

Between Yes and No, Heaven and Earth with Albert Camus on a Spring Morning

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Theme: [History](#)

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“To give up beauty and the sensual happiness that comes with it and devote one’s self exclusively to unhappiness requires a nobility I lack. However, after all, nothing is true that compels us to make it exclusive. Isolated beauty ends in grimaces, solitary justice in oppression.

Anyone who seeks to serve the one to the exclusion of the other serves no one, not even himself, and in the end is doubly the servant of injustice. A day comes when, because we have been inflexible, nothing amazes us anymore, everything is known, and our life is spent in starting again.

*It is a time of exile, dry lives, dead souls. To come back to life, we need grace, a homeland, or to forget ourselves. On certain mornings, as we turn a corner, an exquisite dew falls on our heart and then vanishes. But the freshness lingers, and this, always, is what the heart needs. I had to come back once again.” - **Albert Camus**, “Return to Tipasa”*

For a writer to fight injustice to the exclusion of creating beauty and living passionately contradicts the deepest desires of the human heart. Albert Camus taught us this. The love of life must inform the rebel’s resistance to injustice. “It seems to me that the writer must be fully aware of the dramas of his time,” he writes, “and that he must take sides every time he can and knows how to do so.” But his refusal, his no, does not imply a renunciation but an affirmation, a yes, to the joy and grandeur of life that is everyone’s birthright.

This is the difficult way of true art – the rebel writer’s way – the tension that the writer must live with as he shuttles back and forth between one’s heart’s desires and his commitment to resist evil. What is the point of fighting for a better world if one does not live as if that world were here now, and one’s living and writing were the revelation of that reality. Camus somewhere said something to the effect that it is not your writings that I like, it is your writing. He knew that we are always on the way, and our wayfaring should prefigure the enigma of our arrivals.

It is spring as I write and I am thinking of Camus when that exquisite dew fell on his heart that early morning. No doubt Albert felt a bit of heaven. I’m feeling it now. Spring, the time of the resurrection of the living dead. All around new life bursts and blooms in wild array. A mountain stream races down the hillside, shouting its joy that the earth’s new warmth has freed it at last from its frozen sleep. In the trees all around the birds have returned and sing exultantly of their homecoming. Almost before our eyes the flowers push their way up to the light. They have had enough of the underground, hungrily seeking the sun. It is a beautiful dawn, and I can smell it. I feel as though I have awoken from a long and deep sleep. The morning star welcomed me. The sun rose majestically. And across my window

three early flies jitterbug in the first light. The whole earth is conspiring to explode with life and it is asking for our assent.

But dare the living-dead awaken? Shall we say yes to this paradise?

“This day you will be with me in paradise.” That’s what a man, convicted of crimes against the state and dying fast, once said. Like most memorable statements, it is open to various interpretations. But suppose, instead of offering one, we assume the existence of paradise, and ask a question that lurks unspoken and forbidden in every heart.

For there are some questions so obvious that we refuse to ask them for fear of having to answer. To be asked such questions seems an impertinence, an insult to our intelligence, and an assault on our integrity. Don’t be ridiculous, we think, though we don’t laugh. Isn’t it obvious, we vaguely mutter, secretly knowing it is nothing of the sort. We are caught off-guard, something we don’t do to ourselves. Even our dreams escape us. We prefer to live in the clouds.

But let’s be daring for once. Let’s put aside all our usual lies and evasions and not be afraid of the truth. Let’s ask ourselves a few very simple and annoying questions, the kind children ask their tongue-tied parents, and let’s not squirm away from answering.

What images of death do we live with?

Or, to put it another way, if you believe in life after death, what image of heaven do you entertain? Not what do you think heaven is, but what do you desire it to be? If you object and say you don’t believe in life after death, the question is still valid. For we are, of course, here playing a game of the imagination. You need only make believe, for the hell of it, that there is life after death. Or life before.

What would you like it to be? Imagine. What would you like this life to be? Maybe that’s the real question.

The trouble with being born, of course, is that we are guaranteed to die and be aware of it most of our lives. When it comes to dying, we have no choice; death is our fate and against it freedom is a meaningless word. Living is another matter, though it is not something we generally give much thought, for we can choose not to live when breath is still ours. We are free to wait lovingly for annihilation by patiently enduring our lives, or we can commit quick suicide.

We don’t have to live, but we must die. In our bitterness we may curse the fact that we find ourselves alive in the world; we didn’t ask for it. This is obviously true and equally meaningless. Once we find ourselves alive, death is our destiny, like it or not. Whether life is a living hell for us or just a dull plod through the years – a “hanging in there,” in those unconsciously evocative words – we hold in our hearts, however buried, images of what we would like life to be like if it were eternal.

That is, we all live with images of paradise, no matter how beclouded or unarticulated they may be.

Now, as I wander out in the early morning lulled by birdsong, I wonder what these images consist of. What, in our hearts’ desires, do we yearn to become? What heavens do we wish

to inhabit?

For we are now in the school of imagination, what John Keats called the vale of soul-making, and must, like children everywhere, answer the following: Imagine paradise, on earth or in heaven, and describe it in as few or as many words as you wish. For future reference, learn your answer by heart.

