

Angst and Affirmation in Modern Culture

Sam Morris on the existential choice we all face

The 4th January 1960 was an overcast and drizzly day in northern central France. Albert Camus was returning to Paris with his publisher Michel Gallimard and Gallimard's wife and daughter in a powerful four-door sports car, a Facel Vega. The Vega was infamous for its rear hinging 'suicide' doors that were known to pop open at high speeds upon high vibrations. However, this would not be the issue on this particular journey. Joining the Route Nationale No 5, at about half a kilometer from Yonnes, the car lost control and hit a tree. Gallimard's wife and daughter were thrown from the car, landing between 10–20ft from the wreck. They would recover. Gallimard suffered severe impact wounds, and would die two days later in hospital. Camus was killed instantly. He was only forty-six years old, and had written as recently as 1958, "I continue to be convinced that my work hasn't even been begun." Camus had wished to take a train back to Paris and was renowned for his dislike of cars, but Gallimard had persuaded him to take a lift. The train ticket for the return journey was found in the top pocket of Camus' jacket.

This literary tragedy stamped a full-stop on a body of works that could have included the above incident as a motif. The really ironic tragedy of Camus' death is not that he wanted to get a train and had to be convinced to travel by car, although this does slap you with 'what ifs'. The true absurdity is that the incident would not look out of place in one of Camus' novels.

The Two Faces Of Existentialism

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus writes of everyday life:

"Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, according to the same rhythm... But one day the 'why' arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement."

This is Camus' revelation of *absurdity* (terminology borrowed from Sartre). He is claiming that normal consciousness and perspective are, to a certain degree, empty; or taking the view to an extreme, that life is not worth living. We could easily imagine that the culmination of the above activities could be the car crash on the road to Yonnes: an absurd end to the absurdity of existence.

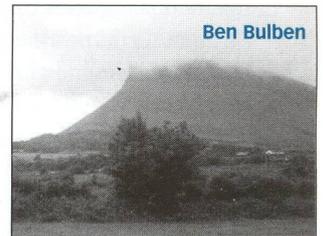
This absurdity is well illustrated in one of Camus' novellas, *L'Etranger* (*The Stranger*). The hero, Meursault, attends his mother's funeral with an air of ambivalence, indicated from the outset of the text with the statement "Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don't know." He continues in an attitude of indifference as he meets a girl the following day and takes her to a show. Meursault searches for sensation from a world that he views as indifferent to its inhabitants. Eventually Meursault kills a man in this attitude of passive separation from the world.

Although Camus never used the term in his life, he is here showing an existential standpoint (the term *existentialism* was first used by Søren Kierkegaard) – an approach to existence which maintains that we are 'unnecessary' and that the world

that envelops us is the only reality, therefore any meaning we attempt to attain is a pure illusion, or at best, a personal construct. Sartre champions this approach in his novel *Nausea*, where nausea is the state that overwhelms the main character Roquentin in a bar when alienation and the mystery of being take hold. Roquentin is left "alone in the midst of these happy, reasonable voices" in a state of oppression by the uncaring universe. This understanding leads to Sartre's famous dictum that 'man is a useless passion'.

This all sounds very depressing and suicidal, and you may ask why I'm choosing to discuss it. I cannot deny these states of consciousness exist, and as we stampede towards further technologicalism and materialism I feel we are more susceptible than ever to angst-ridden existence – to moments when life seems meaningless, as illustrated by Eliot's *Hollow Men* or in much of Samuel Beckett's work. Yet we go about our days in a paradoxical flux, as there is also an intense feeling we experience during our best moments, that *life has meaning*; that it is priceless and filled with immense potential. Either on holiday, or when enjoying ourselves at home; when immersed in an activity, in music, or at moments of celebration, we no longer feel separate, contingent or alienated from reality. As W. B. Yeats expresses it in his poem *Under Ben Bulbin*:

...when all words are said
And a man is fighting mad,
Something drops from eyes long blind,
He completes his partial mind,
For an instant stands at ease,
Laughs aloud, his heart at peace.



