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Foreword

Alice Kaplan

Albert Camus is one of the few French writers of the last century to have emerged from genuine hardship. Born to a deaf, illiterate mother and a father killed in the Battle of the Marne when Camus was eleven months old, he was raised in a barren apartment in Belcourt, a working-class neighborhood of Algiers. *The Wrong Side and the Right Side, Nuptials,* and *Summer,* gathered here in a newly organized collection titled *Personal Writings,* speak from his emotional core about these beginnings and provide the foundation for all his work to come. For readers who know Camus only through the hard-boiled prose of *The Outsider,* the lush emotional intensity of these early essays and stories will come as a surprise.

It is exciting, too, to discover here, in poetic form, the underpinnings of Camus's philosophical thought. In *The Wrong Side and the Right Side*, he gleans "the whole *absurd* simplicity of the world" as he sits with his silent, indifferent mother, incapable of understanding her. Here is the germ of the absurd condition he defines in *The Myth of Sisyphus:* the idea that the world will always dash our attempts to make meaning. Camus will argue in his later works that to be lucid in the face of death yet tend to the fate of the living, or, like Sisyphus, to push a rock up a hill only to see it fall back down and begin again with a sense of joy at the impossible task, is a form of revolt against our condition. In "The Enigma" (*Summer*) he writes, "Where is the absurdity of the world? . . . I should like, faced with the white and black clarity that, for me, has always been the sign of truth, to explain in simple terms what I feel about this absurdity which I know too well to allow anyone to hold forth on it without making certain nuances." By now he has grown impatient with his reputation as a bard of the absurd. But in his earliest essays, *The Wrong Side and the Right Side* and *Nuptials*, he is still dancing around meaning, ready to embrace what he hasn't yet put into words. And especially in the essays where he explores the physical universe, we can sense the beginnings of his commitment to "measure" or "equilibrium," to the truth that comes from the confrontation of black and white. He argues through image and metaphor and produces something like a maxim for a philosophy in the making when he writes in "Return to Tipasa": "In the depths of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer." Later, in his

essay *The Rebel*, Camus will call this measured vision of the world "thought at the Meridian."

The Wrong Side and the Right Side and *Nuptials* were published in Algiers in 1937 and 1939; Camus's debut made an impact among a small group of writers in Algeria but was scarcely noticed in France. In 1957, after he had become a renowned writer, his French publisher reissued *The Wrong Side and the Right Side*. In a preface to the new edition, he still referred to his first writings as "feeble testimony," yet his belief in their value was absolute:

> Every artist keeps within himself a single source which nourishes during his lifetime what he is and what he says. When that spring runs dry, little by little one sees his work shrivel and crack. . . . As for myself, I know that my source is in *The Wrong Side and the Right Side*, in the world of poverty and sunlight I lived in for so long, whose memory still saves me from two opposing dangers that threaten every artist, resentment and self-satisfaction.

Perhaps it was his weariness over the philosophical and political battles in Paris that made him long to re-create what he had achieved in his very first book: "If, in spite of so many efforts to create a language and bring myths to life, I never manage to rewrite *The Wrong Side and the Right Side*, I shall have achieved nothing. I feel this in my bones."

He would return often to this intuitive understanding of his art, where the least practiced writing became, in retrospect, his benchmark.

What once might have seemed awkward to Camus in *The Wrong Side and the Right Side*, *Nuptials*, and *Summer*—the abrupt transitions, the indirect allusions, the taste for maxims—has stood the test of time. Magically lyrical, moving from abstract philosophy to poetry, and driven by anguish and pleasure, they don't correspond to any set genre. They are unpredictable, unique literary wonders, even more meaningful when read together.

The Wrong Side and the Right Side

L'Envers et l'Endroit is a hard title to translate. In French, it can refer to the two sides of a piece of fabric—the one on which you sew and the underside, or the two sides of a coin, heads and tails. *The Wrong Side and the Right Side* consists of five short pieces organized around an ambiguity, a neither/nor-ness.

