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Foreword

Alice Kaplan

Camus is unsurpassed among twentieth-century French writers for a body of work that animates the wonder and absurdity of existence. *Letters to a German Friend*, *Reflections on the Guillotine*, and the Nobel speeches sit alongside his classic novels and essays *The Outsider*, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and *The Plague* as the clearest expression of his moral intuitions. For Albert Camus, commitment was always a form of vigilance—a refusal of complacency, of coercive abstractions and murderous ideologies. He searched for truth and freedom through the complete embodiment of empathy, his solidarity with others. Producing a play, putting out a newspaper: these group endeavors were central to his life's work and provided a foundation for the kind of

political and moral optimism that saw its fullest expression in *The Plague*, in the calm persistence of the public-health squads. He was also aware of the limits of commitment. During his lifetime, there was no shortage of political parties pursuing violent doctrines and governments driven by corrupt motives. Commitment, he knew, could be a blinding devotion as well as a force for good.

The essays and speeches gathered here represent three faces of Camus's commitment. *Letters to a German Friend*, born of his experience in the Resistance, is a passionate confrontation with Nazi ideology. Here Camus explores his willingness to take up arms against tyranny, reimagines love of country, and calls for a new Europe. His is one of the earliest arguments for a postwar European Union, a half century before European citizenship became a reality. *Reflections on the Guillotine*, written in 1957, one of the deadliest years of the Algerian War, became the signal text for the French abolition of the death penalty in 1981. The Swedish speeches explore a specific form of commitment—the commitment to create—thanks to which Camus remains one of the strongest models available today for artists in search of justice. These essays can be read together, as a manual of commitment, or separately, for their affinities with his other writings: *Letters to a German Friend*, a monologue with an imagined interlocutor, is a precursor to Camus's novel *The Fall*; *Reflections on the Guillotine* takes up the scandal of capital punishment central to *The Outsider*; the theme of dangerous creation in the

Nobel speeches appears in “The Human Crisis,” the lecture Camus delivered in the United States in 1946, and in a lesser-known essay, “The Artist in Prison.” This 1952 essay explores the transformation of Oscar Wilde—a dandy, committed only to being superficial, until the devastating experience of an unjust incarceration redefined his vision.*

When Camus was barely twenty-five years old, having recently graduated with a master’s degree in philosophy, his former professor and mentor cynically told him that joining the Algerian Communist Party, or PCA, was a vexed matter but an indispensable part of growing up—he might as well do it because there was no way around it.† During his two years in the party, from 1935 to 1937, he came into his own as an intellectual. He founded and directed a cultural center and a theater troupe, Le Théâtre du Travail (The Theater of Work), while he prepared a first volume of personal essays, *The Wrong Side and the Right Side*. Though it would be thirty more years before Algeria won its independence from France, anti-colonialist activity was already stirring. Camus was assigned to recruit Muslims to the cause. However, by 1937, Hitler was on the move, and the party switched its orientation away from colonialism and toward the coming war. The party remained silent as anti-colonial activists were arrested and prosecuted by the

*As a companion to *Committed Writings*, see Camus’s *Lectures and Speeches*, trans. Quentin Hoare, forthcoming from Penguin in 2021.

†Jean Grenier, *Albert Camus: Souvenirs* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 37–44.

colonial government. Camus grew disillusioned with the party, and the party, in turn, expelled him.

That first experience with party politics and dicta from on high shaped the nature of his commitments to come: he never again trusted a party, never signed on to a rigid system of thought. Yet he remained an uncompromising activist for just causes, a resister who risked his life in situations of despair, an enemy of state violence. The motors of abstract ideology repelled him. He didn't learn freedom from Marx, he would say, he learned it from poverty. A humble boast but also a way of acknowledging his indigent origins and a politics that grew organically out of his lived experience.

He honed those values through a history shared with the men and women of his generation, condemned, as he quips in "Create Dangerously," to live in "interesting times." In "The Human Crisis," a speech given at Columbia University in New York; in "The Non-Believer and the Christians," a lecture at a Paris convent in late 1946; again on his South American tour in 1949, in "The Time of Murderers"; and finally, at Stockholm City Hall in December 1957, he expresses a bitter wonder at what they'd survived: born into World War I; twenty years old when Hitler took power and Stalin began his purges; confronted with the war in Spain, the Second World War, the death camps; and condemned to raise their children in a world threatened by nuclear annihilation, his generation felt they had little hope of changing the world. Camus never stops asking how it is possible to live in a time of catastrophe. Early in his career he had celebrated the figure of Sisyphus, condemned to

push a rock up a hill, only to see it fall down again. The legacy of so many human crises becomes Camus's rock. He looks for a way to live in a time of catastrophe, to struggle against the horror without giving in to easy answers. And for this reason, for us today, he remains a beacon.

Letters to a German Friend

The *Letters to a German Friend* were first conceived and published underground in the third year of the Nazi occupation of France. Camus's encounter with the war leading up to *Letters* defies straightforward chronology. He left Algeria in 1940, at the age of twenty-six, after his newspaper, *Alger Républicain*, was shut down by the colonial government. In Paris he found work as a layout editor for *Paris-Soir*. For the next two years, after the fall of France, he bounced between Algeria and the Vichy zone of France. He struggled with relapses of his adolescent tuberculosis and sought treatment as he was putting the finishing touches on his first two books, *The Outsider* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*. In November 1942, he was living in the Massif Central in a hamlet next to the village of Chambon-sur-Lignon, pursuing his lung treatments in Saint-Etienne. That month, the Allies invaded North Africa. France was cut off from Algeria, and Camus was separated from his wife, who was in Algeria waiting for his return. They were apart for two years. "Trapped like rats," he wrote in his notebooks—a sentiment he transposed to his second novel-in-progress, *The Plague*.

