Tribute to Albert Camus

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

Six months ago, even yesterday, people wondered: "What is he going to do?" Temporarily, torn by contradictions that must be respected, he had chosen silence. But he was one of those rare men we can well afford to wait for, because they are slow to choose and remain faithful to their choice. Some day he would speak out. We could not even have dared hazard a guess as to what he might say. But we thought that he had changed with the world as we all do; that was enough for us to be aware of his presence.

He and I had quarreled. A quarrel doesn't matter—even if those who quarrel never see each other again—just another way of living together without losing sight of one another in the narrow little world that is allotted us. It didn't keep me from thinking of him, from feeling that his eyes were on the book or newspaper I was reading and wondering: "What does he think of it? What does he think of it at this moment?"

His silence, which according to events and my mood I considered sometimes too cautious and sometimes painful, was a quality of every day like heat or light, but it was human. We lived with or against his thought as it was revealed to us in his books—especially The Fall, perhaps the finest and least understood—but always in relation to it. It was an exceptional adventure of our culture, a movement of which we tried to guess the phases and the final outcome.

He represented in our time the latest example of that long line of moralistes whose works constitute perhaps the most original element in French letters. His obstinate humanism, narrow and pure, austere and sensual, waged an uncertain war against the massive and formless events of the time. But on the other hand through his dogged rejections he reaffirmed, at the heart of our epoch, against the Machiavellians and against the Idol of realism, the existence of the moral issue.

In a way, he was that resolute affirmation. Anyone who read or reflected encountered the human values he held in his fist; he questioned the political act. One had to avoid him or fight him—he was indispensable to that tension which makes intellectual life what it is. His very silence, these last few years, had something positive about it: This Descartes of the Absurd refused to leave the safe ground of morality and venture on the uncertain paths of practicality. We sensed this and we also sensed the conflicts he kept hidden, for ethics, taken alone, both requires and condemns revolt.

We were waiting; we had to wait; we had to know. Whatever he did or decided subsequently, Camus would never have ceased to be one of the chief forces of our cultural activity or to represent in his way the history of France and of this century. But we should probably have known and understood his itinerary. He said so himself: "My work lies ahead." Now it is over. The particular scandal of his death is the abolition of the human order by the inhuman.

The human order is still but a disorder: it is unjust and precarious; it involves killing, and dying of hunger; but at least it is founded, maintained, or resisted by men. In that order Camus had to live. That man on the move questioned us, was himself a question seeking its reply; he lived in the middle of a long life; for us, for him, for the men who maintain order and for those who reject it, it was important for him to break his silence, for him to decide, for him to conclude. Some die in old age while others, forever on reprieve, may die at any minute without the meaning of their life, of life itself, being changed. But for us, uncertain, without a compass, our best men had to reach the end of the tunnel. Rarely have the nature of a man's work and the conditions of the historical moment so clearly demanded that a writer go on living.

I call the accident that killed Camus a scandal because it suddenly projects into the center of our human world the absurdity of our most fundamental needs. At the age of twenty, Camus, suddenly afflicted with a malady that upset his whole life, discovered the Absurd—the senseless negation of man. He became accustomed to it, he thought out his unbearable condition, he came through. And yet one is tempted to think that only his first works tell the truth about his life, since that invalid once cured is annihilated by an unexpected death from the outside.

The Absurd might be that question that no one will ask him now, that he will ask no one, that silence that is not even a silence now, that is absolutely nothing now.

I don't think so. The moment it appears, the inhuman becomes a part of the human. Every life that is cut off—even the life of so young a man—is at one and the same time a phonograph record that is broken and a complete life. For all those who loved him, there is an unbearable absurdity in that death. But we shall have to learn to see that mutilated work as a total work. Insofar as Camus' humanism contains a human attitude toward the death that was to take him by surprise, insofar as his proud and pure quest for happiness implied and called for the inhuman necessity of dying, we shall recognize in that work and in the life that is inseparable from it the pure and victorious attempt of one man to snatch every instant of his existence from his future death.
In modern painting the race has already gone to the swift—to the quick brush and the quart can of enamel that dribbles casually across the canvas. The avant-garde now functions as a duly recognized academy, supported by curators, collectors, and critics. In music, however, developments tend to lag just a little behind events in the sister arts. Since music is subject to so many technical limitations, the automatists have had trouble deciding where to begin: you can’t just spatter notes on manuscript paper with a spray gun because, for one thing, a spray gun’s range is wider than a trumpet’s.

