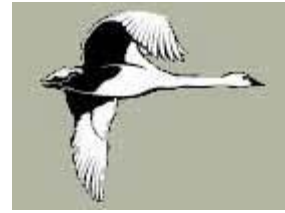


The Trumpeter (2001)

Sartre And Camus On Nature

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Introduction

Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus have frequently been linked together under the broad rubric of existentialism. Webster's defines existentialism as a philosophy "holding that human beings are totally free and responsible for their acts."¹ While this might be a fair starting point, the views of Camus and Sartre begin to diverge quickly into various streams and rivulets that seem to flow away from a common ocean rather than towards one. Of particular note are Camus' and Sartre's starkly contrasting attitudes toward nature. While references to the natural environment are scattered through out their fiction, plays, and non-fiction, they seem to be sharpest in focus in Sartre's novel *Nausea*, and the short story entitled "The Adulterous Woman" in Camus's collection of short stories, *Exile and the Kingdom*.

The Serpentine feeling of *Nausea* is written in the form of the Ilis diary of an alienated prewar French autodidact by the name of Antoine Roquetin. Roquetin spends his days reading at the local library. When he's not doing that, he is painstakingly observing everything around him: objects, tree roots, other people, the imperfections of his own skin, etc.

From early on, we are left with no doubt as to Roquetin's view of existence. "Things are bad. Things are very bad: I have it, the filth, the Nausea."² "The Nausea," as he calls it, is "the hatred, the disgust of existing."³ When he looks in the mirror, he sees something on "the level of a jellyfish."⁴ This is not what he was looking for. He is surrounded by flesh, "defenseless, bloated, slobbering, vaguely obscene."⁵

He dare not look in his mouth, for he might find that "his tongue is an enormous live centipede, rubbing its legs together and scrapping his palate." Then he would have to "tear it out with his own hands."⁶ As Roquetin tells us, what "I wanted" was "to drive existence out of me, to rid the passing moments of their fat, to twist them, dry them, purify myself, harden myself, to give back the sharp, precise sound of a saxophone note."⁷

When he ventures outside, things don't get any better. He walks at random under a "wasted sky."⁸ Even the sea makes a "death rattle."⁹ Everything seems to be "disintegrating."¹⁰ To make matters worse, there appears to be a group of crabs and lobsters following him around and staring at him from various vantage points. He turns around and sees "a crab running backwards"¹¹ around a corner.

He stops at a park, but he will find no solace there. Instead, he has a horrible epiphany. He stares at the root of a nearby chestnut tree. He becomes spellbound by the root, "black and swollen,"¹² like a "long serpent dead at my feet."¹³ As he gazes at the root, which was like "a secretion, like an oozing," he "understood the Nausea."¹⁴

I sank down on the bench, stupefied, stunned by profusion of being without origin: everywhere blossomings, hatchings out, . . . my ears buzzed with

existence, my very flesh throbbed and opened, abandoned itself to the universal burgeoning. It was repugnant. . . . What good are so many duplicates of trees? So many existences missed, obstinately begun again and again missed—like the awkward efforts of an insect fallen on its back?. . . The trees, those great clumsy bodies. . . . They did not want to exist, only they could not help themselves.¹⁵

He shook himself “to get rid of this sticky filth, but it held fast and there was so much, tons and tons of existence.”¹⁶

He goes on to caution people never to leave the cities:

If you go too far you come up against the vegetation belt. Vegetation has crawled for miles toward the cities. It is waiting. Once the city is dead, the vegetation will cover it, will climb over the stones, grip them, search them, make them burst with its long black pincers; it will blind the holes and let its green paws hang over everything. You must stay in the cities as long as they are alive, you must never penetrate alone this great mass of hair waiting at the gates.¹⁷

Although it was written in the 1930s, *Nausea* still holds its own compelling fascination. Some have written the entire thing off as a bad mescaline trip, others have suggested that Sartre is not really writing about nature at all, but is attacking “the lure of bourgeois mentality,”¹⁸ (of which nature is presumably a subset!)