"Irony" shows how deeply and surprisingly Camus grasped the misery of old age when he was only in his twenties. The essay begins with the days and hours in the life of a very old woman and a very old man. A concluding section describes a family that resembles Camus's own: a silent mother and uncle, two sons, and a mean grandmother—a childhood world he chose as the setting for *The First Man*, his last posthumously published novel. In this early sketch, the grandmother is a fake and a bully who makes her grandson say he likes her better than his own mother. She vomits theatrically, and on her deathbed, she farts like a pig. At her funeral, the grandson, the ancestor of

Meursault in *The Outsider,* refuses to kowtow to society's pressures: "He was afraid of being insincere and telling lies in the presence of death." In the conclusion, Camus admits that the three parts of his essay don't fit together very well. But neither, he adds, do the sorrow and radiance of the world.

In "Between Yes and No," Camus grapples with his childhood. A man spends the evening in a Moorish café in the upper Casbah where he can see the lights along the Bay of Algiers. He is flooded with memories of the apartment where he grew up with his mother and grandmother: the banister he dreaded because of cockroaches, the working men on the balconies across the street, the sound of the tramway. His mother is deaf. She stares out from her balcony, thinking of nothing. The writer cries out, "The indifference of this strange mother! Only the solitude of the world can be the measure of it." This mother is inexplicable, and the child's love for her is boundless. "The bizarre feeling a son has for his mother constitutes *his entire sensibility,*" Camus wrote in his work-in-progress notebooks around this time. In *The Outsider,* begun two years later, Meursault is indifferent to his mother. And from the solitary indifference of his own mother, so strongly evoked here, Camus created Meursault's indifference.

"Death in the Soul" is a primer for solitary travel. A man finds himself in a hotel in Prague with barely enough money to live. He orders a greasy goulash drowning in cumin and retreats to his hotel room only to discover that another guest, a total stranger, has died in an adjoining room. "Any country where I am not bored is a country that

teaches me nothing," he decides, then mocks his pompous homily. "That was the kind of remark I tried out to cheer myself up." After this grim tale comes "Love of Life," inspired by another trip to his mother's ancestral Balearic Islands in 1935. The story begins in a cabaret in Palma and offers Camus a happier occasion to reflect on the powers of looking and enjoying that come with travel. A year later, the Spanish Republic began its losing battle against Franco. Despite his deep affinities for the Spanish landscape and people, Camus refused to return to a fascist Spain.

In the title story, "The Wrong Side and the Right Side," placed last in the collection, an old woman purchases a funeral vault and has her name inscribed on the tomb. Every Sunday, she travels to the cemetery and kneels beside her own grave. "And now I think about these things again," Camus writes, in one of the guileless transitions that makes these essays both abstract and intimate. Looking out his window on a January day, enjoying the shadows of branches on his white curtains, he, too, is "face-to-face with the wrong side of the world."

The bleakness and despair but also the gallows humor in *The Wrong Side and the Right Side* were the product of a period in Camus's life marked by illness and marital troubles. His first wife, Simone Hié, was a morphine addict, and the trip to Central Europe he describes in "Death in the Soul" was based on the trip he began with her, until he discovered she had been sleeping with a doctor who supplied her with drugs. He doesn't write explicitly about their separation: it can scarcely be glimpsed beneath his solitude. Nor does he mention his ongoing struggle with

tuberculosis, contracted at age seventeen, which brought him into close conversation with death and affected everything he wrote.

Nuptials

In 1937, when Edmond Charlot published *The Wrong Side and the Right Side*, Camus was already working on four new essays or stories that would become *Nuptials*. At first glance, *Nuptials* portrays a different world from the one explored in the previous volume: poverty and despair give way to a joyous communion with nature. Between the first book and the second, Camus's life had changed. His unhappy marriage had ended. He was expelled from the Algerian Communist Party as a dissident. He had founded a new theater troupe. In 1937, the writer and actor spent his days with a couple of friends, Marguerite Dubrenn and Jeanne Sicard, and a new lover, Christiane Galindo, in the bungalow they dubbed "The House Above the World," with its magnificent view of the Bay of Algiers and the mountains beyond.