Camus wrote,

Yes, nothing prevents me from dreaming, in the very hour of exile, since at least I know this, with sure and certain knowledge: a man's work is nothing but this slow trek to rediscover, through the details of art, those two or three great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened.

Yes, to open our hearts. It is naïve, but not stupid. It is disturbing. It is surely easy to hide behind the word mystery, or cynically to reply that the world is what it is, a far cry from paradise, nor will it ever be, here or in some supposed hereafter, any different. The former is the believer's dodge, the latter the skeptical "realist's" way of begging the question. Both are phony.

Only as we become as little children can we enter into the kingdom of heavenly imagination, and it is the fear of ridicule, our own and others,' that bars the gate. It is obvious that what happens after death is a mystery. Why we come and why we go is something that we'll never know, all beliefs to the contrary. We live by pure faith, though, as Thoreau noted, we are determined not to live by faith if we can avoid it. Which we can't, ultimately. Knowledge fails. And anyway, what we know and what we want are not the same thing. The images of paradise we hold don't illuminate death in the slightest; they do, however, enlighten our lives. After all, it is living that is within our power. We live in possibility. If we wish to pursue the ideal images of our heart's desires, we must first make manifest what they are.

What do you want? I know it is not easy living with a deep but dark longing. Perhaps it is the fear of disappointment that keeps us in the dark. Why, when the whole earth rises toward the light, do we shrink back in fear? Does beauty crush us?

I remember leaving my mother's house to go to the hospital where my dear father had just died. It was 5:30 AM on the first of May. Stepping outside, the birdsong and flowering bushes illuminated by the rising sun staggered me. How could this be: life and death in one hour, one moment. Where now was my father as his son walked through a garden of delight? Where was that man whom I had kissed a few hours before?

What do I want?

Albert, you wondered too when you created your alter-ego Jacques Cormery in your novel, *The First Man*, and placed him at his father's gravesite. It was just a novel, as they say, but you were there and said,

All that was left was this anguished heart, eager to live, rebelling against the deadly order of the world that had been with him for forty years, and still struggling against the wall that separated him from the secret of all life, wanting to go farther, to go beyond, and to discover, discover before dying,

discover at last in order to be, just once to be, for a single second, but forever.

Just once and one time only. Isn't that it? No reruns. No playbacks. One life. Eternal.

Then what?

Perhaps our greatest fear is to passionately want something from life and death, "to go beyond" with Albert, to ask for something independent of society's and others' wishes, and to dare intuit it into existence. Society drones: Don't dare feel it, don't dare say it, don't ask for too much. Narrow it all down, life is much too much, narrow it all down.

Sometimes I think that because so many people have meekly accepted this dictum that they are unconsciously in love with death, assuming that all their problems and the anguish of being placed between yes and no, heaven and earth will then cease. Oftentimes I think that we are living in the age of nihilism that Nietzsche predicted long ago, a time in which the will to nothingness is most clearly expressed in the sterile pursuit and embrace of things, a "paradise" of consumer goods at the expense of livingness.

"I cling like a miser to the freedom that disappears as soon as there is an excess of things," writes Camus, grasping in a few words a key link between a just and unjust world where most people are subjected to violence and degradation at the hands of the wealthy and powerful who seek to devour the earth.

Ah, but here we are walking in the spring sunshine, the time for resurrection and for truth. The whole earth is rising beneath our feet. We can feel it. The trees are budding forth and leaving toward the stars. We can see them. We can smell the earth warming in the rising sun. Perhaps like Camus, the spring smells seize us by the throat, and we find ourselves delirious with love and desire as "the gods speak in the sun and the scent of absinthe leaves," as we wander through a reborn world.

So why don't we say what we truly want? Can we even imagine it? Or is what we want so pathetic - more things, more money, anything to boost our egos and impress others, improve our appearances, elevate our social standing - that to admit it reveals the hollowness of our lives? Are our desires so vague and culturally constricted that they must be repressed lest they make us realize how spiritually dead we are when all around us resurrection calls us to awaken to new life?

Suppose rather than hiding behind the lies and evasions that we use to divorce ourselves from the tree of life, we dare to speak from the indivisible root of truth and desire, or true desire, the eternal tree. For to live truly and to die is to create out of that planting a full flowering, an exposed existence rooted in the earth and reaching to the stars. Then, heaven will be our destiny, for it will proceed from our passions and usher in a glorious spring.

And yet, as Camus knew, our little imaginary heavens can lull us to sleep when world events call to us to rise up and say no. Yes, but no, too. Desire needs will to renew the world. The lover who luxuriates in the spring sap rising must be a rebel. "But the true life is present in the heart of this dichotomy....Life is this dichotomy itself," he tells us.

To live authentically is to live between yes and no.

Dostoevsky, who shared with Camus the belief that we must rebel to save the world, had

Karamazov rightly say that if all are not saved, what good is the salvation of only one?

To which he added: "Life is a paradise and we are all in paradise, but we refuse to see it."

So it seems on this morning in spring as resurrection fills the air. And even though this feeling will fade, Camus is right that its freshness will linger, an exquisite reminder of why we must rebel joyously.

You are right, Albert, "We must simultaneously serve suffering and beauty."

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