The Recovery of Helen: Albert Camus's Attempt to Restore the Greek Idea of Nature*

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It is widely accepted that modern civilization signifies a profound break with antiquity. Yet this notion must be affirmed in the face of some disconcerting historical evidence. There is, for instance, the problem posed by the Renaissance, a movement ushering in the modern age which yet looked back to the ancient world for its inspiration, understanding itself as a rebirth rather than as the commencement of something entirely new. This apparent paradox of novelty and deference to antiquity which characterizes the Renaissance has perhaps been sufficiently explained. But is there yet a sufficient understanding of the manner in which this paradox has continued to characterize modern culture?

In our own century there has been a tendency, especially pronounced among the more influential literary artists, to seek in the antique vision a remedy for the deepening malaise of modernity. One of the most notable of these was Albert Camus. The example of Camus is particularly instructive because, unlike other artists such as Yeats or Anouilh, he also wrote major philosophical essays which rendered more fully explicit his view both of the modern crisis and the meaning of antiquity. While Camus's avowed "Hellenism" has been frequently noted, it has received little sustained attention from his interpreters.[1] One purpose of

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1. The only comprehensive examination in English of Camus's Hellenic sources, and their role in some of his literary art, is provided in Paul Archambault, *Camus's Hellenic Sources* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972). While Archambault's study is useful in regard to the technical question of Camus's use (and sometimes abuse) of particular sources, it sheds little light on the larger question of what Camus thought these sources have to say to the crisis of modernity. The most comprehensive studies in French of Camus's "Hellenism" are François Bousquet, *Camus le méditerranéen, Camus l'ancien* (Sherbrooke, Québec: Editions Naaman, 1977) and Dmitri Papamalamis, *Albert Camus et la pensée grecque* (Nancy, 1964). The first offers a summary of the Hellenic themes and references as they appear throughout Camus's work, but there is little or no attempt to offer a comprehensive interpretation of these themes; while the second, written as a graduate thesis, is more a fragmentary compilation of ideas and references than a critical interpretation.

this essay is to contribute to a more complete understanding of Camus by examining his turn to antiquity within the context of his whole intellectual endeavour. It will be apparent, it is hoped, that his "Hellenism," far from being merely a rhetorical gesture, is central to his meaning and significance for modernity.

Camus often used the term "*renaissance*" to denote his aspiration as a writer. He did so, however, in full awareness of the manner in which other returns to classical civilization — whether profound as in the case of Rousseau and Nietzsche, or merely vulgar as in the case of Mussolini — had ultimately intensified the problem of modernity. In Camus we therefore find a contemporary attempt to find in antiquity a remedy for the crisis of modernity which is undertaken in awareness of, and even opposition to, the results of earlier such attempts. This extra dimension of self-consciousness adds further interest to his own effort to help bring about a *renaissance* in the West, and it makes even more instructive the problematic outcome of his effort. A second, more general, purpose of this essay is to show how Camus's "Hellenism" highlights some of the enormous issues raised by the relationship between antiquity and modernity.[2]

I Camus and the Modern Crisis

Early in his career as a writer-celebrity, Camus had affixed to him those labels — such as "philosopher of the absurd" or "existentialist" — which have since proven to be as durable as they are misleading. In the face of such labels of convenience, he himself was to protest repeatedly that the sense of the "absurd" expressed in such early works as *The Outsider* and *The Myth of Sisyphus* had been for him a point of departure, not a final teaching. He was in fact striving to diagnose a malady of our age, not to glorify it. In a later essay, "The Enigma," in which he attempted to explain himself to his contemporaries, he expressed the central meaning of his whole endeavour in the following clear words: "In the deepest darkness of our nihilism, I have sought only reasons for going beyond this nihilism."[3]

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2. It should be noted at the outset that this study of Camus will draw principally from his essays — philosophical and lyrical — in which he speaks in his own name, rather than his novels and plays. The exposition of his thought about antiquity, and its relation to modernity, is a major task in itself. An examination also of how this thought is reflected in his art would require a much longer essay.

3. Albert Camus, "L'Enigme," *Essais* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), 865; see also *Ibid.*, 97, 835-36. The references in this article will be to the French-language editions of Camus's writings. All translations from the original French are my own.

The problem of nihilism was a central theme of Camus's second major philosophical essay, *The Rebel*, published nine years after *The Myth of Sisyphus*. "Nihilism" signified for Camus, at the deepest level, a sort of instinctive repudiation of life itself: " . . . the secret of Europe is that it no longer loves life."[4] On a more conscious level, nihilism is the denial not only of traditional systems of meaning, but of the very possibility that any moral principles are permanently sustained in the nature of things. As we shall see, for Camus, both the repudiation of life itself and of the sense of a permanent moral "value" in life are inextricably associated expressions of a fundamental modern turning-away from "nature." At the level of practice, this nihilism manifests itself in the absence of any clear idea of a moral limit to the power of human beings to manipulate other human beings and the world around them. The absence of a clear sense of moral limit, in combination with the accelerating development of technological power, poses an unprecedented threat to humanity. This threat had already manifested itself for Camus in the atrocities justified by the deadly ideologies of our century. In *The Rebel* he offered an exhaustive analysis of the ideological mass movements of both the left and the right, but its most compelling passages are those which attempt to uncover the earlier philosophical seeds which helped make these movements possible. Camus focusses his attention especially on those "evil geniuses" of the twentieth century who lived and wrote in the nineteenth — Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche.[5]

Hegel, according to Camus's estimate, is the giant of modern philosophy, the one "true rival of Plato." The prodigious Hegelian system is also "the most ambiguous in all philosophical literature."[6] This ambiguity is evident, for instance, in Hegel's relation to the most significant historical event of modernity, the French Revolution. He is the greatest critic of the abstract principles of justice which, in his view, engendered the Terror; yet he wished to continue the work of the Revolution, attempting to do so by incorporating the abstract justice of the Jacobins into the stream of concrete historical events. Rather than rejecting wholly the idea of morality, he sought to demonstrate that the actualization of moral principles such as justice and goodness is the goal of the historical process. Yet, according to Camus, the teaching that justice is to be found only at the end of the historical process renders provisional morality in the present. The actions of individuals and of societies can only be judged as to whether they are in conformity with the unfolding meaning of history. The monumental Hegelian attempt

4. "L'Homme révolté," *Essais*, 708.
5. "Rencontre avec Albert Camus," *Essais*, 1341.
6. "L'Homme révolté," *Essais*, 854, 542.

to reconcile goodness with historical necessity entails finally the "affirmation of everything, in history, which seems dedicated to success — force in the first place." This cynical implication of Hegel's philosophy of history was balanced by the "idealist" aspects of his thought, for in Hegel, as in all great thinkers, there existed a sort of self-correcting mechanism.[7]

This balance was to be lost by Hegel's successors. Of particular significance is the example of Marx. Motivated by a desire for justice, the depth of which Camus does not doubt, Marx placed his hope in the theory of "dialectical materialism," his variant of Hegel's philosophy of history. From the conviction that the only valid standard of justice or morality exists in the future, it is a short step to the sanctioning of any and every action in the present which might bring that future closer. The historical cynicism practised by Marx's followers, if not by Marx himself, has come to illustrate all too clearly that even the completely sincere demand for justice ends in injustice unless it is based on "an ethical justification of justice" which makes its claim in the present.[8]

