



The Existential vs. the Absurd: The Aesthetics of Nietzsche and Camus

George F. Seffler

The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, Vol. 32, No. 3 (Spring, 1974), 415-421.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0021-8529%28197421%2932%3A3%3C415%3ATEVTAT%3E2.0.CO%3B2-N>

The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism is currently published by The American Society for Aesthetics.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/tasfa.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

GEORGE F. SEFLER

The Existential vs. The Absurd: The Aesthetics of Nietzsche and Camus

An artist . . . if he can tell himself that, finally, as a result of his long effort, he has eased or decreased the various forms of bondage weighing upon men, then in a sense he is justified. . . .

—Albert Camus

. . . the profound Greek, so uniquely susceptible to the subtlest and deepest sufferings . . . was saved by art, and through art life reclaimed him. . . .

—Friedrich Nietzsche

IT IS NOT ACCIDENTAL that Albert Camus, in each of his two major works of philosophical import, *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*, introduces the topic of aesthetics with the aid of a quotation by Friedrich Nietzsche. Both culturally and academically, Camus matured in a world tinged with Nietzschean hues. Commentators concur in this regard: The writings of Nietzsche influenced Camus. Furthermore, Camus himself has publicly acknowledged indebtedness to Nietzsche, referring to the latter as a spiritual ancestor.¹

Coupling these facts with the above texts on art, one would be prompted to interpret Camus as an adherent to Nietzschean aesthetics who upheld and disseminated it to a new generation of followers. Seductive though it be, such an interpretation of the Nietzsche-Camus kinship is too simplistic. Certainly, significant similarities exist between their two philosophies of art; however, these are intertwined among profound differences which require a more complex

framework within which to be elucidated. It is the goal of this work to attempt such a framework.

THE AESTHETICS OF SISYPHUS

In the opening paragraphs of "Absurd Creation"—that section of *Sisyphus* intimating a philosophy of art—Camus quotes Nietzsche: "Art and nothing but art, we have art in order not to die of the truth."

Death, in the form of suicide, is the subject of *Sisyphus*. The man of Sisyphus discovers that essences are non-existent; absolutes, nowhere to be found. Desperately, he searches throughout the world in quest of "the good," "the true," and "the beautiful," and constantly he is disappointed. The world, to all his pursuits, reveals itself only as pure, brute facticity, devoid of any inherent value. Despair seems imminent. Yet, in a moment of contempt, man revolts. In defiance of his situation, he perseveres in this absurd relation to the world.

Art is an instance of this perseverance; it is a recreation of man's senseless situation. As a result, description is the technical keynote of Camus's aesthetics. The absurd art

GEORGE F. SEFLER is chairman of the department of philosophy at Mansfield State College, Pennsylvania.

work is constantly representing to man his existential predicament in "a sort of monotonous and passionate repetition of the themes already orchestrated by the world. . . ." ² Art confronts man anew with the contradictory tensions which plague his own life. Even in fictional writing, wherein feigned situations constitute the structural basis of the art form, man is not separated from his everyday experiences.

Absurd art gives no meaning or purpose to life; it does not give any solutions to or explanations of the problems of life's absurdity. "Explanation," feels Camus, "is useless." ³ Any interpretation of life is relative to one's presuppositions and therein fails to attain "the truth." Explication of the absurd is, then, by its very endeavor, absurd; art, if it attempted such, would be reduced to a form of meaningless verbiage. Even though art is a work of intelligence, its rational achievement consists in nothing other than the acknowledgment of its own nullification in fathoming reality.

Nor does absurd art explain *away* the absurd by making man oblivious of his incongruous state. It is not an escape from life or a refuge from its chronic disorders. Rather, it is a symptom of worldly ills, preserving them and renewing them in an act of spiteful rebellion. "Creation [in art] is the great mime"; it is nothing more. ⁴ Art—Camus is above interpreting Nietzsche—mimes to man the spirit of revolt, so that he may not die of or succumb to the truth: the absurdity of life. In this sense, Sisyphus is the Rebel; we must imagine him happy.

THE AESTHETICS OF THE REBEL

"Rebellion and Art," the division of Camus's *The Rebel* concerned primarily with a philosophy of art, begins: "Art is the activity that exalts and denies simultaneously. 'No artist tolerates reality,' says Nietzsche. That is true, but no artist can get along without reality. Artist creation is a demand for unity and a rejection of the world." ⁵

It would seem that Camus here is advancing a position quite different from that in *Sisyphus*: in the latter, art is descriptive of

man's absurd relation to the world and a preservation thereof; here Camus is proposing that art rejects the world. Upon closer analysis, however, we discover that *The Rebel* text does not contradict that of *Sisyphus*, although it does present a certain sophistication of the Sisyphus theme. In *The Rebel* Camus still maintains that art is descriptive of reality; however, it is a distinctive description. As a result, the rejection of the world of which Camus speaks is not a complete denunciation.

