward such a decision before leaving France; the Sahara merely hardened him. Thenceforth North Africa represented the sphere of the delights of the flesh. The immense and featureless desert became the symbol of sustained desire, a sort of ultimate in voluptuousness.

In Saint-Exupéry's case, the Air Line was more influential than the desert. The Sahara presented some uncommon dangers, but it was flying the mail that taught him devotion to duty. With its picturesque trappings of chieftains and slaves and caravans, Africa forms an exotic setting for some of his best prose.

On the other hand, Africa is an essential influence in Camus from his boyhood to his Nobel Prize. His development is perfectly straightforward; the same blazing sun which poured down on the happy child was still glowing at the heart of his last book.

Actually, childhood and adolescence were much more influential factors than North Africa. Camus' poverty gave him more compassion for ordinary people of the lower classes than we find in either Gide or

Saint-Exupéry. Not that the latter were insensitive men; they were simply more at ease with members of their own social class, and addressed their books to them. Saint-Exupéry grew up in a big house in a walled garden; he was surrounded by affection and security. Later in life, particularly in times of stress, as, for instance, when he was flying towards Arras, the solidity and permanence of his boyhood home seemed values appropriate for all men. Translated into adult terms, the house in the walled garden became the civilization where all men could find peace and protection. Gide's mother was fairly rich; nevertheless, he stresses in his autobiography that he was unhappy as a child. Even in the sickly, lonely little boy, Gide could find the origins of both the saintly and the sinning sides of his nature.

It is possible that it was an advantage for the three writers to spend some time at a distance from France. A second perspective for viewing a problem is bound to be useful. Many successful novelists of the first half of this century detached themselves from their homeland for a time, to mention only Malraux, Hemingway and Graham Greene.

The three authors do agree in this: individual experience is the starting point for a philosophy of life. However, since there was little similarity in the events of their lives, it follows that there is little similarity in their philosophies. They had quite different views on freedom, for instance. Gide was quite prepared to sweep away all dogma, to set up his own standards for a decent, humane life. Saint-Exupéry viewed freedom in the light of his experience as a working pilot. To accomplish something constructive, he and others surrendered a part of their absolute freedom to

effect the achievement. The joy in creation and the warmth of fellowship outweighed the restrictions on his liberty. Camus' conception of freedom contained features from the other two. Like Gide, he refused any preconceived rules of conduct. He rejected utterly the authority of any supernatural. Such liberty seems absolute, but, like Saint-Exupéry, Camus accepts a restraint -- the principle of responsibility. In Camus' view, anything is permitted, but one is strictly accountable. Caligula cannot continue to exist.

The idea that the individual is free but responsible explains the fact that Camus cannot imagine an author who has not committed his talent to relieving injustice and suffering. Each of us is free to ignore these evils; but each of us, by each decision of the passing moment, determines the values he will honour. Whoever ignores pain and injustice accepts cowardice. Whoever chooses to work with his fellows to relieve these ills acquires dignity and significance.

Camus was continuing to illumine this question of man's relationship with society when death cut short his work. Saint-Exupéry likewise left his study of the problem unfinished. In Pilote de Guerre he described the Collective as existing only to serve man. Society was to be strong enough to protect him, and at the same time to contain contradictory and rival activities, which in the long run strengthen both citizens and civilization. Yet this collective could not tolerate anarchy, and of necessity had to exact some restriction on absolute freedom. In Pilote de Guerre, it seemed that Saint-Exupéry was groping toward a sort of unifying spirit to which we would voluntarily renounce a measure of freedom for the control necessary

to prevent war. The last year of his active life did not allow such tranquillity to reflect on the matter. Both he and Camus were believers in action; Gide, however, tried not to commit himself.

In spite of the tragic brevity of the lives of two of the men, we have inherited a great deal of wise advice valid for our time. This is the age of the vast factory, the world-wide organization, the grandiose political schemes. Individual man, in comparison, sinks farther and farther into insignificance. But our authors glorify the individual -- Gide by revealing the marvellously complex nature of his mind, Saint-Exupéry and Camus by exalting the nobility and courage of this fragile creature who is impelled to transcend himself, in the absence of a God, towards his fellows.

Moreover, they not only elevate man, they deflate the vast ambitions which dwarf him. Gide and Camus explicitly, and Saint-Exupéry implicitly, warn us that any human institution needs constant re-examination. Political, economic, social, religious systems tend to become rigid or hypocritical with age. We need to be forever on our guard against accepting the status quo without questioning whether it reflects the aspirations of the majority.

At this point Camus makes an impassioned appeal that when we decide to make a change, we move with moderation. The same message is found in Saint-Exupéry, and in Gide's books in which he shows the folly of extreme action. It is so much stronger in Camus, partly because of the nature of the man, with his brooding pity for all those cut off from the sun, and partly because of his horror at the carnage of war.

This century has an appalling record of disregard for the rights of the individual. Millions of men have been sacrificed for abstract systems -- six million Jews to Nazism, more millions of Ukrainians to Communism, a million Indians and Pakistanis to Nationalism. Apartheid, Imperialism, Colonialism, Fascism -- the list is endless and the heaps of victims sickening.

In the face of this slaughter, Camus' Homme Révolté rejects the expedient justified by the ends. Further suffering, even to hasten an eventual good, is utterly abhorrent. Calm and sensible action can slowly repair the dishevelment of our universe. Finally, in the narrow margin between the Sahara and the sea, each one discovered for himself that life has possibilities for great happiness. In the Biakra oasis, Gide found ecstasy. On the airfields from Tangiers to Dakar, Saint-Exupéry discovered a virile comradeship. The dazzling Algerian summer justified for Camus the absurdity of the world.

All three agree in this -- that simplicity is an essential starting-point for the happy life. Gide urged his readers to discard their prejudices, their sophistication in order to experience directly the satisfactions of their environment. Stripped of its poetic expression, and its mystical religion of humanity, Saint-Exupéry's advice is simple: Serve others. Like Descartes, Camus began to erect a philosophy on one premise, that life in the sun is good.

Where is life simpler than it is in the desert? In itself the desert is a monotony of sand and rock, with almost no plant or animal life; its colours are a spectrum of browns and greys; even its weather is almost

unchanging. Living is uncomplicated. The nomads have a rather primitive form of animal husbandry; the aim of this economy is a standard of living just above survival. It does not take much effort -- and even that, until recently, was spent by slaves and women. The male Bedouin has a good deal of leisure. His social and political structures are elementary; there is no need for years of schooling to understand the organization.

In the desert there are few distractions. The horizon is almost as boundless as at sea, and at night there is little to interrupt one's meditation under the stars. Usually not even the protection of a roof is necessary; in the desert one has the feeling of being exposed to whatever spiritual forces are abroad. The city-dweller who goes to live in the desert finds himself carried backward in time for several thousand years to a simple, primitive civilization.

Yet Gide, Saint-Exupéry and Camus loved it. Gide could not stay away, nor could Saint-Exupéry. A sense of nostalgia pervades Camus' work. They knew instinctively that the African experience was essential to their thought. It had given them a respite from the incomprehensible modern world, and an opportunity to return to first principles. The view of life which they found here was complete and wholesome. It sustained them as they tried to understand the extraordinary perplexities of this century. Refreshed by their vision, they expressed confidence that man, with his infinite capabilities, can solve his problems and find joy in the effort.

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