The immensely influential philosophies of history developed by Hegel and Marx have, according to Camus, demolished all "vertical" transcendence of moral principles, while attempting to retain the "horizontal" transcendence of an immanent good to be realized within future history. The "God of history" of the western religious tradition has been replaced by the "deified history" of modern humanism.[9] In the modern philosophy of history the fundamental principles of human thought and action come to be considered as successive "world views" determined by their historical environment. Yet when it is no longer possible to believe that this succession has a final goal, then the result is a radical historical relativism, or historicism; and humanity is left face to face with the "finality of becoming." The phrase is Nietzsche's, and he is, for Camus, the herald of modern nihilism, who brings into the harsh light of explicitness what is already implicit in the modern philosophy of history: if there is no permanent truth somehow transcending historical process, there is finally no stable anchorage for concepts of "good" and "evil," and hence no final moral limit to human action within history. Yet Nietzsche became "the first perfect nihilist" only in order to overcome the debilitating effect of nihilism. In this effort he, like Marx, ends by awaiting a future advent, not of the classless society but of a superhumanity.[10]

7. *Ibid.*, 541-55.
8. *Ibid.*, 593-614.
9. *Ibid.*, 550, 702.
10. *Ibid.*, 475-89.

While Camus sometimes uses Nietzsche to criticize Marx, his emphasis is on what unites them. They become, through his exposition, the paramount modern representatives of the two faces of what is finally an identical nihilism. Invoking the mythic figure of Prometheus, who defied the established divine order out of love of humanity, Marx too rejects the present order in the name of a future justice. Because this righteous "No" to the injustice of the present is a "No" also to all mystifying moral principles, it finally entails the absence of any idea of a limit to what can be manipulated in the name of the future. Invoking another figure from Greek myth, Dionysos, Nietzsche says "Yes" to the natural order of things — which is for him perpetual and purposeless becoming — out of love for a superhumanity. Nietzsche's "Yes" to the finality of becoming, his *amor fati*, entails nothing less than the affirmation of all that has been, is, and will be, including the sum total of suffering and injustice endured by humanity. Whatever their own intentions, the rebellious "No" of Marx and the consenting "Yes" of Nietzsche have provided theoretical solace for the organized nihilisms of this century, whether the "historical Caesarism" of Russian Communism or the "biological Caesarism" of German National Socialism.[11]

Camus knew that the quest for an "ethical justification of justice" which pre-exists all historical action placed him outside the mainstream of contemporary European philosophy. This turning away from the modern historical philosophies at the same time implied a turning towards the pre-modern philosophical and religious tradition. In the last few pages of *The Rebel*, when indicating the nature of his hope for a recovery of the West from the darkness of nihilism, Camus invokes Nemesis, a goddess of ancient Greece.[12] This highly deliberate choice of a figure from Greek myth rather than from the Bible stems from his distinction within the pre-modern religious tradition between Athens and Jerusalem. And of course it reflects also his own preference.

Although Camus evinced a more conciliatory attitude towards the Christian faith than towards the dominant modern secular faiths, he would not endorse it as the antidote to nihilism. Indeed, for him Christianity, rather than being an alternative to modern historicism, might actually be indirectly responsible for it. A principal theme of the far-reaching critique of Christianity to be found in his work is that the modern philosophy of history is actually "born from a Christian representation"; it is a secularized expression of the Biblical doctrine of providence.[13]

11. *Ibid.*, 629, 648-53.
12. *Ibid.*, 699.
13. *Ibid.*, 594-98; see also, for instance, Albert Camus, *Carnets* II (Paris:

The view that the modern hope for the realization of a justice on earth within and through history is the immanentized offspring of the Christian hope for a future Kingdom of God beyond history is now perhaps an intellectual commonplace (though it would have been less so when Camus was writing). What is particularly significant in his statement of this argument is his attempt to define the inner moral dynamic of the secularizing process. According to him, the modern western attempt to bring heaven down to earth had its primary impetus in a "metaphysical" rebellion which, unable to reconcile the perfection of God with the affliction of human beings, rejected God for the sake of justice for humanity. Sensitivity to the evil and suffering present in the human condition entailed, in the West, "metaphysical rebellion" because of the Biblical concept of a transcendent Creator-God. In the face of the omnipotent and inscrutable deity of the Old Testament, suffering human beings found themselves compelled to choose between unconditional surrender to God's will or the unyielding assertion of their own will, despite God. Situated thus between consent and revolt, western humanity for centuries embraced the former, and was helped to do so by a remarkably effective Christian theodicy which, beginning with the story of the crucifixion itself, was able to persuade the faithful that evil was in reality good, and injustice justice. With the advent of modern scientific reason, the Christian theodicy, and particularly the notion of Christ's divinity so crucial to it, came to be thrown into doubt; the attitude of revolt, always latent in Christian consent, was released. This revolt was, in Camus's view, justified to the extent that the former consent had entailed an acquiescence in evil and injustice.[14]

For Camus, then, there would seem to be no question of a Christian "redemption" of modernity through some sort of "respiritualization" of the modern secular quest for justice. A movement back from the conception of history as human progress to the conception of history as divine providence, even if possible, would not resolve the situation which gave rise to metaphysical rebellion in the first place. As Camus expressed the problem in an interview: "I would find it very disturbing to be forced to choose between Saint Augustine and Hegel. I am convinced that

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Gallimard, 1964), 164: "Communism is a logical consequence of Christianity." For an expression of Camus's relatively conciliatory attitude towards Christianity, see his "L'Incroyant et les Chrétiens," *Essais*, 371-72.

14. "L'Homme révolté," *Essais*, 438-46, 465-71. For a more comprehensive and detailed account of Camus's view of the relation between Biblical religion and modern "rebellion," see my essay, "Prometheus or Cain? Albert Camus's Account of the Western Quest for Justice," *Faith and Philosophy* (April 1991).

there must be a supportable truth between the two."[15] Both the Christian and the modern are preoccupied with history, and both envisage the human situation as one of revolt *or* consent to the order of things. If modernity is to be redeemed by a "return," then it must be more radical than that envisaged by most conservatives: "If, in order to go beyond nihilism, we have to go back to Christianity, then we may very well follow the movement, and go beyond Christianity into Hellenism."[16]

II Camus and Hellenism: the Sources

Our primary concern in following Camus in his movement "beyond Christianity into Hellenism" will be to understand what he discovered there, and why he thought it could bear decisively on the crisis of modern nihilism. Certain preliminary questions, however, need to be addressed: how did Camus envisage his own relation to Hellenism? how did he define "Hellenism" in historical terms? and what was the nature of his acquaintance with Hellenic sources?

