
28. Compare these genuine performances to those of Vaughan in J. G. Ballard’s *Crash*, which take place illicitly at a moonlit racetrack and involve similar reenactments of various wrecks within the pantheon of great automobile accidents.


30. Ibid., 16.


33. Printz, 14.

34. It is worth comparing Warhol’s *Death and Disaster* series with the gruesome car crash photography of Mell Kilpatrick, collected in *Car Crashers & Other Sad Stories* (London: Taschen, 2000).

35. In February 2001 the film *Pollock* opened in the United States to great critical acclaim (Harris as Pollock, and Marcia Gay Harden as wife Krasner, were both nominated for Academy Awards). Although the film version of Naifeh and Smith’s biography deserves credit for not “aesthetically overvaluing” Pollock’s death, it is certainly guilty of playing up the suicide angle, and of perpetuating the myth surrounding the artist’s last moments. The final scene of the movie has Pollock driving drunk with Kligman (who, interestingly enough, is portrayed more sympathetically than any of the other central characters) beside him and Metzger in the backseat. Pollock is totally smashed, and refuses to slow down even in the face of Kligman’s pleas and Metzger’s screams. Nothing objectionable thus far. But in the seconds immediately preceding the crash, Pollock appears sober (in both senses of the term) and seems to acquire an otherworldly prescience of what is to come. Audiovisually speaking, the film encourages this interpretation by muting the women’s voices, and by focusing on Harris’s eerily calm face. If that isn’t enough, Pollock is then shown lifting his head up to the sky, effectively erasing any doubts on the part of the uncritical spectator that his death was, if not wholly premeditated, at the very least pregnant with “meaning.”

1960 automobile accident as a means to justify—or condemn—the struggles of the West in the years following the end of World War II. Albert Camus's untimely death, as tragic as it was, became for many critics a touchstone with which to gauge the high stakes involved in the cultural Cold War.

For many, Camus's death was the stuff of romantic reverie. A highly popular literary figure, a moralist concerned with issues underlying death and the voice of "the absurd," died in what many viewed as an ironic— and absurd—manner, but one that was filled with enough pathos to engender a devoted and heartfelt following. One reason why Camus's tragedy has assumed romantic overtones stems from the way critics pronounced the death of the "hero of the absurd" as quintessentially absurd. The most notable example of this came from Jean-Paul Sartre, who called the accident that killed Camus "shameful, because it revealed the absurdity of our most profound demands within the midst of the human world... For those who loved him, there was an unbearable absurdity in his death."

Such ways of reading the car death are not only too intellectually tidy, but simplistic in their understandings of Camus's philosophical ideas. His untimely death, like those of the many popular figures trapped within the public gaze, became a focal point of importance. Yet Camus never wanted to be considered a James Dean figure, a celebrity who lived fast and died young. If anything, he abhorred the reckless lifestyle. So why, after his death in 1960, has he been seen and read as one of the twentieth century's tragic celebrities of French literature and philosophy?

Camus's curious position in the intellectual world stems partly from the way his life and work was portrayed in the media. In his own writings, at least according to many journalists, he seems to resemble one of his own subjects, Sisyphus, forever rolling the stone of democratic moral commitment up the slope of a postwar world that had forsaken political moderation. To others he was a bourgeois apologist who made the right much more palatable to the literate masses. Yet regardless of how he was read, it was his death in an automobile that in many ways determined the political significance of his work.

The circumstances surrounding his death are tragically straightforward, containing no overt political or philosophical import. On the morning of Sunday, January 3, 1960, Camus left his home in Lourmarin, a village in the southern French Vaucluse region, to travel north with his close friend and publisher, Michel Gallimard. He had several appointments in Paris and had planned on traveling by train. But Michel, who was driving to Paris for the holidays anyway, convinced Camus to accompany him and his family—his wife, Janine, his daughter Anne, and their dog, a Skye terrier—in their Facel Vega sports car. Michel was at the wheel and Camus was sitting up front in the passenger's seat, while the women were curled up in the back. The trip was intended to be somewhat leisurely, taking two or three days, and was supposed to be occupied with friendly talk and enjoyable meals.