Ben Bulbin

For me these moments occasionally arise while in a football game, when I play with such ease and am sure that all touch and contact with the ball will be inch-perfect. I am usually a very inconsistent and average football player, yet in moments of relaxed concentration volleys can be struck with confidence and minimal effort. I have slipped out of the 'me' that stumbles and trips in both action and speech, into a 'me' that is purposeful and overflowing with vitality and focus. At these times it seems that a glow has ignited in my head and all my action and movement are at one with my surroundings. This is what J. G. Fichte meant when he said that man only knows himself in action. I no longer feel separate, contingent or extraneous to reality. I feel part of the world.

The seventeenth century French philosopher Blaise Pascal called this 'authentic existence' – in contrast to an 'inauthentic existence' in which people waste their lives concerned with trivialities. Likewise, the twentieth century German philosopher Martin Heidegger wrote in *Being & Time* of "Being that degrades itself in the mediocrity of everyday life" and of our "forgetfulness of Existence." In other words, we can become so bogged down by the actualities of just surviving day by day that we forget to enjoy the knowledge and feeling of being alive in the world.

Why is this? Why can we experience moments of oppression, and at other times moments of almost divine bliss? And which is correct? Vision or Nausea? Meaning or Meaningless?

Colin Wilson's Affirmative Response

Some may view this problem as basically irrelevant, like asking which is truer, summer or winter? or which moods are truer, happiness or depression? Yet, as Colin Wilson highlighted in *The Outsider* (1956), when "Van Gogh painted *The Starry Night*, which seems to be a pure affirmation of life, yet ends his life leaving a note saying 'Misery will never end'... the question was not only significant but, literally, a matter of life and death." Furthermore, the sense of lack of meaning or purpose is very

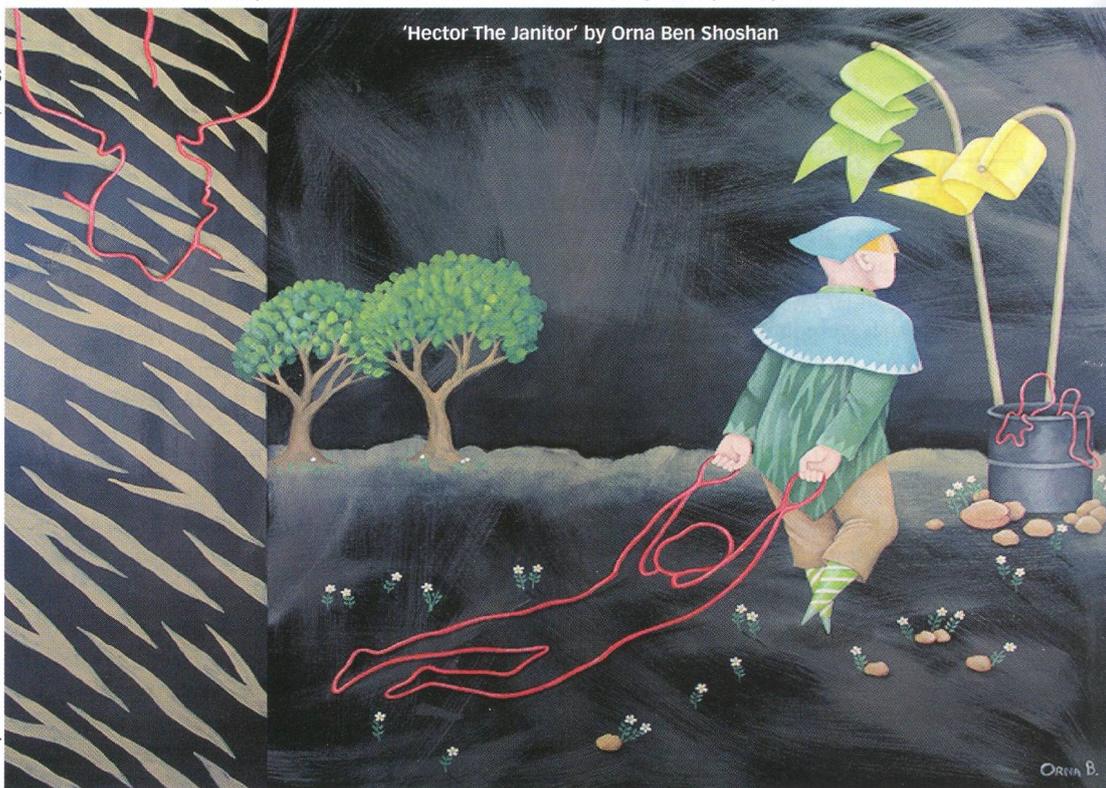
apparent in twentieth century literature, philosophy and art. Liberal humanism finds it impossible to accommodate the irrational extremes of human behaviour. It is also difficult to maintain allegiance to the possibility of a benign Marxism. Structuralism, post-structuralism, and deconstructionism have eliminated the individual human subject and stirred up scepticism about whether it is possible to make any absolutely true statement. To add to this, there is a general sense that the certainties provided by religion have been lost, never to be regained or replaced. Science solves our practical problems, but at times only widens the inner void of meaninglessness. So it's an important issue.