"The truth is that it is indeed a hard destiny to be born on a pagan earth in Christian times. This is my case. I feel closer to the values of the ancient world than to those of Christians." This statement in an interview typifies Camus's sense of allegiance to antiquity, particularly in contradistinction from Christianity. On other occasions, he professed himself to possess "a Greek heart" and to "feel most at ease in the world of Greek myth."[17] As the wording in such professions indicates, Camus's avowed rapport with Hellenism was, first, one of immediate and vivid feeling. He was willing, to some extent, to invoke the simple accidents of geography (his North African birth and upbringing), and even heredity (his Spanish maternal ancestors) to explain his lively sentiment for the Hellenic world, appearing at times to see Hellenism as a manifestation of a more primal Mediterranean cultural matrix dictated by the necessities of climate and geography rather than by any vision of the mind. His writing, especially the lyrical essays, is suffused with lovingly drawn images of Mediterranean nature: the dazzling sun and the serene sea, human bodies on the beaches, the fragrances and silhouetted hills of the evenings. Yet while Camus, as we shall see, wished to give nature its due, his rapport with Hellenism was not finally a matter of the senses, but of thought. His return was a return not to nature *tout court*, but

15. "Extraits d'Interviews," *Essais*, 1428.
16. *Carnets* II, 233.
17. "Rencontre avec Albert Camus," *Essais*, 1343; "Trois Interviews," *Essais*, 380; *Carnets* II, 317.

to a particular, Hellenic, vision of nature — a vision originating in the Mediterranean, but which, insofar as it is simply true, would be transferable anywhere. Such a return to a particular idea of nature is a more difficult matter, requiring a more precise theoretical articulation.[18]

Before considering the nature and quality of Camus's theoretical grasp of Hellenic sources, something should be said about what he understood "Hellenism" to be. "Hellenism" could refer, in its limited sense, to the Greek culture prior to Alexander the Great's conquests; or it could refer, more broadly, to the whole of antique civilization from Homeric Greece up to and including the last years of the Roman Empire. While Camus's own notion of what constitutes "Hellenism" in terms of cultural history is best inferred from an identification of those sources which figure most prominently in his enucleation of the Hellenic vision, certain generalizations of an excluding nature can be made immediately. He excluded, in no uncertain terms, the Romans, who attempted to substitute military genius for the artistic genius and the sense of life which they lacked; they were "imitators without imagination," and it was not even the pure genius of Greece which they imitated, but the "fruits of her decadence and her errors."[19] Since Hellenism in its broad sense sometimes incorporates Christian or even Gnostic writers living within the classical period, it is necessary to note that these also would be excluded from Camus's definition. Whatever the historical milieu in which they grew up, and whatever the degree to which they employed or were influenced by Greek concepts, both Gnosticism and Christianity are, for Camus, fundamentally alien to the Hellenic vision. All the preceding exclusions may be highly contentious, but from our perspective — and Camus's — it is the exclusion of Christianity which is most significant, and his reasons for it must be examined at a later point. To offer now a more positive statement as to what "Hellenism" is for Camus: it is primarily that Greek culture extending from Homer to Aristotle. The category remains, of course, extremely broad, but it will be further clarified through our consideration of the particular Hellenic sources most influential for him.

Detecting particular influences and sources within a complex body of thought can be an endless and uncertain task, especially in the case of a writer such as Camus, whose scrupulosity about the accurate use and citation of sources was not that of a professional scholar. Since my primary concern is with the thought of Camus,

18. See the speech delivered by Camus as a youth at the inauguration of the "Maison de la Culture" in Algiers, "La culture indigène, la nouvelle culture méditerranéenne," *Essais*, 1321-27.
19. *Ibid.*, 1324. See also *Carnets* III (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), 145-46.

rather than with literary influences, a brief overview of his use of Hellenic sources must suffice here.[20] These sources can, for the sake of convenience, be categorized according to three literary genres: myth (or, more accurately, "mythopoetry"), tragedy and philosophy.

References to Greek myth occur frequently throughout Camus's work. Indeed, as his notebooks reveal, the whole plan of that work was conceived in terms of three progressive stages, each identified with a mythical figure: "I. The Myth of Sisyphus (absurd). II. The Myth of Prometheus (rebellion). III. The Myth of Nemesis."[21] While one searches in vain for an explicit definition of myth on Camus's part, it is clear that he did not accept the popular modern tendency to make "myth" synonymous with "illusion," whether salutary or not. He envisaged the task of the artist as one of transmitting myths to a humanity which cannot live without them, not as a means of consolation or escape, but as a vehicle for helping people to see more clearly the nature of things. The imagination of the artist "breathes life" into already existing myths or engenders new myths "according to the measure of his passion and his anguish."[22] A primary source for those already existing myths which Camus strove to revive for modern people was Homer. The available evidence indicates his careful, and probably repeated, reading of the Homeric epics. The passages in the *Iliad* which appear to have impressed him most profoundly are those which evoke the wrath of Achilles after the death of Patroclus; and in the *Odyssey*, his attention was captured most by the scene wherein Ulysses rejects Calypso's offer of immortality in favour of returning to his native land of Ithaca. Both of these episodes were to become, for Camus, emblematic of the Hellenic vision.[23]

Greek tragedy was also an important source for those myths which he strove to re-animate. One thinks immediately, for instance, of Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, the "archetype" of Greek tragedy for Camus. The mythical figure of Prometheus, especially as evoked by Aeschylus, long preoccupied him: as a student in Algeria, he adapted *Prometheus Bound* for the stage, and Prometheus

20. For more detailed accounts of the classical texts (as well as secondary sources) read by Camus, see Paul Archambault, *Camus' Hellenic Sources* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972); and Francois Bousquet, *Camus le méditerranéen, Camus l'ancien* (Sherbrooke, Quebec: Editions Naaman, 1977). This section of my essay is indebted especially to Archambault's study.

21. *Carnets* II, 328.

22. *Carnets* II 325. For more on Camus's use of myths, traditional and modern, see Monique Crochet, *Les mythes dans l'oeuvre de Camus* (Paris: Editions Universitaires, 1973).

23. See, for instance, *Carnets* II, 22, 303; "L'Exil d'Hélène," *Essais*, 856.

was later to become the subject of an essay, "Prometheus in the Underworld," as well as the symbolic protagonist of his major philosophical work, *The Rebel*. He had an extremely high regard also for Sophocles, "the greatest tragedian of all time," and especially for his *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*. Both Oedipus and Antigone figure with Prometheus, though less prominently, as embodiments of the typically Hellenic response to the human condition. Camus's relative disregard for the works of Euripides reflects, to some extent, the influence of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*. Yet while Nietzsche's tendentious account of Greek tragedy was undeniably important for him, especially when he was younger, Camus nevertheless possessed a thorough first-hand familiarity with Aeschylus and Sophocles (as well as Euripides). In a late lecture devoted to the subject, "On the Future of Tragedy," he shows an independence and originality of judgement capable both of accepting and rejecting elements of Nietzsche's account.[24]

The presence of Nietzsche makes itself felt also in Camus's account of Greek philosophy. Here again, however, he demonstrates a final independence of judgement, and on that most crucial of questions — the question of Socrates. Though critical in one of his earliest writings of the *paresse du coeur* exhibited in the serene, optimistic rationalism of Socratism, Camus was later to come to the defence of Socrates against Nietzsche.[25] Socrates came to signify for him two virtues conspicuously lacking in the modern age: the acknowledgement of the limits of one's knowledge —"he did not believe he knew what he did not know" — and, closely related to this intellectual restraint, the emphasis on disciplined dialogue, or dialectic, as the means of arriving at truth. For Camus, Socrates incarnates the attitude and method proper to genuine philosophy. Yet while thus invoking the modest figure of Socrates against the striving for omnipotence of the modern system-makers, Camus does not necessarily affirm the particular truths arrived at by Socrates, or attributed to him by Plato. His references to the Platonic dialogues are remarkably few and, taken together, they evince neither much familiarity nor much sympathy with the actual philosophical teaching of Socrates-Plato. Camus, indeed, professed a greater inclination for pre-Socratic philosophy: "I feel at ease with the Greeks, and not those of Plato: the pre-

24. See Albert Camus, *Théâtre, Récits, Nouvelles* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), 1701-11. Cited hereafter as *TRN*.