But in the early afternoon of the second day, the Gallimard car skidded off the road and crashed into a row of trees lining the highway, old National 5, stretching from Le Sens north toward Paris. The accident was caused by either a blowout or broken axle—experts are not sure which—and the Facel Vega ended up wrapped around a tree 40 feet from the first tree it initially impacted. Camus's head flew backward against the rear window, resulting in a skull fracture and broken neck, killing him instantly; Michel Gallimard was propelled out of the car, bleeding profusely; Janine and Anne were both thrown clear of the accident, in shock but without any serious injury. Officials noted that the dashboard clock had stopped at 1:54 or 1:55 P.M., taken to be the moment of the accident, and the speedometer was allegedly stuck at 145 kilometers, or approximately 90 miles per hour. Michel eventually died in the hospital, saving him from any personal recriminations concerning his responsibility for the death of the popular Nobel laureate.

Camus's death assumed a cultic significance for several reasons. For one, he died with his final and unfinished manuscript, Le Premier Homme (The First Man), in his briefcase. Second, he—a man who apparently abhorred reckless driving—was killed in a speeding accident. And finally, he was, at the time, an important political figure as a critic of ideological authoritarianism. The first of these facts proved to be particularly poignant for Camus's literary following. At the time of his death, Camus had written approximately eighty thousand words of Le Premier Homme, and he
was hoping to finish the novel by summer 1960. This was to be his first major full-length novel, a work vast in scope that would not be a roman-fleuve. As Camus explained to his wife shortly before the accident, the novel in progress was largely autobiographical, a sort of éducation sentimentale that would highlight the writer’s French Algerian past and position himself as the product of a melting pot experience. The book would also emphasize the rootlessness endemic in modern society, which required of the individual the necessity of self-definition through an engagement with the social and political issues of his time.

Camus’s life—cut short by a senseless automative accident—was as incomplete as his work. Like those of other twentieth-century writers such as Nathanael West and Jack Kerouac, Camus’s untimely death created a tragic yet romantic sense of the “what if.” What would Le Premier Homme really have been like? How would the Nobel Prize winner further enhance his place within the literary world? Readers who are familiar with his writings, especially the unfinished novel, may wonder what Camus was ultimately capable of, and if his success as a writer would have surpassed his early critical reception.

Or, one may argue, had Camus survived the crash, his literary reputation might not have enjoyed the security it does today. Although such speculations are, in the end, groundless, they nonetheless resonate in the reader’s imagination. Is the heroic standing of the popular French writer and dramatist mainly a result of his early death in a car crash? As this volume suggests, automobile accidents hold a curious place in the popular imagination, especially when they involve public figures. They are the birthplace of rumor, the impetus to myth, and the stuff of legends. Camus’s tragedy was no exception, placing him in the pantheon of car crash victims populated by such figures as James Dean, Jayne Mansfield, Jackson Pollock, and Princess Diana.

Yet despite the importance of his unfinished novel and cultic personal status, the main significance of Camus’s death is the way that it has been used by critics with their own political agendas. In the decades following World War II, partisans on both ends of the political spectrum sought to discover—or appropriate—literary and intellectual figures that would lend cultural credence to their particular Cold War views. At times, the writers were quite willing participants in this alliance, as in the cases of Jean-Paul Sartre and Lionel Trilling. Others, however, such as George Orwell, found their work and their ideas placed within a political context that was inappropriate at best, at worst manipulatively misleading.

Such appropriations of Camus and his work occurred in various ways. For example, in Simone de Beauvoir’s 1954 novel, The Mandarins, Camus is represented as the iconoclastic member of the French left who stubbornly refuses to follow the lead of his contemporary intellectuals. By many on the American right, as well as those in what, politically speaking, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. would call the “vital center” of the time, Camus was heralded as the champion of a tireless anti-Marxist sentiment. Yet whether vilified by the left or glorified by the center and the right, Albert Camus’s reputation was largely a construction of the various individuals who surrounded him, read his work, and used his writings to support, accurately or inaccurately, particular political agendas.