No form of art can survive on total denial alone. Just as all thought, and primarily that of non-signification, signifies something, so there is no art that has no signification. . . . To create beauty, he [man] must simultaneously reject reality and exalt certain of its aspects. Art disputes reality, but does not hide from it. ⁶

Similar to that in *Sisyphus*, Camus's interpretation of artistic creation in *The Rebel* is not escapist in character. It is a description of selected events whose interrelatedness gives a partial continuity to the art work. Viewed from an aesthetic distance, the personages of an artistic work "possess a coherence and a unity which they cannot have in reality, but which seem evident to the spectator. He sees only the salient points of these lives without taking into account the details of corrosion." ⁷

In this sense the art work does change reality, yet this change should not be misconstrued as its reconstitution. "Real literary creation," insists Camus, "uses reality and only reality with all its warmth and its blood, its passion and its outcries." ⁸ The juxtaposition of events which bear some specific likeness merely imposes upon the reality derived content of the art work a loose cohesion not found within life. This transfiguring addition is purely structural in character. Life is without structure, without design. In art, it is given somewhat of a design, a style—the style of the artist.

In brief, this is Camus's aesthetical theory. With modifications, it is a consistent theory from *Sisyphus* to *The Rebel*. There are many more ramifications to it than we have discussed, but these are not to our purpose. Let us turn, then, to the texts setting forth

Nietzsche's theory of art, to the texts of Camus's spiritual ancestor.

NIETZSCHE'S APOLLONIAN-DIONYSIAN AESTHETICS

Unlike Camus who develops his philosophy of art primarily in a context of social thought, Nietzsche propounds his in an essay of, among other themes, primarily wondering esteem for classical Greek culture. To Nietzsche, the Greeks are "an envied species of man," yet they had a *need* for artistic creation to sustain their culture, their life. What need did it satisfy? How, in fact, did Greek art function? These questions are crucial to Nietzsche's aesthetics.

Nietzsche envisions Greek art as emerging from Apollonian-Dionysian roots; these deities represent for him the realms of dream and intoxication respectively, the generators of art. The distinction Nietzsche draws between these realms is unimportant to our discussion. What is a matter of concern, however, is their common source—both realms are grounded in and denote a form of illusion. Illusion is the underpinning of Nietzsche's aesthetics. Art creates an aura of unreality; it generates an unworldly state. Yet one does not confuse this dream state with the real world. "Despite the high intensity with which these dream realities exist for us," comments Nietzsche, "we still have a residual sensation that they are illusions. . . ." ⁹ Still we crave such revery and delight in it. It is a panacea to life.

The Christian, Nietzsche maintains, is able to endure the sufferings of life by postulating an other-worldly existence to which this world is a transient "vale of tears." In such an otherworldly existence, Nietzsche has no interest; nevertheless, he sees the necessity of some consolation, some distraction of this world's severities, which does not detract primacy from material existence. ". . . there is but one world, and it is false, cruel, contradictory, seductive, and without sense," Nietzsche discloses. Man, "in order to endure life, would need a marvelous illusion to cover it with a veil of beauty." ¹⁰ Art functions then as a momentary obliteration of reality; it never aims at reproducing it.

Nietzsche makes this point quite emphatically as he comments upon A. W. Schlegel's suggestion that the chorus of Greek tragedy is nothing but "the quintessence of the audience, as the ideal spectator." ¹¹ The position Nietzsche views as a crude, unscholarly (though dazzling) hypothesis and denies its validity.

We had supposed all along that the spectator, whoever he might be, would always have to remain conscious of the fact that he had before him a work of art, not empiric reality, whereas the tragic chorus of the Greeks is constrained to view the characters enacted on the stage as veritably existing. . . . Schlegel's theory suggests to us that the perfect spectator viewed the world of the stage not at all as art but as reality. ¹²

Nietzsche views the chorus not as a bridge between the characters on stage and the spectators, but as a separating, impassable wall. It sets the two apart reminding the audience of the radical split between the fictive status of the drama and their own existential situation. Nietzschean art is not representative of the world; it supplants earthly existence to make life bearable. "Art is not an imitation of nature but its metaphysical supplement, raised up beside it in order to overcome it." ¹³

A PROBLEM

My elucidation of Nietzsche's aesthetics has been derived exclusively from *The Birth of Tragedy*, written early in Nietzsche's career. We must ascertain if these early texts reflect his mature views; it may well be that Nietzsche has substantially altered his position in later writings. After all, in the 1886 preface to *The Birth of Tragedy*—this was fourteen years after the first edition was published—Nietzsche looks unfavorably upon the work, referring to it as "an impossible book." We must determine to what extent, if any, Nietzsche's disgust with the work affects those aspects of his aesthetics as presented above.