25. See "Métaphysique chrétienne et Néoplatonisme," *Essais*, 1309; "L'Incroyant et les Chrétiens," *Essais*, 374-75; "L'Exil d'Hélène," *Essais*, 854; and for his defence of Socrates against Nietzsche, see *Carnets* II, 78-79.

Socratics, Heraclitus, Empedocles, Parmenides."[26] Though one finds references in his work to all three pre-Socratics, it is Heraclitus, as we shall see, who is most favoured.

This completes our overview of Camus's acquaintance with Hellenic literary sources. It is evident that his knowledge, at least insofar as it went beyond a rather basic level, was selective; yet few would deny that familiarity with those figures who most attracted his attention — Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Heraclitus and Plato's Socrates — does indeed constitute familiarity with the heights of Hellenic culture. But is "familiarity" the proper term here? This raises the difficult question of the quality of Camus's understanding of his sources. It can be affirmed, at least, that in regard to the above-named, his knowledge was derived directly from his own study of the original texts (though not in Greek), complemented by the use of generally reliable, comprehensive secondary sources available to him. Yet the nature of this study was variable, ranging from thorough in the case of, say, Aeschylus and Sophocles, to cursory in the case of Plato's dialogues. In response to our question, then, it must be acknowledged that Camus's acquaintance with Hellenic sources was not that of a trained classicist; but neither was his purpose. His primary concern was not the sources in themselves, but the sources insofar as they contain a teaching which might be of help in his own attempt to find a way out of modern nihilism. He thus invites the risk, to which he sometimes succumbs, of losing sight of the distinction between his own thought and that of the Greeks.[27] Yet the deeply interested

26. *Essais*, 1615. Save for some fragmentary allusions to the Stoics, the Epicureans and Aristotle, Camus evinces little interest in post-Socratic Greek philosophy. The one noteworthy exception is the commentary on Plotinus which constitutes one of the chapters of the thesis he wrote for his degree in philosophy at the University of Algiers, "Métaphysique chrétienne et Néoplatonisme." This account of Plotinian metaphysics, however, is essentially a matter of the diligent fulfillment of an academic requirement, without fruitful ramifications for his later thought.

Note should be made also of Camus's interest in Thucydides's history of the Peloponnesian war. The Greek historian's description of the plague in Athens served as a model for Camus's novel, *The Plague*, both in narrative tone and in much of the empirical content. Yet beyond the specialized interest which this use of Thucydides might hold for interpreters of *The Plague*, it has little bearing on the broader question of Camus's Hellenism.

27. This danger is more noticeable in the young Camus, who in at least one instance is willing to label "inconsistent" in the Greeks what is not in accord with that attitude of "loyalty to the earth" which he attributes to them. See "Le Mythe de Sisyphe,"*Essais*, 145. The more judicious commentary of his maturity still evinces a reluctance to acknowledge elements of "otherworldliness" among the ancient Greeks: while the story of Ulysses's renunciation of immortality is often alluded to, Plato's "Phaedo" receives no comment.

nature of his engagement with the Greeks, in which so much is at stake, is capable of speaking, and making the ancients speak, with an unusually penetrating voice to a distracted modernity. We turn now to the question of what, according to Camus, the ancient sources have to say to us.

III Camus and Hellenism: the Themes

Camus was aware that it is "always arbitrary to speak of a 'Greek spirit'." On the other hand, he argued that if it is nevertheless permissible to speak of "civilizations" at all then it must be possible to discern within each certain "favoured themes," which become even more pronounced in the light of comparison with other civilizations.[28] Camus found such "favoured themes" within his Hellenic sources; these themes, in turn, determine his selection of those Hellenic allusions which pervade his writing. There appear to be three such privileged themes: the idea of limit or moderation ("*la mesure*"), the love of beauty, and the sense of "friendship" with nature. Camus repeatedly evokes these components of the Hellenic vision, and almost always by way of contrast with modernity. The following passage, taken from his essay, "Helen's Exile," is characteristic:

> We have exiled beauty; the Greeks took arms for it. The first difference, but one that goes far back. Greek thought was always based on the idea of limit. It pushed nothing to extremes, neither the sacred nor reason, because it denied nothing, neither the sacred nor reason. It gave everything its share, balancing shade with light. Our Europe, on the contrary, bent on the conquest of totality, is the daughter of excess. We deny beauty as we deny everything that we do not exalt. And, even though we do it in diverse ways, we exalt one thing and one alone: the future empire of reason. In our madness, we push back the eternal limits, and at once dark Furies swoop down to tear us apart. Nemesis, goddess of moderation, not of vengeance, watches. She punishes, ruthlessly, all who go beyond the limit. . . .
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> At the dawn of Greek thought, Heraclitus already imagined that justice set limits to the physical universe itself. "The sun will not go beyond its bounds, or else the Furies who watch over justice will discover it. . . ."
>
> Nature is still there, nevertheless. She opposes her calm skies and her reasons to the madness of men. Until the atom too bursts into flame, and history ends in the triumph of reason and the death agony of the species. But the Greeks never said that the limit could not be crossed. They said it existed and

28. "Métaphysique chrétienne et Néoplatonisme," *Essais*, 1225.

> that whoever dared ignore it was mercilessly struck down. Nothing in today's history can contradict them.[29]

Moderation and excess, beauty and ugliness, nature and history — these are the antitheses which sound throughout Camus's writing about antiquity and modernity. Such all-embracing concepts demand more precise clarification. Yet in "Helen's Exile" lyricism prevails over detailed exposition, (in any event, not much clarification is possible in the short space of a few pages). Nor is such an exposition forthcoming in the much longer essay, *The Rebel*, written at about the same time: after an exhaustive analysis of the theoretical origins of the modern crisis, Camus stops short at a vague, though eloquent, appeal to an alternative "pensée de midi" inspired by Hellenism. While one finds in these and other writings many indications of his vision of Hellenism, a sustained and systematic exposition is absent. This should not be taken as a sign of incapacity or even any particular reticence on his part, for such an exposition was to have been the concern of his next major philosophical essay, "Nemesis," which he did not live to complete.[30] Despite the absence of this essay, it is still possible to find in his available writings a considerable basis for further clarification of those "favoured themes" he discerned in Hellenism.