The first essay in *Nuptials*, "Nuptials at Tipasa," remains the most famous of all of Camus's personal writings, and it has always had a special status in Algeria. Today if you travel to the ruins in the village of Tipasa, forty-two miles west of Algiers, you're likely to see fellow visitors carrying a paperback of *Nuptials* or reading out loud among the stones. The archaeological site contains several layers of civilization: an old Phoenician port and trading cen-

ter; a Roman colony; a center of fervent early Christianity, named after its patron, Saint Salsa, martyred by pagans. Camus barely dwells on the history of the place. In "Nuptials at Tipasa," he honors the Mediterranean. As a young communist speaking at the Algiers cultural center, Camus argued—already defining himself against the rigidity of the party—for a liberating relationship to the landscape: "What we claim as Mediterranean is not a liking for reasoning and abstractions, but its physical life—the courtyard, the cypresses, the strings of pimientos."*

But no matter how sunny, how alive, his portrait of Tipasa in *Nuptials*, joy for Camus is always coupled with despair. "There is no love of life without despair of life," he writes in "Love of Life." The phrase captures something essential: Camus referred many times to the unfathomable fact that his childhood was both impoverished and happy. What attracted Camus to Tipasa is also a paradox: a "kingdom of ruins" where culture has reverted to nature through the process of natural decay. In the basilica, sage and wildflowers grow where there used to be corpses. And in the great tradition of the nineteenth-century Romantics, the ruin is the privileged site for love, "a marriage of ruins and springtime." Amorous gestures transfer from lovers to the world of things: "crushing absinthe leaves, caressing ruins, matching my breathing with the world's tumultuous sighs." Breath in Camus's writing is never neutral. His lungs were slowly decaying, and he didn't expect to grow old.

*"La culture indigène: La nouvelle culture méditerranéenne" (1937) in *Conférences et discours*.

"Nuptials in Tipasa" is followed by "The Wind at Djemila." Camus traveled to Djemila, an archaeological site in the northeastern mountains of Kabylia, in an airplane owned by his friend Marie Viton. That escapade is nowhere here. A dry, windy, and foreboding place, the village of Djemila becomes an occasion to meditate on death, on the blue of the sky, on the punishing wind, and especially on illness. Camus rails at death, setting a scene he must have lived and witnessed in the tubercular ward at Mustapha Hospital: "You can be lying in bed one day and hear someone say: 'You are strong and I owe it to you to be honest: I can tell you that you are going to die'; you're there, with your whole life in your hands, fear in your bowels, looking the fool. What else matters: waves of blood come throbbing to my temples and I feel I could smash everything around me."

"Summer in Algiers," as joyous as "The Wind at Djemila" is stark, flows over with movie houses, dance halls, swimming spots, countless idiotic amusements, and a sense of wonder about his hometown: "What is so unique in these fleeting evenings of Algiers that they free so many things in me?" In the final essay, "The Desert," written under the sign of Giotto and De la Francesca and based on memories of his own Italian sojourns in 1936 and 1937, Camus draws still more lessons for living from the landscape and the people of Tuscany. Here his focus wanders, until he can't decide if he is really writing about Italy or about the eternal quest for balance—between yes and no, happiness and bitterness, asceticism and sensuality.

Summer

The third collection included here is the longest of the three and the most diffuse, with the earliest essay dated 1939 and the latest 1953.

Camus began to write "The Minotaur" after moving to Oran in 1939. His newspaper, *Alger Républicain*, had just been shut down by a reactionary government. Finding himself without resources, he was forced to leave Algiers for Oran, where he moved in with the family of his fiancée, Francine Faure, in their apartment on the Rue d'Arzew in the commercial center. Oran annoyed him. He claimed that the city turned in on itself like a snail, snubbing the sea—that it was nothing but dusty stones. In the town square known as the Place d'Armes, two ridiculous bronze lions graced the steps of the city hall. Camus delighted in recounting the legend: they were said to trot out onto the square every night to relieve themselves.