The public persona of Camus is linked in many significant ways to his untimely death. His car accident brought to the fore the issues that largely defined his life. The cultural publications that highlighted these issues, both before and after his death, present a curious mixture of attitudes—at times ambiguous and at times contradictory. Many of the popular weekly magazines tended to paint a fairly sympathetic picture of Camus, especially in terms of their American readership. For instance, a Newsweek piece in 1954 quotes the French writer as saying “If one loves in one’s friends only the good qualities, one has no friends. One must also love the faults of friends. I still love America.” In a 1957 LIFE magazine article, interestingly entitled “Action-Packed Intellectual,” popular readers are given one of their first and more intimate images of Camus. The piece was comprised primarily of photographs of the famous author directing a play, fooling around in the rain, addressing Hungarian youth, and enjoying a calm moment with his children. The article shows a warmer and more human side of Camus—one that would go a long way in endearing the atheistic author to the magazine’s American readership.

Even his driving preferences were given a romantic gloss. About two weeks after his death, TIME quotes Camus as having said “It is wonderful
to drive fast... when one is not driving oneself." However, later critics and biographers, perhaps with the benefit of hindsight, painted a more tempered picture of the French writer. Donald Lazere argues that, in contrast to the "juvenile delinquent" form of rebellion found in much postwar culture—and embodied by such figures as James Dean, Marlon Brando, Ken Kesey, and J. D. Salinger—Camus possessed a rather tragic vision of life, one preoccupied with fate and death. He also fought against bourgeois self-righteousness, celebrated the individual's harmony with nature, and was keenly aware of the necessity of human solidarity and the personal dilemmas involved in political commitment. Lottman paints a similar portrait in his biography. He writes that Camus was more cautious than he was reckless, and adds that he "didn't like fast driving, except perhaps his own." Whenever the writer was riding with Michel Gallimard, he would say, "Hey, little brother, who's in a hurry?"

Had the critical assessment of Camus stopped at the strictly personal, such uncertain applications of his life and his work might be understandable. After all, the Nobel laureate had become somewhat of a literary celebrity—perhaps not on the scale of an Ernest Hemingway, but nonetheless one whose dramatic, fictional, philosophical, and political writings had acquired international recognition. And it was the political reception of his work during the Cold War that gave his reputation such weightiness. Interpretations of his political ideology were as ambiguous as the descriptions of his personal life. Camus's automobile tragedy only contributed to the appropriation of the ideas that defined his literary output. In the absence of the living author's clarifying voice, speculations over Camus's political philosophy took on a variety of forms, many of them incongruous each with the others.

At the time of his death Camus felt as if he were embarking on a new stage of his work. Not only had he recently won the Nobel Prize for literature, not only was he engaged in writing his full-length novel, but his political attitudes were continuing to evolve. Unfortunately it is impossible to know how his philosophy would ultimately have developed. He was unable to respond to the intellectuals, especially within American circles, who were placing him within particular political categories. As a result, many cultural Cold Warriors with an investment in staking out political territory used Camus for their own agendas—and many did so by referring primarily to Camus's best known political treatise, _The Rebel._

Neoconservatives, such as those who were associated with _Commentary_, found in Camus a voice whose criticisms of the Soviet Union could be interpreted as anticommunist, if not downright sympathetic to Western capitalist democracies. One of its most representative figures, Norman Podhoretz, argued that "the truths of _The Rebel_ were on the whole the truths of the 'Right,' as that term was understood [during the 1950s]." H. J. Kaplan not only found the French writer a very moving figure—winning him the affectionate label, "Brother Camus"—but praises Podhoretz for his "instinctive grasp" of Camus in his time. Those whose sympathies lay more to the left, such as Conor Cruise O'Brien, took a similar view of Camus, but with a different tone. O'Brien accused Camus of supporting Western colonialism in Algeria and criticized "the increasing right-wing positions of his later years." What's more, O'Brien goes on to condemn Podhoretz's assessment of Camus. "What a pity," he writes, "the novelist did not have a neoconservative father-confessor at his side, to get his penance right for him, and see his books got rewritten."