What strikes me is the resemblance between Sartre and some of the most puritanical of the Church Fathers. Like them, Sartre worries about being “unclean,”¹⁹ about this “serpentine . . . feeling of existence.”²⁰ Perhaps even more striking is full embodiment of the mechanical, Cartesian worldview in Sartre’s novel. For instance, during the chestnut tree episode, Roquetin metaphorically relives the last 400 years of European history:

In vain I tried to count the chestnut trees, to locate them by their relation to the Vellada, to compare their height with the height of the plane trees: each of them escaped the relationship in which I tried to enclose it, isolated itself, and overflowed. . . . I insisted on maintaining in order to delay the crumbling of the human world, measures, quantities, and directions.²¹

Now if this had been written in the 1990s, one might expect there to be a strong element of self-parody or satire involved. However, this does not appear to be the case with Sartre. In his autobiography, he writes that “at the age of 30, I executed the masterstroke of writing in *Nausea*. . . . I was Roquetin. I used him to show, without complacency, the texture of my life.”

In a later interview, when asked if he accepted the label of “the anti-nature philosopher,” he states: “The real problems of the human species today, the problems of class, capital, and so on, are problems that have no relation to Nature. They are posed by the human species in its historical movement, and that leaves Nature outside of them.”²³

The Wild and Limited Universe

While Camus and Sartre started out as friends and admirers of each others work, they broke in the 1950s, chiefly over the issues of Marxism and political violence. While Sartre longed for a “cleansing” violence²⁴ to arise from the Third World and sweep away the much hated “bourgeois mentality” Camus cautioned that there are no privileged executioners,²⁵ and became increasingly dismayed by the abuses of the Marxian/Hegelian worldview, which he regarded as a new religion complete with its own

inquisitors and purges of heretics.²⁶

When we come to Camus' approach to nature, we see such a radical departure from Sartre's position, it seems remarkable that the two men were ever linked together in the public mind. The same observations that would be guaranteed to fill Sartre with horror were sources of delight for Camus.

For example, Camus finds inspiration in a cat making "his way in the ditch that runs alongside the road, for cats are loath to walk in the middle."²⁷ In his notebooks, Camus writes: "We are asked to choose between God and history."²⁸ He views this as a false dichotomy, for he would rather choose the earth, the world, and trees" instead.

While Sartre thought of the city as a saving fortress, and worried about it being overrun by that "great mass of hair" that awaits outside the gate, Camus viewed the city as an aberration, "a huge necropolis, . . . an assemblage of huge, inert cubes."²⁹

Unlike Sartre, Camus was never entirely at home in Paris, and tenderly retained ties to the desert landscape of his native Algeria. Camus did not wish to become a "prisoner of . . . the sterile city carved out of a mountain of salt, divorced from nature, deprived of these rare and fleeting flowers of the desert." He didn't dread chestnut roots, he dreaded "the city of order in short, right angles, square rooms, rigid men."³⁰

Also unlike Sartre, Camus was not concerned with over-abundant vegetation smothering the earth. He was, however, very concerned about "these crowds of people, incessantly growing over the surface of the world, who will eventually cover everything and end up suffocating themselves."³¹ Elsewhere he warns that:

[T]he day can be foreseen when silent natural creation will have yielded altogether to human creation, hideous and flashing, resounding with warlike clamors, humming with factories and trains, at last definite and triumphant in the course of history.

If *Nausea* was Sartre's masterstroke vis-à-vis humanity's relationship to nature, then the exquisitely crafted short story "The Adulterous Woman" was Camus'. In it a woman named Janine goes through the motion of her uneventful life with her uneventful husband, Marcel.

Through observation of the Algerian landscape around her (reminiscent of the writing of Annie Dillard or Loren Eiseley), she begins to have glimpses of a unified cosmos of wonder beyond the knot of "habit and boredom... "tightened by the years."³³ One evening she wanders outside and away from the bed of her lover:

After a moment, however, it seemed to her that the sky above her was moving in a sort of slow gyration. In the vast reaches of the dry, cold night, thousands of stars were constantly appearing, and their sparkling icicles, loosened at once, began to slip gradually toward the horizon. Janine could not tear herself away from contemplating these drifting flares. She was turning with them, and the apparently stationary progress little by little identified her with the core or her being. . . Breathing deeply, she forgot the cold, the dead weight of others, the craziness or stuffiness of life, the long anguish of living and dying. After so many years of mad, aimless fleeing from fear, she had come to a stop at last. At the same time, she seemed to recover her roots and the sap rose again in her body, which had ceased trembling. . . The last stars of the constellations dropped their clusters a little lower on the desert horizon and became still. Then, with unbearable gentleness, the water of night began to fill Janine, drowned the

cold, rose gradually from the hidden core of her being and overflowed in wave after wave. . . . The next moment, the whole sky stretched out over her, fallen on her back on the cold earth.³⁴