For me, existentialism is a passionate protest against the prevalence of mere cold logic. The basic axioms of existentialism concern the stature of man. An existentialist philosopher might commence his analysis of human existence by pointing out that while there are times a man feels supremely happy and confident, there are other times when he feels substantially less than human. Existentialism offers no consolation, it purely confirms the diagnosis: without God a person must give himself significance, because if he does not, no one will. This injection of importance is the role of Wilson's 'New Existentialist'.

The apparent existential dichotomy between life affirmation and suicidal angst is tackled in a series of seven books published by Colin Wilson between 1955 and 1966, and labelled by him 'The Outsider Cycle'. Consisting of *The Outsider*, *Religion and the Rebel*, *The Age of Defeat (Stature of Man, in America)*, *The Origin of Sexual Impulse*, *The Strength to Dream*, *Beyond the Outsider* and *Introduction to the New Existentialism*, these works culminate in what Wilson calls his 'New Existentialism' or existentialism mark three – with Romanticism as existentialism mark one, and early twentieth century existentialism as mark two.

Wilson first notes that the state of mind which refuses to

'Hector The Janitor' by Orna Ben Shoshan



feel at home in a dehumanised world is not just a twentieth century phenomena, but has its founding in the work of the poets, artists and writers of the Romantic movement. Wilson argues that he sees the origins of Romanticism in Newton's *Principia Mathematica*. With it, man has been repositioned in the universe, with the option to obtain what would seem to be ultimate knowledge. Man is now free to pick fruit from the tree of knowledge at will (as opposed to the idea that God distributed knowledge at his own discretion). With this newfound freedom in hand, the early Romantics felt that 'visions of ecstasy' and 'moments of affirmation' enabled the introduction of a deeper meaning hidden behind the harsh face of reality. We can see this is in visionary work of Blake and Palmer. There is also an underlying optimism in the works of Schiller, Wordsworth and Goethe. However, the plummet back down to cold, oppressive reality was at times impossible to stand, and we see many early deaths and suicides throughout the Romantic period. It's as if the movement expired in bursts of self-pity. Yet the initial impetus for the centering on the self and the irreconcilable nature of man is nevertheless taken up as a foundation for twenty first century Western culture. Consider this comment from the historian of philosophy, Jacques Barzun:

"Some critics have concluded that the Romantic outlook is doomed to failure as it tries to reconcile the irreconcilable... [yet] twentieth century culture is still eager to achieve this reconciliation. Like Romanticism, it starts from man and accepts the contradictions within him. Man is both great and helpless... with reason and driven by an irrational life force. He cannot give up or withdraw from his earthly effort for... he is 'embarked', engaged in the struggle before he knows there is one. Hence the Romantic valuing of the qualities that may see him through; energy, daring, capacity for experience, courage, intellect and imagination."