And such political critiques were not limited to the antithetical "right" and "left." Cold War "centrists"—sympathetic to the "left" yet critical of communism—acknowledged Camus's philosophical indebtedness to Marxist thought but defended him for his moralism and his sense of political moderation. Germaine Brée, for instance, praised Camus's "courageous public stand against communism" and wrote of _The Rebel_ that it is, "in effect, the cry of a 'son of' the real Prometheus, protesting against the perversion of the hero." William Barrett argued that the political message underlying _The Rebel_ was a plea for a Third Force between the bourgeois West and the communist Soviet Union. Similarly, democratic socialists—such as those associated with _Dissent_—praised Camus's anti-Stalinist attitudes but, in contrast, they highlighted his Marxist/socialist leanings more than those in the democratic center might have done. Michael Harrington argues that "Camus was a man of the Left," then goes on to say that "[p]ositive, he could find nothing more than a romantic syndicalism to counterpose against his own corrosive skepticism."
Before Camus's death, Irving Howe wrote of the author: "One feels about Camus that... he is a writer to be trusted to the very end. Because he is a man like all other men, he is also a writer who may mislead; but because he has looked at the face of power and turned away, he will not violate his readers with ideological or spiritual trickery." And, writing almost thirty years after the fatal car crash, Jeffrey C. Isaac emphasized the democratic socialism underlying *The Rebel*. Isaac believed that Camus endorsed Marx's critique of bourgeois mystification yet pointed out that many Cold War critics of the 1950s—both left and right—failed to see Camus's strongest arguments: that communism is important for history because it articulated, then betrayed, human freedom. 

It is easy to see why many of Camus's critics, especially in the aftermath of the automobile accident and in the midst of the Cold War, looked to *The Rebel* as one of the most representative works in his political philosophy. Yet perhaps more important, it is the controversy surrounding the publication of this book that helped fuel the passions of the Cold Warriors. This fervor stems primarily from the famous exchange between Camus and his one-time friend Jean-Paul Sartre.

The break between the two men over *The Rebel* is the stuff of French intellectual legend. Because of the highly volatile issues involved—such as Sartre's supposed Stalinism and Camus's assumed apologies for Western bourgeois society—the argument became a rallying point for those on both the left and the right. There have been a number of enlightening studies on the French intellectuals' disagreement, as well as on the effects this had in helping to define Western politics after World War II. The issues at the heart of this disagreement not only help to provide an understanding of Cold War intellectual culture but also allow a glimpse into the political ramifications of Camus's untimely death.

The bitter exchange between Camus and Sartre was to prove a critically defining moment in twentieth-century political thought. Far from being merely a personal squabble based on inconsequential differences, this debate was politically charged with the problems that had so enlivened an entire generation. Such volatile material easily transcended the narrow confines of the Parisian literati and became a beacon for cultural Cold Warriors on both the right and the left. To Germaine Brée, writing in 1963, it stood "as the ideological centerpiece of our time." In fact, the intellectual debate between the two men was founded on the ideological issues that defined much of the last half of the twentieth century.

The actual debate between Sartre and Camus took place in the pages of Sartre's own publication, *Les Temps Modernes*, in August 1952. In this polemic, both men, along with the magazine's manager, Francis Jeanson, debated Jeanson's earlier review of Camus's *The Rebel*. In his review, Jeanson had attacked what he considered the pseudosophilosophical underpinnings of the book, particularly Camus's misunderstanding of Marx and what he saw as Camus's rejection of history. The book, he argued, would give comfort to right-wing critics and only serve to stoke the reactionary passions of anticommunism.

Although this review was a catalyst in the break between the increasingly estranged Sartre and Camus, Jeanson's own significance in the polemic was minimal. His review served as a trigger for the release of the tensions that had been slowly mounting between the two men. Camus was not, after all, unfamiliar with criticism, nor was Jeanson's review the first instance in which Camus's work had been condemned as an apology for the bourgeoisie. Likewise, it should have come as no surprise to Sartre that his former friend would have been so offended at the off-hand manner in which the review was commissioned. Despite the growing political chasm between the two men, Camus would have assumed that his friendship with Sartre should warrant a personal review from him, the magazine's publisher. The emphatic response of both men—each with its accusatory and combative tone—betrays the deeply personal edge as well as the sheer intellectual urgency behind the exchange.