Elsewhere, S. Beynon John suggests that, with lines like: “From atop the plateaus, the swallows plunge into huge caldrons of seething air,” Camus’ work comes close to a literary equivalent of Van Gogh’s paintings.³⁵ And like Edward Abbey, Camus explored both the sacred and the political implications of the natural world:

How tempting to merge oneself with these stones, to become indistinguishable from this burning and impassive universe which stands as a challenge to history and its agitations! . . . there is in every man a deep instinct which is neither that of destruction nor that of creation. It is simply the longing to resemble nothing.³⁶

Camus once referred to “the wild and limited universe of man.”³⁷ I found this fascinating, as it seems to uniquely sum up Camus’ writing. Camus is painfully aware of that original, wild nature beyond the city gates that is so used and abused by humankind. He urges us to read the “gospels of stone, sky and water.”³⁸

At the same time, as in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he urges that human society must acknowledge a limit. “The most exemplary life” is one that involves a “confession of ignorance.”³⁹ Human society “explains neither the natural universe that existed before it nor the beauty that exists above it.”⁴⁰ We have replaced “ancient harmony with the disorderly advance of . . . pitiless progress.”⁴¹ “Admission of ignorance, rejection of fanaticism,” and “the limits of the world and of man” are what we should aim for.

Sartre and Nature Revisited

In his book on Sartre, Stuart Zane Charme finds that, unlike his political views, Sartre’s view toward nature was amazingly consistent, right down to what he would eat and not eat. Seafood, of course, was anathema to him, as it reminded him of “the swarming life beyond the realm of the human.” “[H]e preferred food that had been transformed to disguise its natural origins.” Raw vegetables were “too natural,” but okay “after human intervention transforms them into puree.” Cakes and pastries were ideal because they had “been thought out by man and made on purpose.”⁴³

Like a number of left-wing intellectuals after the war, Sartre tended to associate any talk of respect toward nature with anti semitism and National Socialism.⁴⁴ While it is true that the Nazis spoke of blood, soil and the land as part of their reason for fighting, it takes a wild leap of imagination to therefore link any philosophical attitude which greatly regards nature as uniformly anti-semitic and potentially fascist! If so, Native Americans, Australian Aborigines, and other tribal peoples would all have to be tarred with the same brush. Camus had great respect for nature, and was also a key figure in the French Resistance to Hitler. Illformed as it is, this attitude still survives today, as when certain pundits refer to wilderness and wild species advocates as “eco-fascists.”

Much has also been written about Sartre’s relationship to women, and the female principle as a whole. Charme sees no ambiguity in the symbolism behind that “great mass of hair” waiting outside the city gate. “Like nature itself, femaleness is a treacherous swamp in which the sharp, hard light consciousness (which Sartre . . . associated with maleness) could become entrapped and inundated.”⁴⁵

In a remarkable reflection on “sliding” in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre maintains that sliding “assures my mastery over the material without my needing to plunge into that material and engulf myself in it in order to overcome. To slide is the opposite of taking

root.” That would bring up the terrifying prospect of being “assimilated into the earth.”⁴⁶

Sliding, on the contrary, realizes a material unity in depth without penetrating farther than the surface; it is like the dreaded master who does not need to insist nor to raise his voice in order to be obeyed. An admirable picture of power. From this comes that famous advice: ‘Slide, mortals, don’t bear down!’⁴⁷

Conclusion

Germaine Bree’s book, *Camus and Sartre* provides one of the best analyses of the contrast in the two writers views. “Sartre was confident that man could direct the course of history,

manipulate it so it would serve rational human purposes.”⁴⁸ “Unlike Sartre,” Camus “evoked History as a Roman amphitheater complete with its lions, and the writer as a recently designated and rather reluctant martyr.”⁴⁹

If Sartre thought of it as his goal “to rescue the entire species from animality,”⁵⁰ Camus could find wonder in a “furtive jackal” silently walking on the edge of the desert.⁵¹ While Sartre looked in the mirror one day and found out what he “had always known: I was horribly natural.”⁵² Camus believed that “the earth is our common homeland,” and “the body is our common bond.”⁵³

