Robert Zaretsky: *A Life Worth Living: Albert Camus and the Quest for Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013. Pp. 227.)

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Camus published two of the works for which he is most celebrated, the novel *The Stranger* and the philosophical essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in 1942, when he was twenty-nine. He had already worked as a journalist, and soon after served as the editor in chief of *Combat*, an underground Resistance paper. Besides producing two more novels, *The Plague* and *The Fall*, and another philosophical essay, *The Rebel*, Camus also published a host of short stories and plays, worked as an actor and a director, and became the epitome of the public intellectual before his untimely death in 1960.

Dealing with such a complex figure in a book as short as this one requires hard choices. For Zaretsky, a historian who has published a biography of Camus (Cornell University Press, 2010), the purpose of the present book is to take up "certain intellectual or moral themes we have long associated with Camus's work" (10). The book consists of five chapters that represent what Zaretsky sees as the most significant of these themes—"Absurdity," "Silence," "Measure," "Fidelity," and "Revolt"—and each chapter consists of short sections that swing between historical and biographical matters on the one hand and these specific themes on the other. This approach leads to some surprising choices regarding the works that are covered, and in particular in regard to the novels for which Camus is perhaps best known, which get little attention here: a few pages are dedicated to *The Stranger, The Plague* is mentioned a few times, and *The Fall* is not mentioned at all. The works that are stressed—*The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*, and to a lesser extent a few plays and short stories—are pressed into service to make good two interrelated aims: to show that Camus approached the theoretical problem of meaning as truly as a thinker might, and that his own life typified what is best in this approach. It is the second aim in particular that drives Zaretsky, who is a Camus devotee, but a critical analysis of the "intellectual or moral themes" is lost in the process. This problem arises most conspicuously in regard to the book's two leading themes: absurdity and political morality.

Zaretsky largely accepts at face value Camus's understanding of "the Absurd," but he is not faithful to the conclusions that Camus actually draws from it in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and he does not contextualize the problematic, which reveals significant problems with Camus's view. Absurdity is the problem of groundlessness, contingence, and, finally, meaninglessness regarding those aspects of the human condition that seem as if they should be open to rational justification, and for Camus it assumes cosmic proportions: reflective consciousness seeks its justifications in a universe that refuses to reciprocate, and therefore everything, including our own lives, is up for grabs, which is why he starts the essay with the questionable claim that suicide is the one serious philosophical question. Camus does not answer this question

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satisfactorily, but he does tease out the consequences of absurdity in a way that Zaretsky, who prefers Camus the moralist, does not acknowledge: everything is permitted. If all is meaningless, Camus says, it is a matter of indifference whether one is a Don Juan, an actor, a conqueror, or a creator, and while Camus seems to favor the last, he can offer no basis for ruling out the first three. This is important, for Camus's political morality will conflict with the logic of this view, while Zaretsky sees Camus's political morality as following from it. How an absurdist becomes one of the leading moralists of his time is not at all clear, and saying that it involves "the passage from solitary revolt against the world's absurdity to collective revolt against man's inhumanity to man" (51) only begs the question.

Furthermore, Camus's conception of absurdity does not arise in a vacuum but grows out of what Weber called "the disenchantment of the world," and it does not conflict with Christian metaphysics, as Zaretsky suggests, but rather constitutes its secular continuation. Indeed, it falls within what Nietzsche depicted as God's "shadow," for it nostalgically assumes that the universe *should* have a meaning after the death of the God that had furnished (the grounds for) it. Viewed in this way, absurdism is a sort of *ressentiment*, which means that it is a manifestation of nihilism rather than a response to it, and Nietzsche himself was not a nihilist, as Zaretsky claims (88), but rather its diagnostician and avowed enemy. Nevertheless, Zaretsky takes on the job of defending this metaphysical interpretation of absurdity against the analytical attacks of such "professional philosophers" as Thomas Nagel, who attributes absurdity to "a collision within ourselves" rather than "a collision between our demand for reason and the world's silence" (49), and then holds up "another kind of philosopher," Robert Solomon, who sees that certain philosophers are trying "to give us a vision, to inspire us to change our lives by way of many different devices" (51). In fact, Solomon rejects the metaphysical interpretation, and his phenomenological approach values the *experience* of absurdity precisely because it symptomatizes the sort of collision of which Nagel speaks. By symptomatizing such a collision, the experience of absurdity reveals it, and this may spur us to change our lives, and perhaps even the sociopolitical world that informs them.

Absurdity, understood as the limits of rational justification, might also be used to deflate the pretenses of those rationalist political views that Camus came to attack, and perhaps Zaretsky is moving in this direction when he says that "political absurdity results from a state's insistence to give meaning to the unjustifiable suffering it inflicts on its citizens" (177). In any case, when it comes to political morality, he spends much more time applying the political-moral takeaway from *The Rebel*—that rebellion (rather than revolution) intrinsically requires limits or measure—to the political debates of the time than in analyzing its theoretical positions, none of which are beyond reproach. Camus is undeniably capturing important problems in the rationalist political tradition, but there is nothing nuanced about his broadsides on figures such as Hegel and Marx, and Zaretsky's claim that

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"Camus had no patience with theory and its practitioners" (161) does not get Camus off the hook, and particularly not on Zaretsky's reading of him, as he refuses to take seriously Camus's own claim that he was no philosopher.

Zaretsky does a reasonably good job of reciting the particulars of Camus's conflict with other French intellectuals on the left regarding the Algerian uprising and the status of the Soviet Union, and he faithfully details Camus's unrepentant humanism. But, again, the problem is that he is so identified with Camus's positions that he does not critically assess them. There is much that is admirable in these positions, but they surely were not impregnable, and Zaretsky does not adequately engage their critics. With respect to Algeria, he says that even "sympathetic critics" such as Albert Memmi described Camus as a "colonizer of good will" who could not escape the dilemmas of history (128), but rather than explore this charge, Zaretsky instantly likens Camus's plight to Montaigne's during the religious wars, and he praises Montaigne for his "rare ability to remain above the fray" (124). Is there no possibility that there is *any* truth in Memmi's charge? As a *pied-noir*, Camus's desire to end the ravages of terrorism and colonialism *and* to maintain political ties between Algeria and France was natural, but this was not necessarily the most just solution, it was not tenable, and it was not like Montaigne's position. So, too, with respect to the Soviet Union, Zaretsky does not fairly consider the criticisms of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, and he fails to make clear that they were no more loyal to the Soviet Union than Camus was loyal to the United States. In fact, they were all libertarian socialists, and their battle reflected not their theoretical commitments but the hopeless problem of political praxis at the start of the Cold War.

While discussing Camus's fondness for the ancient Greek tragedies, Zaretsky rightly says that tragedy involves competing ethical claims, each of which is valid. The problem with this book is that Camus's own claims are not seen in this way, but rather are seen as hovering above the fray, and this does him no honor.

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Alan Patten: *Equal Recognition: The Moral Foundations of Minority Rights*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014. Pp. xiv, 337.)

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Alan Patten's book is an important restatement and reconfiguration of the liberal case for recognition of cultural minorities. Patten's book emerges

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