Camus believed that Jeanson was only a front, a mere "hatchet man" for Sartre, and formally addressed his letter to "Monsieur le Directeur." His "collaborator," Camus charged Sartre, had falsely accused Camus of refusing the role of history in the genesis of revolution. What *The Rebel* had done, in fact, was to criticize the attitude that makes an absolute of history. A Marxist critique of economic and social history was a legitimate enterprise, Camus argued, but that had not been the focus of the book. What he had attempted in *The Rebel*, and what Jeanson had conveniently
overlooked, was an examination of the conditions under which rebellion led to repression and terror. Therefore, it was not history that he’d rejected but a particularly dogmatic interpretation of history.

More distressing to Camus was the method in which Jeanson had criticized his book. Defending Marxism as an implicit dogma, Jeanson had refused any attempt to critique this ideology and had pushed to the right all arguments that did so, a tactic that Camus found intellectually dishonest. Faithful to the philosophy of moderation that he espoused in his text, Camus believed that all political constructions were subject to thorough critical examination, regardless of ideological considerations.28 “One does not judge the truth of a thought according to whether it is on the right or on the left,” argued Camus, “still less according to what the right and left wish it to be.”29 He refused to succumb to this form of intellectual blackmail, claiming that if “the truth appeared to me on the right, I would be there.”30 Furthermore, he argued, Jeanson’s exclusionary logic restricted the freedom of possibility by leaving no room for a third way: It was either the status quo or Stalinism.

Such arguments, claimed Camus, naturally led to a silence on the evils inherent in authoritarian socialism. While accusing Camus of denying history, Jeanson had in fact turned a blind eye to the Soviet gulags. Such hypocrisy, Camus argued, could find legitimacy only in a political philosophy that “free[d] man from all shackles in order to practically engage him in a historical necessity.”31 This was the main philosophical problem that Camus found in Jeanson’s critique, and he addressed it to Sartre point-blank:

Only the principles of prophetic Marxism (with those of a philosophy of eternity) can indeed authorize the pure and simple rejection of my thesis. But can such views be definitely maintained in your journal without contradiction? Because, after all, if man has no end that could be taken as a rule of value, how can history have a definite meaning? If it has one, why shouldn’t man make of it his end? And if he did that, how could he be in the terrible and unrelenting freedom of which you speak?32

The Rebel attempted to reveal the consequences of such a prophetic philosophy. It argued that only a “happy ending” to history could justify the sacrifices of yesterday and today, and such an ending was far from certain. Totalitarian atrocities were the dangers of justifying any violence in the name of ideology. Camus argued that Jeanson had failed to address this central point. To admit that history is in any way meaningful would have shaken the existential foundations on which Jeanson’s philosophy rested. Instead, Jeanson had engaged in “skillful distinctions” that led only to the impasse against which The Rebel had warned: “It is not me that he has maligned, but our reasons for living and for struggling, and the legitimate hope that we have of overcoming our contradictions.”33

Sartre’s reply was a vivid display of his polemical powers. In contrast to Camus’s indirect accusations, which contained the “nasty smell of wounded vanity,”34 his was highly personal and to the point. Much in the same way as Camus had indicted Jeanson, Sartre accused Camus of engaging in an unattractive moral absolutism. “You bring a portable altar with you,” he argued, to terrorize Jeanson and his like into silence.35 “But I ask you, Camus, just who are you, to stand off at such a distance? And what gives you the right to assume...a superiority which nobody accords you?”36 To Camus’s insistence that he was speaking with a passion for the working class and the hopes of all men, Sartre responded in unequivocal terms. Regardless of what Camus may think, claimed Sartre, he was actually working against the proletariat by attempting to destroy its only real hope of betterment, the Communist Party. Here Sartre, like Jeanson before him, consigned Camus to the ranks of the reactionary right (a position that some Cold War intellectuals delighted in and others abhorred). The once-admirable man—resistant, editor of the clandestine Combat, author of The Stranger, and hero of the absurd—was nothing more than an apologist for the bourgeoisie. “I am deeply afraid,” wrote Sartre, “that you have moved into the camp of the stiflers, and that you are abandoning forever your former friends, the stifled.”37