To solve our problem, let us review a text of *Ecce Homo*, written in 1888, the last productive year of Nietzsche's career. Herein he reviews *The Birth of Tragedy*, remarking:

To do justice to *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) certain things will have to be forgotten. Its very

errors produced a great effect, and account for the fascination it contained. By these errors I mean my treatment of Wagnerism, as if the latter were the symptom of an ascending tendency.¹⁴

Nietzsche's dislike for *The Birth of Tragedy* is certainly not unconnected with this split with Richard Wagner. Nietzsche extolled him in the book as the composer *par excellence* of the authentic Nietzschean world-view; however, Wagner's Christian-tainted *Parsifal* led Nietzsche to denounce Wagner's music and the texts of *The Birth of Tragedy* relating to him. Nietzsche's reason for rejecting the book, then, has no bearing upon our topic and does not prompt us to conclude that Nietzsche in his later writings changed his position on the purpose of the arts. Similarly, it does not support the contention that he did *not* change it. Thus, we must search out mature texts which do manifest Nietzsche's position on the function of art. In them we find no reversal of thought, but perhaps a certain shift of emphasis.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche reflects: "I made several suggestive statements to the effect that existence could be justified only in esthetic terms. As a matter of fact, throughout the book I attributed a purely esthetic meaning—whether implied or overt—to all process: a kind of divinity if you like. . . ."¹⁵ In his later works, Nietzsche's comments upon art were never so laudatory; in *The Birth of Tragedy*, his justification of earthly existence *only* as an aesthetic phenomenon had become an overstatement. Art, he felt in later years, could, in certain instances, nurture human weaknesses, especially art exemplary of Christian values; moreover, to make art *the* supreme value undervalued science wherein Nietzsche also hoped to find value for the God-less man.

This new direction of thought does not invalidate his early philosophy of art; it does, however, remove art from that niche of life's supreme value. It portrays art as one of the values, a preliminary one, in making life palatable; nevertheless—and this is the crucial point—the technique whereby art produces this value is still viewed in Nietzsche's later writings as intoxication, the view of *The Birth of Tragedy*. Nietzsche

never changed his view in this regard. *Twilight of the Idols*, written in 1888 (Nietzsche's last productive year), specifically states: "For art to exist, for any sort of aesthetic activity or perception to exist, a certain physiological precondition is indispensable: *intoxication*. Intoxication must first have heightened the excitability of the entire machine: no art results before that happens."¹⁶

In later texts like this, the Apollonian root of art is little mentioned; the emphasis is upon Dionysian intoxication. Furthermore, the illusionary, obliterating character of intoxication is played down; emphasis is placed upon its strength-giving result. Dionysian intoxication [*Rausch*] is denotationally multidimensional. It refers not only to alcoholic inebriation but also to any other activity which is strongly exciting or elating. Moreover, this elation serves not only as a panacea for old ills, but also as a source of new strength, a tonic, to endure future ills. The first function, Nietzsche emphasizes, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, the latter, in his later works. Again, this is not a reversal of thought; at most it is a slight change of emphasis. These two elements of intoxication are really not separable; the one implies the other. They are like two sides of the same coin; for, in a Nietzschean world, a temporary oblivion of life's present severities *means* a renewal of strength to endure life. As Nietzsche states in the opening quotation: Art saved the Greek from life and thereby through art life reclaimed him.

DIONYSIUS VERSUS SISYPHUS

The contradiction is this: man rejects the world as it is, without accepting the necessity of escaping it. In fact, men cling to the world and by far the majority do not want to abandon it. Far from always wanting to forget it, they suffer, on the contrary, from not being able to possess it completely enough, estranged citizens of the world, exiled from their own country. . . . Thus we make these lives into works of art.

Although familiar with Camus's and Nietzsche's aesthetic theories, if asked who wrote the above, one would be hard put to give an answer. The text in fact comes from Camus's *The Rebel*, but Nietzsche could just as well have written it. This illustrates that fundamental similarities indeed exist

between the two men's philosophies of life and their respective, resultant aesthetics.