An artist himself, and more particularly a "man of the theatre,"[31] Camus felt an especially strong affinity for the austere beauty of Greek tragedy. It was in a lecture given in Athens four years before his death, "On the Future of Tragedy" that he offered one of his most helpful explications of the meaning of Hellenism, and its bearing on the crisis of the modern West. In this lecture Camus confronts directly the thorny question, "what is a tragedy"? Without pretending to offer an exhaustive definition, he nevertheless attempts to enucleate what he finds at the heart of any tragedy. There is, according to him, always a conflict of forces. While conflict is, of course, also inherent in other art forms, the feature distinguishing tragedy from, say, melodrama or drama is that the forces confronting each other are equally legitimate. Tragedy is "ambiguous," for each force is at the same time both justified and unjustified, whereas in more "simple-minded" drama it is a straightforward question of good *versus* evil. Referring to ancient Greek tragedy, Camus remarks that "Antigone is

29. "L'Exil d'Hélène," *Essais*, 853-57.
30. See *Carnets* II, 342. With the permission of Camus's children, I was able to examine his notes for "Nemesis," found within his unpublished journals for the last eight years of his life (1951-1959). The bulk of these notes is now available to the public in the recently released final volume of Camus's notebooks, *Carnets* III (Paris: Gallimard, 1989).
31. See "Pourquoi je fais du théâtre," *TRN*, 1720-28.

right, but Creon is not wrong. Similarly, Prometheus is both just and unjust, and Zeus who pitilessly oppresses him is also in the right." This confrontation of equally legitimate forces gives rise to the central teaching of Greek tragedy, the teaching of "limit":

> This is why the chorus in ancient tragedies principally advises prudence. For the chorus knows that up to a certain limit everyone is right and that the person who, from blindness or passion, oversteps this limit courts catastrophe in order to make triumphant a right he thinks he alone possesses. The constant theme of ancient tragedy, therefore, is the limit that must not be transgressed. On either side of this limit equally legitimate forces meet in quivering and endless confrontation. To make a mistake about this limit, to wish to destroy the balance, is to perish.[32]

What is the nature of these two forces, mutually opposed within a delicate equilibrium, in Greek tragedy? Camus defines them more precisely as, on one side, the assertion of human will, and on the other, "the divine principle reflected by the world."[33] Human conflict with the divine order — whether incarnated in a god, in society, or in the notion of Fate — can be motivated by the proud desire for power, by ignorance, or by the thirst for justice. Even in regard to the last, however, there remains a limit; hence Prometheus is plunged into the depths of Tartarus when his indignant revolt against injustice leads him to express his hatred of the divine order itself. The more that human revolt is morally justified, and the more that the sacred order is necessary, the more profound is the tragedy.

The simultaneous affirmation of mutually limiting revolt *and* consent, of "Yes" *and* "No" to the order of things is, according to Camus, the essential meaning of Greek tragedy. And it is the teaching most badly needed by a western civilization which has for centuries been lurching between the extremes of an unlimited consent *or* revolt, "Yes" *or* "No." Camus, as a careful and sometimes approving reader of Marx, was not so naive about the nature of historical change as to think that the sort of fundamental alteration of attitude he was proposing was wholly a matter of individual reason and will. His lecture includes a discussion of the broader historical conditions which have made tragedy possible in the past. It is only on two occasions in the history of the West, separated by twenty centuries — in ancient Greece and in renaissance Europe — that the rare flower of tragedy has made its appearance. The Greece of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, and the western Europe of Shakespeare and Racine were cultures of transition,

32. "Sur l'avenir de la tragédie," *TRN*, 1705.
33. *Ibid.*, 1706.

of "struggle between a world that is still interpreted in the sense of the sacred and men who are already committed to their individuality, that is to say, armed with the power to question." Tragedy makes its appearance during that transitory time between the decline of an old system of meaning (or religion) and the advent of a new one. And most propitious for tragedy is that special moment when the traditional sacred order and the new, questioning individualism are approximately equal in strength. This is why, for Camus, Sophocles signifies the supreme height of Greek tragedy; in Aeschylus the traditional religious element remains preponderant — in the last play of his trilogy, Zeus was to grant forgiveness to a repentant and reconciled Prometheus — and in Euripides the emphasis on individual psychology has already become pronounced. At the extreme degrees, neither a wholly religious nor atheist tragedy is possible; there can be only religious or atheist drama. It is thus that Camus explains the absence of tragedy in the era of traditional Greek religion prior to Aeschylus and, again, in Roman Catholic Europe prior to the Renaissance and Reformation. Similarly, the tragic voice falls silent again in Greece after the triumph of Socratic rationalism, and later, in Europe, after the triumph of Cartesian rationalism. Both a wholly sacred society, where all is mystery and divine grace, and a wholly rational, humanist society, which banishes the divine entirely, are inimical to the delicate equilibrium of the tragic attitude.[34]

It was Camus's uncertain hope that tragedy might be born yet again in the West, in the twentieth century, though such a birth still "needs our patience, and a genius." The conception of man as the maker of his own history, rooted in the metaphysical rebellion with which the modern project began, has been carried so far that history itself "has put on the mask of destiny." We now see evidence of humanity beginning to rebel against this deity of its own making. This opposition between an absolutism of historical necessity and a renewed individual demand for justice constitutes a tragic climate. It is at this point of extreme tension, where the modern historical sense "turns back against itself," that Camus discerns the possibility of an advance. It is at this point also that the fatality of Nemesis, "goddess of moderation not of vengeance" makes its presence felt.[35]

Even in ancient Greece, Nemesis would appear to have been a relatively vague and abstract figure, more a moral symbol than an individualized deity. It is perhaps this very lack of concreteness which makes her appeal to Camus as the personification of an idea

34. *Ibid.*, 1702-1703, 1707-1709.
35. *Ibid.*, 1709, 1711; "L'Exil d'Hélène," *Essais*, 853.

which, in the latter part of his life, he was striving to articulate in a form worthy of it. In the absence of the major philosophical essay which was to explicate Nemesis, we can only reconstruct this idea in outline, making use of those allusions to it which are to be found in his later published essays and in his notebooks. It is evident that, however Nemesis tended to be understood by the ancient Greeks, for Camus she is above all the protectress of the order of the universe, which she enforces "pitilessly."[36] We have seen that he regarded acknowledgement of this order, however painful it may be, as one of the fundamental teachings of Greek tragedy. But what can it mean to speak of an essential order — moral as well as physical — in the universe? Camus knew that to speak in this way was already to separate oneself from contemporary thought, dominated as it is by "the purely historical philosophies."[37] Where, then, did he find for his invocation of Nemesis the theoretical basis which would render that invocation something more than a poetic gesture?

It would appear that Camus found what he needed above all in the writings of the mystic-philosopher, Heraclitus. "Mystic" because Camus does not follow Nietzsche in regarding Heraclitus as the teacher of the "finality of becoming."[38] He seems, rather, to interpret Heraclitean philosophizing as a movement through emphasis on the ceaseless flux of visible things to the intuition of an underlying unity, a unity, however, which does not entirely transcend the natural universe. This interpretation of Heraclitus as striving to think together the eternal One and the everchanging Many, or Being and Becoming — upholding both in a precarious balance which neither attempts to escape from the world nor surrenders to the flux of history — is evident in the following passage in *The Rebel*:

> . . . one cannot say that being is only on the level of essence. Where could one perceive essence except on the level of existence and becoming? But one cannot say that being is only existence. Something that is always in the process of becoming could not have being — there must be a beginning. Being can only prove itself in becoming, and becoming is nothing without being. The world . . . is both movement and fixity. The historical dialectic, for example, is not in continuous pursuit of an unknown value. It turns on limit, the prime

36. "L'Exil d'Hélène," *Essais*, 853. See also Monique Crochet, *Les mythes dans l'oeuvre de Camus*, 80.
37. "L'Homme révolté," *Essais*, 425.
38. See, for instance, Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, trans. by Marianne Cowan (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1962), 57-68.