What Sartre had found particularly objectionable was the discussion of the Russian gulags. Contrary to Camus’s insinuations, Sartre had indeed expressed his alarm at the existence of these camps. He’d committed Les Temps Modernes to the issue of the labor camps the moment it hit the French intellectual consciousness. The gulags were a horror, of course, but what was equally inadmissible, according to Sartre, was the exploitation of them by the bourgeois press. One should not take the suffering of those in communist regimes, he argued, and use it to justify
the suffering and exploitation caused by capitalism. Sartre reproached Camus for his part in this crime. He too was guilty of exploiting these atrocities by using them to demolish Jeanson’s review.

Furthermore, he had used his arguments to justify an acceptance of the status quo that undermined the effectiveness of any progressive politics. By condemning the Communist Party, in Sartre’s view the only force capable of effectively mobilizing the masses, Camus had sabotaged such immediate struggles as the peace movement and the emancipation of the Vietnamese and Tunisians. Failing to choose between the effectiveness of the Communists and the tyranny of the Fascists, Sartre told his old friend, “I see only one solution for you, the Galapagos Islands.” 38 He then exposed Camus’s misguided reading of history: “It is not a question of knowing whether History has a meaning and whether we should deign to participate in it, but to try, from the moment we are in it up to the eyebrows, to give History the meaning which seems best to us, by not refusing our participation, however weak, to any concrete action which may require it. 39

While Camus had recklessly accused Jeanson of worshiping history, he himself claimed that he could approach the issue only with great trepidation. Such, Sartre asserted, was to be expected from such a “beautiful Soul” who places himself outside history, remaining pure against any contact with reality. What Camus loved was not man, with his hands dirtied by struggle, argued Sartre, but the majestic idea of “man.” The Rebel, with its blanket condemnation of the Soviet Union and its preaching of bourgeois moderation, was nothing more than a rejection of man’s historic project. It was with much indignation that Sartre pronounced in no uncertain terms, “Your book will serve only as a touchstone to reveal the bad faith of the guilty party.” 40

The break between the two men was inevitable. Far from being an issue over contemporary politics, the debate surrounding The Rebel was deeply rooted in the philosophical inconsistencies surrounding dialectical history. By the early 1950s, Sartre had begun to reject his earlier existential philosophy and had come to see Marxist thought as the only tenable solution to the growing problems of postwar Europe. As if answering Marx’s call to change history, Sartre sought to commit himself to the dialectics of history and create an art of engagement. Camus, on the other hand, condemned the messianic impulse in Marx and relied more on a Nietzschean critique of history. This took form in the character of the Promethean rebel, an ever-critical consciousness that would keep a constant vigil on the safeguard of the present moment. The various essays, dramas, and fictions that would follow from both men would serve as vivid expressions of the philosophies of caution and commitment that underlay their personal politics.

In Camus’s case, the works written in the four years following the end of World War II are perhaps the most significant. These works broached many of the vital issues he would later raise in The Rebel, particularly that of moderation. For instance, the danger that Camus saw inherent in twentieth-century ideologies, and in messianic Marxism in particular, was a will to abstractions. In State of Siege, suffering comes at the hands of the character Plague, a personification of abstraction and morbid efficiency. Diego, a young medical student who confronts Plague, cuts through the bureaucratic fog and refuses to be counted among its victims: “Only masses count with you; it’s only when you’re dealing with a hundred thousand men or more that you condescend to feel some interest . . . But a single man, that’s another story; he can upset your applecart.” 41 This, in effect, was precisely the charge that Camus had leveled against the intellectuals of Les Temps Modernes in what he saw as their worship of history. By concentrating on the process of history, they had naturally overlooked the individual, or more importantly, the lived moment. Existence, detached from the possibility of the present life experience, became an abstraction and therefore life-denying.

