

PREFACE

FOR ME "*The Myth of Sisyphus*" marks the beginning of an idea which I was to pursue in *The Rebel*. It attempts to resolve the problem of suicide, as *The Rebel* attempts to resolve that of murder, in both cases without the aid of eternal values which, temporarily perhaps, are absent or distorted in contemporary Europe. The fundamental subject of "*The Myth of Sisyphus*" is this: it is legitimate and necessary to wonder whether life has a meaning; therefore it is legitimate to meet the problem of suicide face to face. The answer, underlying and appearing through the paradoxes which cover it, is this: even if one does not believe in God, suicide is not legitimate. Written fifteen years ago, in 1940, amid the French and European disaster, this book declares that even within the limits of nihilism it is possible to find the means to proceed beyond nihilism. In all the books I have written since, I have attempted to pursue this direction. Although "*The Myth of Sisyphus*" poses mortal problems, it sums itself up for me as a lucid invitation to live and to create, in the very midst of the desert.

It has hence been thought possible to append to this philosophical argument a series of essays, of a kind I have never ceased writing, which are somewhat marginal to my other books. In a more lyrical form, they all illustrate that essential fluctuation from assent to refusal

The myth of Sisyphus, and other essays / Albert Camus; translated
from the French by Justin O'Brien

which, in my view, defines the artist and his difficult calling. The unity of this book, that I should like to be apparent to American readers as it is to me, resides in the reflection, alternately cold and impassioned, in which an artist may indulge as to his reasons for living and for creating. After fifteen years I have progressed beyond several of the positions which are set down here; but I have remained faithful, it seems to me, to the exigency which prompted them. That is why this book is in a certain sense the most personal of those I have published in America. More than the others, therefore, it has need of the indulgence and understanding of its readers.

ALBERT CAMUS

PARIS MARCH
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O my soul, do not aspire to immortal life, I out exhaust
the limits of the possible.

—Pindar, *Pythian* iii

THE PAGES that follow deal with an absurd sensitivity that can be found widespread in the age—and not with an absurd philosophy which our time, properly speaking, has not known. It is therefore simply fair to point out, at the outset, what these pages owe to certain contemporary thinkers. It is so far from my intention to hide this that they will be found cited and commented upon throughout this work.

But it is useful to note at the same time that the absurd, hitherto taken as a conclusion, is considered in this essay as a starting-point. In this sense it may be said that there is something provisional in my commentary: one cannot prejudge the position it entails. There will be found here merely the description, in the pure state, of an intellectual malady. No metaphysic, no belief is involved in it for the moment. These are the limits and the only bias of this book. Certain personal experiences urge me to make this clear.

AN ABSURD REASONING

Absurdity and Suicide

↑HERE is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest—whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories—comes afterwards. These are games; one must first answer. And if it is true, as Nietzsche claims, that a philosopher, to deserve our respect, must preach by example, you can appreciate the importance of that reply, for it will precede the definitive act. These are facts the heart can feel; yet they call for careful study before they become clear to the intellect.

If I ask myself how to judge that this question is more urgent than that, I reply that one judges by the actions it entails. I have never seen anyone die for the ontological argument. Galileo, who held a scientific truth of great importance, abjured it with the greatest ease as soon as it endangered his life. In a certain sense, he did right.¹ That truth was not worth the stake. Whether the earth or the sun revolves around the other is a matter of

¹ From the point of view of the relative value of truth. On the other hand, from the point of view of virile behavior, this scholar's fragility may well make us smile.