> value. Heraclitus, the discoverer of becoming, nevertheless set a limit to the perpetual flow. This limit was symbolized by Nemesis. . . .[39]

It is now possible to give more precision to the idea of "nature," one of those "favoured themes" of the Greeks which Camus invokes repeatedly throughout his work. It is the "nature" of Heraclitus which "likes to hide itself," which "neither speaks nor conceals" but "rather gives a sign" to those who are "awake"; this visible sign of invisible divine order (*kosmos*) is the universe itself, which is characterized, on the level of logic, by the ceaseless play of contradictions: "cold things grow hot, the hot cools, the wet dries, the parched moistens."[40]

The Heraclitean presence is manifest in a pervasive, though largely implicit, manner throughout Camus's work — perhaps most obviously in that continual generation of contradictions which marks it so strongly. Many commentators have noticed Camus's predilection for antithetical themes and symbols — light and darkness, midday and midnight, reason and the irrational, revolt and consent, beauty and ugliness, moderation and excess, freedom and justice — but remarkably little attention has been given to the connection with Heraclitus. Camus's proclivity for such antitheses was already present in his earliest writing: his first published book of essays was entitled *L'Envers et l'Endroit* ("Betwixt and Between") and contained within it an essay entitled *Entre Oui et Non* ("Between Yes and No"). It would seem that what was originally an artist's sensitivity to the oppositions in life came to be increasingly articulated in a Heraclitean manner. Apart from direct allusions to Heraclitus, this development is shown by the prominent use in a later essay like *The Rebel* of unmistakeably Heraclitean images, such as the "bow" and the "midday sun," to express the balanced tension between opposites.[41] It is shown also by the evidence in Camus's late, unpublished notebooks of experimentation with the actual literary style of Heraclitus's philosophizing. Particularly significant is a section of his notebooks, dated in the last month of his life, which contains a series of oracular aphorisms under the title *Pour Némésis* ("For Nemesis"):

> Black horse, white horse, a single human hand controls the two furies. To the open tomb, joyous is the race.

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39. "L'Homme révolté," *Essais*, 699.
40. Heraclitus, 22 B 93, 123, 126 (Diels-Kranz). Found in the translation of Jonathan Barnes, *Early Greek Philosophy* (Penguin Books, 1987). See *Carnets* III, 223, where Camus speaks of the artist as one who "neither reveals nor conceals: he gives a sign."
41. See *Essais*, 708-709.

> The truth lies, frankness conceals. Hide yourself in the light.
> The world fills you and you are empty; plenitude.
> The small sound of foam on a morning beach; it fills the world as much as the roar of glory. They both come out of silence.
> He who refuses chooses himself, who covets prefers himself.
> Neither ask nor refuse. Accept in order to renounce.
> Flames of ice crown the days; be still in the unmoving fire.
> Equally hard, equally gentle, the slope, the slope of the day.
> But at the summit? a lone mountain.
> The night burns, the sun darkens. O earth which suffices for everything. . . .
> Behind the cross, the demon. Leave them together. Your empty altar is elsewhere.[42]

Heraclitus would seem to signify for Camus the theoretical height of the Greek capacity for affirming the unity of things in a manner which "excludes nothing", not even apparent contradictions. Indeed, the ability to live in the contemplation of contradiction, without succumbing to the temptation to exclude one of the opposing poles, is the very manifestation of the sense of limit, a sense which, in turn, is attuned to the underlying order of nature. Beauty, the third of the "favoured themes" of the Greeks, is made possible by this law of limit inherent in nature and imitated in human art. And it is the inspiring presence of beauty, in turn, which makes possible loving consent to that order of nature which is sometimes so painful. While in Camus's writing these three Hellenic themes of limit, beauty, and nature constitute a triad, it is the last — nature — which functions as the formative principle.

IV The Meeting of Hellenism and Modernity

The radical ambition of Camus's undertaking has not been sufficiently appreciated. His writing argues for, and to some extent attempts itself to fulfill, nothing less than the reconstitution of the philosophical-religious basis of western civilization. While this proposed reconstitution is to be inspired by Greek thought, it must be emphasized that Camus did not envisage the problem as one of simply "restoring" Heraclitus or Aeschylus to the present as if the intervening twenty-five centuries had never existed.[43] Apart from its practical impossibility, such a wholesale restoration of the teaching of the ancient Greeks would betray that very teaching; for the Greeks, to repeat, "gave everything its share." This entails doing justice to the modern historical sense, and thereby incorporating it in a more balanced perspective, rather than excluding it

42. *Carnets* III, 276.
43. See *Carnets* II, 26.

totally. The historical sense, according to Camus, is inextricably associated with a truth which has been learned through enormous pain and struggle, and which must be given its due in any hoped-for *renaissance* of the West.

What this modern truth was for Camus is revealed, in a negative manner, in the one repeated criticism he directs at ancient Greece: "In Greece there were free men because there were slaves."[44] That this echoes a typically Marxian observation merely indicates that, to some extent, Marx was right: the splendid liberty of Greek philosophy, art, and political action was paid for at the price of equality. When Heraclitus descended from the quest for the invisible order to the visible realm of politics, this is what he prescribed: "It is law also to follow the counsel of one."[45] Camus was not willing to accept the political solution offered by Greek philosophy to the problematic relationship between the few wise and the many "uncomprehending." According to him, a genuine restoration of the Greek vision requires going beyond the Greeks themselves to the affirmation of a balance between opposites which they failed to preserve — the balance, to express it most simply, between liberty and equality.[46] To express this balance in a manner more appropriate to our investigation here: it is the balance between the ancient Greek consent to the order of nature, and that modern demand for justice which attempts to direct history towards the fulfillment of all human beings. Marx was right to feel compassion for oppressed humanity, and to strive to abolish such oppression; he was wrong insofar as this striving made him a "stranger to any solar beauty."[47] Camus himself wished to affirm both justice and beauty, rebellious compassion for the oppressed and consent to the order of nature. In one of his most powerful articulations of this aspiration, he invokes, characteristically, the Heraclitean image of the bow:

> In the difficult times we face, what more can I desire than to exclude nothing and to learn to weave from strands of white and black a single string tautened to the breaking point? In everything I've done or said to the present, it seems well to me to recognize these two forces, even when they contradict each other. I have not been able to deny the light into which I was born and yet I have not wished to refuse the burdens of our time. . . . Yes, there is beauty and there are the humiliated. Whatever the difficulties of the enterprise, I would like never to be unfaithful to the one or the other.[48]

44. *Carnets* I (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), 234, 247.
45. Heraclitus, 22 B 33, 34 (Diels-Kranz).
46. See "L'Homme révolté," *Essais*, 691-93.
47. *Ibid.*, 598.
48. "Retour à Tipasa," *Essais*, 874-75.