In Chambon-sur-Lignon, the protestant pastor André Trocmé had organized a vast rescue mission for Jewish children, giving them refuge in the village. Camus later wrote to his wife in code that he had spent the summer “mostly with children, big groups of children.” This was the atmosphere of risk and rescue through which Camus approached the Resistance. In 1943, he was able to move to Paris, where his publisher Gallimard gave him work as an editor. He attended his first meeting of the Resistance group *Combat* in 1943 and began to participate in the making of their underground newspaper. When France was liberated in August 1944, Camus, now *Combat’s* editor in chief, was celebrated as a national hero. He had never sought the spotlight, and his discomfort with fame remains a persistent theme in these writings.

Letters to a German Friend was composed between 1943 and 1945, the period of Camus’s intense participation in *Combat*—underground, then above ground. It represents a departure from Camus’s pacifism of the 1930s: “We have now accepted the sword, after making sure that the spirit was on our side.” He defines the stakes of armed resistance: the necessary fight against cruelty, against false mysticism, against falsehood, against murder. Keeping in mind the French men and women who were going to their deaths—“so many Socrates,” he wrote elsewhere: “Our comrades will be more patient than the executioners and more numerous than the bullets. As you see, the French are capable of wrath.”

The letters are dedicated to one of those comrades,

René Leynaud, a Christian poet who was the regional chief of the Combat movement. In 1944, Leynaud was captured, imprisoned, and shot in the woods. Leynaud is the real friend whose sacrifice grounds the letters, while the German friend in the title is a straw man. Camus imagines two young men, one French, one German, who come of age reading Nietzsche. The German takes the route of extreme nationalism. The Frenchman chooses a more circumspect reading of Nietzsche, replete with a sense of the absurd.

Using letters as his form allows Camus to dramatize a dilemma that concerned every French person who had lived through the Occupation: how to come to terms with the French defeat and how to fight. Through his German friend, Camus is able to characterize the enemy's state of mind and build a case for French values and a French victory. In the first letters, France is vanquished but determined; in the last, the enemy is crushed. In his second letter, Camus sets a scene in a truck of prisoners taking a group of Frenchmen toward their execution. The German chaplain who accompanies them urges an innocent adolescent boy to accept his imminent death. When the boy slips out of the truck and starts to run, the chaplain denounces him to the guards, who catch him. The chaplain, Camus remarks, has chosen the side of the executioners. Camus writes to his German friend that a French priest relayed the story, telling him that "no French priest would have been willing to make his God abet murder."

Reflections on the Guillotine

The thrust of this essay is Camus's core belief that the state has no right to take a life. He is thinking of Nazism, of course, but also of the Algerian War and of the hundreds of FLN freedom fighters condemned to death by the French government. In 1981, when France abolished its death penalty, it had been a quarter century since Camus had published his *Reflections on the Guillotine*. The essay had remained a touchstone for death penalty abolitionists. Today, on death-row corridors throughout the world, Camus's *Reflections on the Guillotine* and *The Outsider*, his novel about a man who waits for the guillotine, circulate. These are texts of resistance and hope.*

Reflections on the Guillotine was sparked by a childhood story Camus's grandmother had told him about his father, who died when Camus was eleven months old. Camus remembers: "One of the few things I know about him . . . is that he wanted to attend an execution." When Lucien Camus did attend the execution of a man condemned to death for the murder of children, he was so shocked by what he saw that he came home and vomited. "Instead of thinking of the slaughtered children," Camus writes, adding an image, "he could think of nothing but that quivering body that had just been dropped onto a board to have its head cut off." The same story appears in various forms in *The Outsider*, *The Plague*, and *The First Man*. In *Reflections*

*As recounted by Joël Calmettes in his 2013 documentary *Vivre avec Camus*, which includes an interview with the exonerated death-row inmate Ronald Keine.

on the Guillotine, it is the deeply felt origin story of his entire argument.

When Camus was a young journalist in Algiers in 1939, a serial killer named Edgar Weidmann was guillotined in public, in Versailles, for murdering six people. The event turned into such a gruesome spectacle that the government decided to outlaw public executions. So much for capital punishment as a deterrent: when executions take place in secret, behind walls, Camus argues, there is no more exemplary value, no more cathartic function. Among the striking examples of the inhumanity of death by guillotine are journalist Roger Grenier's interviews with official state executioners, quoted here. *France Dimanche*, Grenier's newspaper, found them too gory to publish, so Grenier transposed them into his 1953 novel, *Les Monstres*: "If the client hesitates, we grab him by the arm with one hand and by the seat of the pants with the other, lifting him off the ground. He's nothing but a package to be handled without much effort. The only worry I've ever had is when I felt the seat of the pants rip." Added to the torture of the death penalty is waiting—worse than death itself—and, of course, the possibility of judicial error behind the condemnation. Once an execution takes place, there's no taking it back.

Along with his revulsion at the guillotine itself was Camus's wariness of judicial systems. We know that Camus wrote many letters to French president René Coty protesting death sentences. As a matter of principle, he took the side of the accused. He opposed the death sentence of the collaborationist writer Robert Brasillach and signed