The only truly spontaneous composer I know of was Domenico Scarlatti’s cat, whom he once caught walking on the keys of his clavier, thereby providing the theme of the celebrated “Cat’s Fugue.” Still we must clearly count this as a case of cat proposes, man disposes. Some of our best-trained modern composers envy that cat her casualness, her lack of creative inhibitions. Like their colleagues of the paintbrush, the musical avant-gardists regard chance as their most valuable ally and invoke it as fervently as ever a romantic prayed for inspiration from the muses.

The foremost creator of music by accident, a middle-aging Californian named John Cage, dramatically introduced this concept about ten years ago, at a Columbia University concert. He himself conducted the history-making first performance of “Imaginary Landscape No. 4,” a work scored for twelve table-model radios. Two players were assigned to each radio, one to tune from station to station, the other to turn the volume up or down on cue. In the random counterpart of words and music that emerged we heard a fragment of some commercial, a few bars of jazz, a snippet of news commentary, and so forth, all cunningly intermixed in strict time to Cage’s pontifical beat. This fortuitous chorus may not have made everyone happy, but at least we left the hall knowing that we had undergone a unique experience, that it would never happen again in just the same way.

Reduced to its essentials, Cage’s argument for his unpredictable music proceeds from the premise that the world is full of sounds, some of them intentional but mostly accidental—traffic noises, steam knocking in the radiator, thunder rolling out of the sky. A composer may try to organize random sounds, or he may devise new ways of letting them speak for themselves. He may become a creator of opportunities, a manipulator of accidents. In practice this may mean shifting much of the responsibility onto the performer’s shoulders, thus relinquishing the composer’s hard-won control over what occurs in the concert hall.

In Cage’s recent “Concert for Piano and Orchestra,” for instance, the piano part contains a folio of eighty-four different passages shuffled like a deck of cards, and the soloist “is free to play any elements of his choice, wholly or in part and in any sequence. The orchestral accompaniment may involve any number of players on more or fewer instruments, and a given performance may be extended or shorter in length.” The haphazardness of this method reflects Cage’s preoccupation with the three-thousand-year-old Chinese Book of Changes, the I Ching, in which—according to translator Richard Wilhelm—“Attention centers not on things in their state of being, as is chiefly the case in the Occident, but upon their movements in change.” For an esoteric composer, the I Ching has the further advantage of obscurity, ambiguity, and endorsement by C. G. Jung.

In May, 1958, Cage and his friends gave a twenty-five-year retrospective concert of his works at Town Hall, and the proceedings were documented on tape by George Avakian, a veteran jazz authority and recording director. As a special labor of love he has just released a special three-record set containing the entire concert, including a generous admixture of catcalls and applause. (Priced at $25, the albums are available directly from the producer, at 10 West Thirty-third Street, New York.) In the most comprehensive program notes ever compiled for contemporary recordings, Cage explains their background in detail; in every aspect the booklet and records are a milestone for the experimental wing of modern music.

But the proof of the pudding, after all, rests not in Cage’s elaborate theorizing but simply in the hearing of his pieces. As a matter of fact, most of them stand up extraordinarily well under repeated listening—the clangorous music for electronic carillon, for example, or the fragile sonatas for “prepared” piano, performed by Maro Ajemian, that ring fascinating changes on faintly Oriental themes—like an atavistic memory of a gamelan gong. Cage’s heavier-footed experiments of the 1930’s sound contrived by comparison, and his “Williams Mix” for tape recorder is a skittish and superficial affair. But if you will go to the trouble of sitting down with the retrospective and meet it about halfway, chances are that you will at least, as Thurber would say, be amused by its presumption.

A young Cage disciple, Morton Feldman, has just appeared on his first LP (Columbia ML 5403, $4.98) with works bearing titles that might have come straight out of the Guggenheim: “Intersection 3,” “Extension 1,” “Projection 4,” and so forth. Feldman, too, advocates the overthrow of fixed notation and promotes accidents to the best of his ability. The program notes explain that in some instances he employs “unpredictability reinforced by spontaneity . . . what [the performer] plays is not dictated beyond the graph ‘control’—the range of a given passage and its temporal area and division are indicated, but the actual notes heard must come from the performer’s response to the musical situation.” The actual notes heard on this record, unfortunately, sound hopelessly coarse if not downright inept, and I am somewhat at a loss to find the responsible party. It has not yet occurred to either Cage or Feldman to let us know what they think of the outcome when the