Camus, as an artist and, moreover,a conscious transposer of ancient myth into modern contexts, continually sought images suitable for embodying his ideas. But what image would be appropriate to this vast conception of a renewed West, to be born out of the balanced tension between the highest aspirations of antiquity and modernity? The figure of Prometheus, who brought to humanity both technology and art, may demonstrate an ancient awareness of the legitimate claims of both beauty and the alleviation of human suffering.[49] Yet despite this, the Greeks do not finally provide the great image Camus needs. That they do not would appear to reflect his view that they gave too great a share to beauty and not enough to man's responsibility for ameliorating his situation. If Hellenic civilization is indeed deficient in this one, fundamental respect, then it needs correcting by modernity, just as modernity needs to learn from it. In an article (which he did not publish) written in defence of *The Rebel,* Camus offers an explanation of this mutual need, an explanation which appeals to an image of reconciliation borrowed from the modern artist, Goethe:

> The ideology of the XIXth century, at least in those of its tendencies which rule today over the European mind, turned away from the dream of Goethe which united, with Faust and Helen, contemporary titanism and antique beauty, and gave them a son, Euphorion. The contemporary Faust has then wished to have Euphorion without Helen, in a sort of morose and prideful delectation. But he has been able only to bring forth a monster from the laboratory rather than the wonderful child. I have not said that Faust is wrong in what he is, but only that, in order to be and to create, he cannot do without Helen. I have not set up — a vain enterprise — the Mediterranean against Europe, but have affirmed that the one cannot do without the other. Neither Faust without Helen, nor Helen without Faust, that is what I believe.[50]

For Camus, this marriage of Faust and Helen must seek its philosophical inspiration in Heraclitus, rather than in Goethe's contemporary, Hegel. It must be a unity which allows each, modernity and antiquity, to be what it is, rather than that false synthesis — stemming from the modern quest for totality — which finally excludes Helen.[51] In Goethe's poem the offspring of the union, Euphorion, dies, too beautiful for the misery of this world. Camus, writing in the midst of twentieth-century nihilism, was

49. See "Prométhée aux enfers," *Essais,* 841.
50. "Défense de l'Homme révolté," *Essais,* 1710-11.
51. See "L'Exil d'Hélène," *Essais,* 855: "History explains neither the natural universe which was before it, nor beauty which is above it. It has therfore chosen to ignore them."

even less sanguine about the future, but he was nevertheless willing to allow that it still "depends on us whether or not Euphorion lives."[52]

V Concluding Remarks: Euphorion and the Problem of Religion

Camus's expression of hope for the renewal of western civilization remains tentative and undeveloped in comparison with his magisterial analysis of the modern crisis. This is partly a matter of the accident of his early death, early especially for a writer who felt himself ready to undertake his most important work. Yet the tenuous, barely formed character of Camus's hope must also be attributed to the sheer enormity of the problems which attend it. The problem I wish to raise here does not concern the accuracy of Camus's interpretation of Hellenism (a matter perhaps best left to classicists), but the general feasibility of his attempt to find in the Hellenic vision a corrective to modernity. If indeed it depends on us "whether or not Euphorion lives" (a statement which seems quintessentially modern), then we are faced with the task of coming to terms with such problems.

In his lecture "On the Future of Tragedy" Camus pointed to the tragic climate constituted in our century by the conflict between the new absolutism of historical necessity and the individual's demand for freedom and justice. Because the modern deity of historical necessity is a human invention, it does not in any way constitute a divine or sacred force. Yet elsewhere in the same speech, as we have noted, Camus defined the essence of tragedy as the conflict between *divine* necessity and human assertion. There is a certain ambiguity here concerning the place of the "divine" or "sacred" in that renewed tragic equilibrium sought by Camus. This ambiguity reflects a larger uncertainty in his thought about the role of religion in the renewal of western civilization.

Camus has surprisingly little to say about ancient Greek religion. One remark made in an interview, however, is very telling: "I feel closer to the values of the ancient world than to those of Christians. Unfortunately, I cannot go to Delphi to have myself initiated!"[53] This regretful acknowledgement that Greek religiosity is no longer a living possibility points to a sense of deprivation which haunts Camus's writing: whether in his austere analysis of the modern malaise or in his lyrical evocations of the beauty of nature, his writing is suffused with an unfulfilled religious yearning. He always refused the epithet "atheist"; but because the term "God" was so burdened with Judaeo-Christian meanings, he pre-

52. "Défense de l'Homme révolté," *Essais.*, 1711.
53. "Rencontre avec Albert Camus," *Essais*, 1343.

ferred to speak of his "sense of the sacred."[54] The absence of a more concretely defined religious mediation of the sacred constitutes an immense question mark beside Camus's thought. It is difficult to understand how Euphorion could ever be for modern people more than an abstract idea clothed in a rarefied artistic image. If the idea represented by Euphorion is indeed true, then it still needs an appropriate spiritual vehicle — a public piety — capable of making it a living presence in modern society.

In regard to those public pieties already present in modern society, Camus was relentless in exposing the false idols of the dominant secular ideologies. His treatment of the primary traditional religion of the West, Christianity, evinces by comparison a more ambivalent combination of hostility and guarded praise. He views Christianity, for instance, as closer to the ancient Greek vision insofar as it remains oriented towards a truth beyond the historical process; after all, the Greeks were "able to enter into Christianity," whereas they would have "understood nothing of existentialism."[55] Yet, as we have seen, he also holds Christianity responsible for the appearance in the West of the historical sense. This problem posed by Christianity is crucial for Camus, since it can be argued that, as a historical mediator between Hellenism and modernity, it might after all be the very religion required to give life to Euphorion.

The problem of the relationship between antiquity and Christianity was always a fundamental concern for Camus. Almost as though from a premonition of how important it would prove for his thought, as a university student he chose the transition from Hellenism to Christianity as the subject of the thesis written for his degree in philosophy. And his projected major philosophical essay, "Nemesis," which he did not live to complete, would have taken up the same subject again. The early thesis, "Christian Metaphysics and Neoplatonism," together with certain passages in his later writing, constitutes all that we have of his account of the role of Christianity as mediator between antiquity and modernity.[56]

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54. "Extraits d'interviews," *TRN*, 1881; "Réponses à Jean-Claude Brisville," *Essais*, 1923. For discussions of Camus's "*anima naturaliter religiosa*," see François Mauriac, "To Albert Camus," *Letters in Art and Literature*, trans. by Mario Pei (New York: Philosophical Library, 1953), 33; Jean Onimus, *Camus and Christianity*, trans. by Emmett Parker (University of Alabama Press, 1970), 102-106; Patrick McCarthy, *Camus* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1982), 147, 181.

55. *Carnets* II, 116.