(In *From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life.*)

Et In Absurdia Ego

Given the contradictions inherent in human life, it may seem that Camus and Sartre formed a necessary conclusion in saying that absurdity and nausea were the norm, and however you approach life, you are destined to be left empty.

Wilson cites Sartre's predecessor, Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, as shedding light on this. Husserl started from the idea that our consciousness is 'intentional' – that when we perceive something, we have to grasp it with our minds like our hands grasp an object. Furthermore, we vary the energies we give to this process of grasping. When I am in a gallery or museum I put more effort and energy into the action of perceiving so that I can grasp as much as possible. At the other extreme, when I look at my watch and fail to see the time and must look again, I am not engaging with my surroundings. So it would similarly be that when Meursault experiences absurdity and Roquentin experiences nausea, their cynical pessimism is due to an inability to see beyond themselves, or an inability to sustain the effort of attention.

In contemporary Western society, no one sustains the effort. Our variable states are pacified by our quick-fix culture. It is easier to watch a film or the TV, or take a drug, than immerse oneself in the act of perception with an aim. When the world shouts at us with aggression, we can retreat into the latest soap opera and calm our minds with easily-absorbed fictional characters, as opposed to working through our varying selves with a mind to self-development, or even undertake the

more strenuous act of reading a novel. So we are left in flux, but with no idea why we are in flux, or which stage of the fluctuation is to be taken as an existential foundation to build upon.

According to Wilson, existentialism is in its essence a confrontation with one's own self: the key question is 'What shall we do with our lives?' Whatever queries may be leveled against the nature of the universe are secondary. The objective of an existentialist is the salvation of the individual, as opposed to a comprehensive intellectual system. Wilson highlights moments in Camus' work where he approaches a sense of G.K. Chesterton's 'absurd good news'. For example, on the eve of his execution, Meursault feels a surge of affirmation, and claims that "I'd been happy, and I was still happy." This affirmation of life is reminiscent of when Raskolnikov, the central character in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, considers the possibility of being executed for the murders he has committed. He reflects that "he would prefer to stand on a narrow ledge for all eternity, surrounded by darkness and tempest, rather than die at once." The fear of death has raised his consciousness to a point where he becomes aware of the absolute value of his existence.

It's true that the imminent snuffing-out of all we are does wonders to concentrate the mind. Sartre mentions that he never felt as free as when he worked for the French resistance during the war and could have been captured and executed at any moment. The pressure of the end of freedom makes you value it. In modern Western society, this pressure is almost nonexistent. Instead, man has created entertainment, sports, games and computer games to place artificial obstacles in his path, as an attempt to induce a pressure on our existence in order to heighten our appreciation of it. In a way we are bringing about false crises and dealing with them. In a game of football, eleven men are stopping me kicking a ball into the back of a net. If I achieve this I get a reward – a feeling of euphoria about my own achievement and ability, an affirmation of life. Similarly, Ernest Hemingway spent his whole life searching for crisis moments to overcome, from bullfights to deep-sea fishing and war. This searching is somewhat explained when he wrote in *The Old Man and the Sea*, "a man can be destroyed but not defeated" – hardened and stoical about the limits of his being, he therefore craved what seem to be the highest experiences of a harsh, uncaring existence. When this satisfaction started to cloy, the only end for him was alcohol or suicide. He chose both.

This game of dogged acceptance, and even pursuit, of a harsh reality, is modern man's existential choice. Alternatively, we accept our lot of boredom and triviality, and feel that things just happen. Yet if Wilson is correct, we must remember that "Husserl has shown that man's prejudices go a great deal deeper than his intellect or his emotions. Consciousness itself is 'prejudiced' – that is to say, intentional." Thus we are to blame for our own boredom.

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