Camus urges us to get in touch with the inner most part of our being, which exists “like those measureless waters under the earth which from the depths of rocky labyrinths have never seen the light of day yet . . . reflect light.”⁵⁴ And finally:

Living with one’s passions amounts to living with one’s sufferings, which are the counterpoise, the corrective, the balance, and the price. When a man has learned—and not on paper—how to remain alone with his suffering, how to overcome his longing to flee, the illusion that others may share, then he has little left to learn.⁵⁵

Endnotes

1. Victoria Neufeldt, editor. Webster's New World Dictionary. New York: Warner Books, 1990, p. 209.

2. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, New York: New Directions, 1964, p. 29.

3. *ibid.* p. 136.

4. *ibid.* p. 27.

5. *ibid.* p. 122.

6. *ibid.* pp. 212-13.

7. *ibid.* p. 234.

8. *ibid.* p. 97.

9. *ibid.* p. 75.

10. *ibid.* p. 96.

11. *ibid.* p. 167.

12. *ibid.* P. 172.

13. *ibid.* p. 173.

14. *ibid.* p. 176.

15. *ibid.* pp. 178-79.

16. *ibid.* p. 181.

17. *ibid.* pp. 208-9.

18. Paul Reed, *La Nausee*, London: Grant & Cutler, 1987, p. 31.

19. *Nausea*, p. 200.

20. *ibid.* p. 135.

21. *ibid.* p. 173.

22. Jean-Paul Same, *The Words*, New York: George Braziller, 1964, p. 251.

23. Arthur Schilpp, editor, *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, La Salle, Illinois:

Open Court, 1981, p

29.

24. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York: Grove Press, 1963, p. 94. Sartre's introduction to Fanon's book is probably one of the most memorable rants in history.

25. Germaine Bree, *Camus and Sartre*, New York: Delecorte, 1972, p. 217.

26. Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, New York: Alfred Knopf, 1957.

27. Albert Camus, *Youthful Writings*, New York: Alfred Knopf, 1976, p. 232.

Camus continues: "[T]he roughness of ditches are so much rapture for one who knows how to wait

" One can only imagine what Sartre would make of this passage!

28. Albert Camus, *Notebooks: 1942-51*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1965, p.122.

29. Albert Camus, *The Plague*, New York: Modern Library, 1948, p. 155.

30. Albert Camus, *Exile and the Kingdom*, New York: Alfred Knopf, 1972, p. 53.

31. Albert Camus, *American Journals*, New York: Paragon House, 1987, p. 94.
32. *Notebooks: 1942-51*, p. 152.
33. *Exile and the Kingdom*, p. 24.
34. *ibid.* p. 32-33. Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamozov*, Vol. 1, London: Everyman's Library, 1967, pp. 376-77, contains a passage remarkably similar to this, in which Alyosha ends up embracing the Earth.
35. S. Beynon John, "Image and Symbol in the Work of Albert Camus," in Germaine Bree, *Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1962, pp. 134-135.
36. Albert Camus, *Selected Essays*, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1970, pp. 122-23.
37. Albert Camus, *The Essential Writings of*, New York: Harper Collins, 1979, p.55.
38. *ibid.* p. 63.
39. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, New York: Alfred Knopf, 1957, p. 188.
40. *ibid.* p. 189.
41. *ibid.* p. 190.
42. *ibid.* p. 192.
43. Stuart Zane Charme, *Vulgarity and Authenticity*, Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts, 1991, p. 92.
44. *ibid.* p. 128.
45. *ibid.* p. 149. All the more remarkable is the fact Sartre considered himself a feminist.
46. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, New York: Philosophical Library, 1956, p. 584.
47. *ibid.* p. 584.
48. *Camus and Sartre*, p. 30.
49. *ibid.* p. 35.
50. *Vulgarity and Authenticity*, p. 60.
51. *Exile and the Kingdom*, p. 25.
52. *The Words*, p. 110.
53. *Camus and Sartre*, p. 145.

54. Albert Camus, *The First Man*, New York: Alfred Knopf, 1995, p. 278.

55. *Notebooks: 1942-51*, p. 41.

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