In The Plague, Camus again uses the theme of pestilence to reveal this pernicious ideological disease. As long as the citizens of Oran saw the plague in abstract terms—a punishment from God, a series of bureaucratic proclamations, or a collection of funereal statistics—they were destined to remain powerless and ineffectual. The heroes of the novel are those who refuse to submit to the plague and fight it, in all its manifestations, in the trenches of the everyday. They demonstrate the importance of immediate human welfare over any vague and lofty preconceptions.
Rambert, the young journalist accidentally trapped in the quarantined city, protests the governmental decrees that separate him from the wife he dearly loves. After initial thoughts of flight, his rebellion takes the form of solidarity with the sanitation squad in alleviating the suffering brought on by the plague. Another citizen of the town, Dr. Rieux, refuses to take his eyes from the tasks his office requires. When Father Paneloux reminds him that through his medical help he too is working for man’s salvation, Rieux responds, “Salvation’s much too big a word for me. I don’t aim so high. I’m concerned with man’s health; and for me his health comes first.”

Camus abhorred the idea of history as progress. He likened the dialectic mind to Father Paneloux, who sees in the plague an abstraction of Christian salvation and passively accepts its consequences as a fate ordained by God. In doing so, he thereby neglects the true horrors of the plague and any possibility of overcoming it. Prophetic Marxism, like Christianity, defines the future as a time of heightened judgment and increased objectivity—a philosophy that is life-defying in that it privileges the future at the expense of the present. This Camus could not accept.

Through Tarrou, Camus’s alter ego, the plague takes on a more obvious ethical dimension. Much like the city of Oran, he too is infected with a plague, but one of a moral nature. “I had plague already, long before I came to this town and encountered it here,” he confides to Dr. Rieux. In his younger days, Tarrou had joined the cause of justice by committing himself to a revolutionary band dedicated to the overthrow of social orders based on the death sentence. Their methods were akin to those of the regimes they sought to defeat, but with a difference. “I knew,” Tarrou reveals, “That we, too, on occasion passed sentences of death. But I was told that these few deaths were inevitable for the building up of a new world in which murder would cease to be.” But one day, after witnessing a series of executions at the hands of the revolutionary comrades, he grasps the true horror of his commitment: “I came to understand that I, anyhow, had plague through all those long years in which, paradoxically enough, I’d believed with all my soul that I was fighting it.” Thus he learned, in a world of pestilences and victims, that he too was infected, and that it was up to him not to submit to and join forces with the pestilences, in whatever forms they may take. Tarrou, as a result, undergoes a change, espousing an ideology of affirmation rather than one based on destruction.

This same outlook formed the moral imperative of The Rebel. A cause armed with slogans of justice or cries for a classless society is admirable, but it runs the risk of turning against itself without a sense of moderation. Absolute justice without human roots becomes a dangerous abstraction that can be used to justify the very atrocities against which the individual reacts. The rebel must never lose sight of his fundamental intentions, and he must constantly scrutinize—critique—his methods. This is Camus’s “philosophy of limits”: “The logic of the rebel is to want to serve justice so as not to add to the injustice of the human condition, to insist on plain language so as not to increase the universal falsehood, and to wager, in spite of human misery, for happiness.” In short, “the consequence of rebellion . . . is to refuse to legitimize murder because rebellion, in principle, is a protest against death.” When the rebel loses sight of his limits, then Prometheus becomes a Caesar, and a life-affirming impulse turns against itself and becomes life-defying.

Perhaps no other work more candidly elucidates this issue than The Just Assassins, a drama in which a young band of Russian terrorists attempts to assassinate the Grand Duke of Russia. Their efforts are initially foiled when one among them, Kaliayev, fails to throw the bomb upon seeing the Grand Duke’s two children in the carriage with him. He cannot bring himself to take the lives of innocents, and his actions draw the attention of his comrades Stepan and Dora:

**STEPAN:** Not until the day comes when we stop sentimentalizing about children will the revolution triumph, and we be masters of the world.