56. The thesis, written for the "diplôme d'études supérieures," has been published in the Gallimard edition of the *Essais*, 1224-1313. It is not yet

Camus undertook in his thesis to trace the development of Christianity from a "primitive" Jewish sect to a world religion with a fully developed organization and theology. His study begins with the evangelism of the New Testament and ends with what he characterizes as the "second revelation" of Augustinian theology, which laid the foundations of a new civilization in the West. In his view, the decisive event in this development was the break with Judaism and the subsequent entry of the Christian faith into the Graeco-Roman world. He focusses his attention particularly on the process of collaboration between the new evangelical faith and the Hellenic thought which, though in attenuated manner, continued to inform an antiquity in its twilight.[57]

According to Camus's thesis, Hellenic culture proved to be fertile soil for the evangelical seed in two primary respects. First, the affinity for the mystery cults, which he attributes to the "Greece of darkness," was to become increasingly pronounced as the political-social crises of declining antiquity intensified. The older Greek mystery religions were supplemented by cults imported from the Orient, a proliferation which gave expression in varying ways to a common "desire for God." While this as yet uncrystallized religious fervour constituted an atmosphere peculiarly receptive to the Christian message, it was the other Greece, the "Greece of light," which provided that message with the sophisticated philosophical concepts needed to give it a coherent and universal voice. Perhaps in part to dispel the notion that there was a straightforward inevitability to this development from the New Testament to Augustine, Camus devotes a chapter each of his thesis to two powerful alternatives to Christianity which arose during this transitional period: Gnosticism, one of the most vital of the heresies born of Graeco-Christian collaboration; and neo-Platonism, as expressed in Plotinus, which represented a valiant effort of late Hellenism to find within itself alone the sources of spiritual renewal, but which ended by providing the conceptual formulae for Augustine's Christian metaphysics.

Not content to be a chronicler of events and ideas, Camus, even within the confines of this academic thesis, wished to make

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available in English translation. Despite its importance for Camus's later thought, it has attracted almost no scholarly attention. For a commentary on the thesis itself, see Paul Archambault, *Camus' Hellenic Sources*, ch. II; and for the most worthwhile general discussion of Camus's view of the relationship between Hellenism and Christianity, see André Devaux, "Albert Camus: le christianisme et l'hellénisme," *Nouvelle Revue Luxembourgeoise*, janvier-avril 1970, 11-30.

57. See "Métaphysique chrétienne et Néoplatonisme," *Essais*, 1224-50, 1293-1310.

his own point. The reader is struck by the way in which he repeatedly returns to the question which is really his fundamental concern: "But is it possible to distinguish . . . what constitutes the originality of Christianity? That is the whole problem."[58] From the beginning, he concentrates on what is "irreducible" in Christianity and, by implication, in Hellenism. In his view, the theme of the Incarnation is that unique master theme of Christianity around which coalesce the characteristic notions of faith, sin, renunciation of the world, the hope for immortality, and providentialism. This last sub-theme of providentialism, or the "philosophy of history" as he calls it already, is especially singled out for notice; though in origin "a Judaic invention," it is taken up and intensified in the notion of the Incarnation as an historical "fact." What he notes as distinctive in Hellenism in this early writing is primarily by way of contrast to the favoured Christian themes: an emphasis on knowledge rather than faith, ignorance rather than sin, loyalty to this world rather than hope for another. Particularly significant in this regard is his emphasis on the Greek vision of the cosmos, *vis-a-vis* Christian providentialism, as "a cyclical world, eternal and necessary, which could not be accommodated to a creation 'ex nihilo' which postulates the end of the world."[59]

This last difference between Hellenism and Christianity was later to develop into the more clearly defined, generalized opposition between "history" and "nature" formulated in *The Rebel*. In this work Camus underscores more heavily the originally Jewish origin of the Christian philosophy of history; so much so, indeed, that Christianity appears almost to lose what is irreducible in it, to become entirely an amalgam of Hellenism and Judaism. Even the Christian theme of the Incarnation highlighted in the thesis tends, in Camus's later writing, to lose somewhat its irreducibility. It comes to be interpreted primarily as a mediating concept, serving to lessen the distance between the implacable God of the Old Testament and suffering humanity. In this concern with mediation, Christianity exhibits a spirit characteristic of the Greeks, who did not envisage the divine on one side of a divide and humanity on the other, but a series of stages leading from one to the other. Yet despite this, Camus's verdict is that over the centuries the preponderant movement in the Christian tension between the poles of Athens and Jerusalem has been towards the latter: ". . . when the Church dissipated its Mediterranean heritage, it placed the emphasis on history to the detriment of nature, caused the gothic to triumph over the romanesque, and, destroying a limit in

58. *Ibid.*, 1229.
59. *Ibid.*, 1226, 1229, 1231, 1236.

itself, has made increasing claims to temporal power and historical dynamism."[60]

This statement must be considered Camus's final answer to the suitability of the Christian religion for mediating the sacred to modern people. But "final" only in the sense of "last." Would it have remained his answer if he had lived to write "Nemesis"? If so, would it have been an adequate answer? No clear response to the first question is to be found in Camus's final work, published or unpublished; and an answer to the second would presuppose a superior resolution of the problem of Christianity in relation to Athens and Jerusalem, according to which the adequacy of his account could be measured. These questions nevertheless invite at least a few brief remarks.

It should be noted that Camus nowhere precludes the possibility of a Christianity closer in orientation to the Greek "friendship" with nature. In *The Rebel*, for instance, even while speaking of the triumph of the historical pole in Christianity, he acknowledges the continuing presence of Hellenism in "the admirable efflorescence of the Albigensian heresy on the one hand, and on the other, Saint Francis."[61] It is worth noting, further, that the two thinkers with whom Camus was most engrossed in the last years of his life were Dostoevsky and Simone Weil. Dostoevsky, speaking out of the Eastern Christian tradition, placed reverent love for the beauty of the earth near the centre of Christian spirituality; and Simone Weil strove to revive within modern Christian thought the idea of the order of the world as object of contemplation and of imitation.[62] It seems permissible to infer that Camus's close reading of such Christian thinkers would at the very least have made him aware of the possibility of a Christianity which gives nature its due, a Chris-

60. See "L'Homme révolté," *Essais*, 594-95, 701-702.

61. *Ibid.*, 595. In his last notebooks, we find Camus speaking of the modern need to "Graecisize Christ." See *Carnets* III, 220.

62. The most sustained expression of Dostoevsky's "telluric mysticism" is found in Book Six of *The Brothers Karamazov*. Camus's fascination with Dostoevsky, whose portrait had a prominent place in his study, is evident throughout his life, from his youthful role as Ivan in a stage version of *The Brothers Karamazov*, to his adaptation for the theatre of *The Possessed* in the last year of his life. Camus remains one of the most thoughtful Western commentators on Dostoevsky's religious thought; see, for instance, "L'Homme révolté," *Essais*, 465-71.

Simone Weil, in *La Source Grecque*, offers a remarkable account of the Greek antecedents of the Christian mediating concepts of the Incarnation and the Trinity — antecedents which include not only Plato, but also Homer, Aeschylus, Pythagoras, and, be it noted, Heraclitus. Camus, as editor of the "Espoir" series for the Gallimard publishers, was responsible for the publication of this book. For his admiring assessment of Weil's "authentic and very pure" Christianity, see *Essais*, 1700-1702.

tianity which did not die with Saint Francis. One wonders, in any case, what an adequate alternative would be, since there is no other living religious tradition which embodies, however faintly, the "favoured themes" of Hellenism. This is the challenge posed to Camus by the existence of Christianity. The challenge posed by him in return would be that Christianity therefore strive to recover its Hellenic spiritual sources before they disappear entirely.

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