Camus's editor in Algiers planned to publish "The Minotaur" in a chapbook in 1942, but it was censored by the Vichy government, who had other plans for a quickly dwindling supply of paper. So Camus waited and published the essay in one of the little magazines that sprang up in Algiers at the liberation. Seven years later, he included it in *Summer*. By then he had taken his antipathy for Oran even further: he had set a fictional plague in the city, in a novel about which he liked to say ruefully that it had more victims than he could have anticipated. *The Plague* was Camus's first great commercial success. For readers of *The Plague*, "The Minotaur" is a fascinating warm-up—

scales for the work to come. *The Plague* gave him such a bad reputation in Oran that he wrote a mock apology in the form of a heavily ironic headnote to "The Minotaur": "Violent protests emanating from this beautiful town have in fact assured me that all the imperfections have been (or will be) remedied."

Though it has a more disenchanted voice than *Nuptials, Summer* is *Nuptials*'s heir. Camus is still exploring the shades of despair and joy in nature. If you can make it through the coldest night in February, he says in "The Almond Trees," you'll wake up to those almond trees in bloom. In "The Enigma," he casts a bitter glance at the Parisian literary scene. Other essays in *Summer* speak to his deepest values: "Helen's Exile" extolls the Greek sense of measure—an argument he would return to in *The Rebel*. In "A Short Guide to Towns Without a Past," he delights in making fun of the rivalry between Oran and Algiers by way of boxing matches—the equivalent of a Yankees–Red Sox series. In "The Sea Close By," he uses a boat trip in South America to explore his eternal sense of exile.

In 1953, after Camus had been living full-time in Paris for nearly a decade, he returned to Tipasa. It was December, it had been raining for five days, and the air was so humid you could almost drink it, he said. What had become of the sunlight that had once devoured everything? In 1939, when he published *Nuptials,* Camus was unknown beyond his circle in Algiers. The man who returned to Tipasa in 1953 was the author of *The Outsider,* the bestselling *Plague,*

the essays *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel,* as well as several well-known plays. He was a famous man. Europe was now in its own state of ruin. European intellectuals were being torn apart by debates over communism. Sartre and Camus had fallen out over Camus's attack on Marxism in *The Rebel.* The exchange had taken place publicly in Sartre's magazine *Les Temps Modernes* and had become so bitter as to leave no room for reconciliation. Tipasa, too, had changed: there was barbed wire surrounding the site, and you needed authorization to enter. It was no longer a natural spot for lovers. Yet by attending to the sky, the air, and the light, the forty-year-old writer regained access to the Algerian wellspring that would allow him to confront the dark night of injustice in Europe. Like an artist returning to his sketchbook, Camus looked to Tipasa—the place and the memory—as an ever-available source of renewal.

Today in Tipasa, if you walk past the ruins along a cliff high above the Mediterranean, you will find the only memorial to Camus in all of Algeria. Inscribed on a simple block of stone, faded from the wind and barely legible, is this single line from "Nuptials at Tipasa": "Here I understand what is meant by glory: the right to love without limits."

These personal essays address a central question of identity: Was Camus Algerian or French? Camus's education in French schools, his French publisher in Paris, and an adult life spent in the intellectual hothouse of Saint-Germain-des-Prés all mark him as a consummate French writer. And

yet it's a mistake not to take into account everything he owes to his Algerian childhood, so beautifully rendered here. While he was following a French intellectual tradition, his birthplace infuses the images he uses and the texture of his work. Today, many Algerian writers claim him as part of their literary tradition. And this is the case despite the harsh critiques he's received for the flatness, even the namelessness of Arab characters in his fiction. In a speech he gave in Paris in 1958, Camus expressed in the strongest terms what Algeria had meant to him. He referred to the group of French and native writers in the "School of Algiers" united around Edmond Charlot's small publishing house. He said that having been born in Algeria was the greatest good fortune of his existence. And, once again, he repeated his literary credo: "I've never written anything that isn't directly or indirectly tied to this land."*

**"J'ai eu l'occasion de dire que je n'avais rien écrit qui, de près ou de loin, ne se rattache à cette terre."* Speech to the Algerienne Association, November 13, 1958, in *Conférences et discours*.

I

The Wrong Side and the Right Side

1937

(*L'Envers et l'Endroit*)

to Jean Grenier