Both thinkers are this-world oriented in their writings. For each, material existence exhausts reality; there is no other real form of existence. Man, if he is to survive, must accept and embrace life. What is life? An incarnation of dissonance, states Nietzsche. Camus concurs: There are no absolute values in the world, only confused, unachieved ends. Thus, acceptance of life has certain shattering consequences. It is to these consequences that both men's aesthetics are directed and thereby justified.

No essence of beauty (in the sense of a Platonic form) is required to generate or to justify art. The aesthetic mode is fully intelligible within a human context, with man as the progenitor of art and the recipient of its value. Art esteemed for art's sake has no place in either man's viewpoint; artistic productions have, for both thinkers, practical value. However, when we focus upon the constitution of this value, we discover that the two theories, which thus far complement and coincide with each other, quickly diverge.

For Nietzsche, art functions as an asuagement of man's sufferings. Art directs him for the moment from the world to create a euphoric, yet illusory, relief of its severity; temporarily, it makes him forgetful of his existential situation. Man, Nietzsche maintains, in order to endure life needs artistic illusions to veil it with a cope of beauty.

Camus denies this function to art; it veils nothing. In this sense Camus's world is more severe than Nietzsche's—the latter has included within its bounds a means of sedation to calm man momentarily in his existential situation: art. No such tranquilizing agent exists within Camus's world. Art aggravates man's worldly tensions; it does not soothe them. Absurd art makes more piercing the acute distresses of man by portraying them artistically. Art for Camus is *not* a retreat to one's "ivory tower" wherein reality, the absurd, can be ignored. Art does not offer a refuge from reality; it cannot be the consolation for life. Yet it is precisely such consolation which Nietzsche sees in art.

Finding no intrinsic values within existence, nausea permeates the Nietzschean man. And, "in this supreme jeopardy of the will, art, that sorceress expert in healing, approaches him; only she can turn his fits of nausea into imaginations with which it is possible to live." ¹⁷

This dreamy, unreal aura in which the Nietzschean work envelops man makes impossible a descriptive art form; even a selected description in Camus's sense of the phrase is ruled out. Art for Nietzsche is not a representation of reality. It is not an imitation of nature, we recall Nietzsche stating, but a metaphysical supplementation, whose goal is to overcome reality without destroying it. In this sense, Nietzschean art extends hope to man, not in an unrealistic sense of total and permanent refuge from life's trials and tribulations, a state which could never occur within the Nietzschean world-view, but rather the hope-giving awareness that, if needed, a means exists to help endure life, to alleviate its extreme hardships.

With such a view Camus vehemently disagrees: "It culminates thus in forced optimism, the worst of luxuries, it so happens, and the most ridiculous of lies. . . . Must we conclude that this lie is the very essence of art? I shall say instead that the attitudes I have been describing are lies only insofar as they have but little relation to art." ¹⁸

Nietzsche responds: "We are in need of lies in order to rise superior to this reality, to this truth—that is to say, in order to live. . . . Man must already be a liar in his heart, but he must above all else be an artist, *one of the greatest of liars.*" ¹⁹

EXISTENTIAL VERSUS ABSURD AESTHETICS

Camus had great respect for Nietzsche and was much indebted to him, publicly acknowledging him as a spiritual ancestor. Yet, why should Camus revere Nietzsche and quote the latter's views on art amid his own when he held to an aesthetics so radically different? Perhaps the beginnings of an answer are found in a statement made by Camus during a 1951 interview. "What is admirable, in Nietzsche," Camus remarks

therein, "is that you always find in him something to correct which is dangerous elsewhere in his ideas."²⁰ Camus's references to Nietzsche's texts on art serve, then, as a form not of agreement, but of correction.

The proper relation of a spiritual, intellectual ancestor to his descendant never consists in the simple bequeathing to the descendant of a tomb of insights to be preserved intact and untouched. The good student listens to the master; then he builds upon the latter's insights, either in the form of a constructive continuance or of a reactionary reversal. Camus built upon a Nietzschean foundation, altering, modifying, and rejecting elements of his thought. Within the world of aesthetics, Camus's position has transfigured Nietzsche's. Similarly, within the world of actual artistic creations, Nietzsche's paragon, the traditional Greek tragedy with its systematic structure of conflict, climax, and denouement, has given way to Camus's and other authors' unclimatical, unresolved works of revolt and rebellion.