**DORA:** When that day comes, the revolution will be loathed by the whole human race.

**STEPAN:** What matter, if we love it enough to force our revolution on it; to rescue humanity from itself and from its bondage? . . . No, don’t misunderstand me; I, too, love the people.

**DORA:** Love, you call it. That’s not how love shows itself . . . Even in destruction there’s a right way and a wrong way—and there are limits.

Stepan, blinded by a lust for revolution, lacks what the Camusian rebel must possess, a sense of “la mesure.” Legitimizing the murder of
children: Here is the abstraction of ideology taken to its logical conclusion. It is a dangerous man who maintains, as Stepan does, "I do not love life; I love something higher—and that is justice." This is what Nietzsche would call one of the dreaded "apologists of history" who possesses a heightened desire for objectivity and posits his salvation in a future state of justice.

This is not the case with Kaliyev. He has joined the revolution because of his love of life. For all his revolutionary idealism, he nonetheless understands the true meaning of rebellion. He is Camus's most striking literary embodiment of the hero defined in The Rebel. In a particularly revealing passage, Kaliyev protests to the stalwart Stepan, in words that could well have been Camus's to Jeanson and Sartre, "I shall not strike my brothers in the face for the sake of some far-off city, which, for all I know, may not exist. I refuse to add to the living injustice all around me for the sake of a dead justice." For this Camusian hero, political justice must not be abandoned, but instead tempered, or moderated, with the immediate human issues that define existence.

Camus's concept of moderation—especially as it was spelled out in The Rebel, his drama, and his fiction—stands in stark contrast to the fervor surrounding his death. What's more, it inadvertently provided many intellectuals with a means by which to justify their own Cold War politics. Perhaps this is an inevitable risk for writers highly conscious of their public significance and so willing to take a chance with their political voice. But in Camus's case this is particularly unfortunate, for his life was an unfinished text, a work in the making. It is perhaps ironic that while working on The Rebel, Camus was wary of a linear and messianic philosophy that would threaten the processes of political moderation and negotiation. After his fatal car crash, however, he was considered to have reached an endpoint in his own political thought. Such a reading of Camus's life is problematic and, perhaps more important, incomplete—just as, by the very nature of his accidental death, it must always be.

While the deaths of such celebrities as James Dean and Princess Diana created a media storm that reflected the chaos of their own lives, the death of Camus should have alerted his public to the (abundant) fragility and fluid nature of one's life and ideas. But even calling his death "abundant" is a form of Monday morning quarterbacking. Camus's car accident was a tragedy, but it was a tragedy quite separate from the philosophy and images that make up his reputation. An analysis of this untimely death is both a case study in celebrity politics and, by contrast, a means of fully appreciating Camus's important contributions to Western literature and philosophy.

NOTES

3. The following account of Camus's death is taken from Lottman's seminal biography. See Herbert R. Lottman, Albert Camus (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979). See also Patrick McCarthy's Camus (New York: Random House, 1982).
4. Camus's personal disclosures on his unfinished novel are recounted in Lottman 650-651, and 658-659, and in McCarthy, 318-319.
10. Lottman, 662-663.
15. I'm keeping in mind that labels such as "right," "left," and "centrist" are relative and, in terms of literary and political assessments, are best understood in relationship to one to the other.
17. Ibid., 219.


26. Camus's reply to Jeanson's review appears as "Révolte et Servitude" in *Actuelles II: Chroniques 1948-1953* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), 86. All translations of this text are mine with the help of a good friend, Claude Chauvigné.

27. Camus, "Révolte," 86.

28. For a brief discussion of Camus's notions surrounding political moderation, especially as they concern postwar dramatic criticism, see my essay "Camusian Existentialism in Arthur Miller's *After the Fall*," *Modern Drama*, 43, 2000, 192–203.

29. Camus, "Révolte," 86.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid., 116.

32. Ibid., 115.

33. Ibid., 123.


35. Ibid., 73.

36. Ibid., 79.

37. Ibid., 82.

38. Ibid., 86.

39. Ibid., 104.

40. Ibid., 73.