Nietzsche's aesthetics necessitates good art works to portray some form of action-resolution to make the audience will the endurance of life's severities. This is especially true in the Greek tragic form. If one is to see the inevitability of suffering in life and the wisdom gained through this suffering, he must accept the responsibility for his actions and resign himself to the inevitable punishments for his unjust deeds. Aeschylus, in his *Orestes* trilogy, had to portray the killing of Clytemnestra; Sophocles, the self-blinding of Oedipus. If these retributive events did not occur, the works would have no constructive worth. If these characters did not pay for their crimes, if they somehow bypassed the tragic consequences of their deeds, the art work would convey to man a false hope of escaping reality and not the submitting commitment to embrace it. The brief flight into oblivion of the Nietzschean art work can in no way be construed as a step toward permanent escape; it is but a stimulant toward lasting acceptance of the world.

In a sense, Nietzsche's views on plot-resolution complement Aristotle's, although

Nietzsche is critical of the latter's aesthetics. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle insists upon the unity of plot as the characteristic of a good tragedy or narrative poem. This unity does not refer to Camus's organizational unity of portraying selected, related events, but to a cohesive, integrated unity in the sense of completeness. Works of tragedy and narrative poetry are to have a beginning, middle, and end, the latter being the necessary or usual consequent to the action. Nothing more could issue from the plot. There is portrayed in the work a certain crisis which builds, erupts, and completely resolves itself, resulting in the psychotherapeutic restoration of the audience's emotional balance which allows it to face the world again with renewed confidence that its problems are, perhaps, not so catastrophic as it first thought. This relief or comfort which the art work brought to the audience is nothing other than Nietzsche's artistic intoxication, with its soothing tranquilizing state of illusory oblivion. In *Will to Power* Nietzsche makes this point clear: "The extreme calm in certain sensations of intoxication (more strictly, the retardation of the feelings of time and space) likes to be reflected in a vision of the calmest gestures and types of soul. The classical [Greek artistic] style is essentially a representation of this calm, simplification, abbreviation, concentration. . . ." ²¹

Such peace and comfort can no longer be found in contemporary artistic productions—be they in the theater, film, or literature. Nor for that matter should such be found, according to Camus. The good guy no longer wears a white hat; the bad guy, black. The characters wear motley-colored hats—if they wear hats at all: The hero no longer gets his lover, holding hands, walking off into the sunset, to live happily forever after. The fragmentary episodes of contemporary art works bring to the foreground the uncertainties of existence giving the audience not a sense of satisfaction and resolution, but a sense of confusion and futility in its full existential absurdity.

Of Dostoevsky, Camus once remarked that "it is not an absurd novelist addressing us, but an existential novelist."²² Camus's justification for this remark entailed what

he detected in Dostoevsky's works as a certain resolution, a reply to the absurd situation, which gave to life a nobility, a hope-giving explanation—characteristics not inherent to absurdist literature. If Camus's remarks about Dostoevsky's works are appropriate is not our concern. However, if we accept Camus's reasoning and maintain a distinction between existential and absurd literary approaches based upon plot-resolution or lack thereof in conjunction with the respective accompanying literary, psychological, and structural implications, we can indeed speak of Camus's and Nietzsche's philosophies of art as fundamentally diverse. Respectively, Camus and Nietzsche present to us the absurd and the existentialist aesthetics.

¹ "Encounter with Albert Camus." An interview with Gabriel d'Aubarède in *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, May 10, 1951. Reprinted in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, ed. Philip Thody and trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy (New York: 1970), p. 354.

² *The Myth of Sisyphus* (New York: 1955), p. 70.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *The Rebel, An Essay on Man in Revolt* (New York: 1957), p. 253.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

⁹ *The Birth of Tragedy*, I. (All references are from the English edition, *Complete Works*, ed. O. Levy, London 1909–13.)

¹⁰ *The Will to Power*, 853, and *The Birth of Tragedy*, XXV. *Will to Power* citations correspond to the section numberings of the 1906 edition.

¹¹ *The Birth of Tragedy*, VII.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, XXIV.

¹⁴ "The Birth of Tragedy," *Ecce Homo*, I.

¹⁵ "Critical Backward Glance," *The Birth of Tragedy*, V (1886), preface.

¹⁶ "Expeditions of an Untimely Man," *Twilight of the Idols*, 8 (1888).

¹⁷ *The Birth of Tragedy*, VII.

¹⁸ "Create Dangerously," *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death* (New York: 1961), pp. 263–64.

¹⁹ *The Will to Power*, 853; italics mine.

²⁰ "Encounter with Albert Camus," p. 354.

²¹ *The Will to Power*, 799.

²² *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 82.