

## CAMUS'S STAGE ADAPTATION OF DOSTOEVSKY'S DEMONS

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### Abstract

*This article aims to explore Albert Camus's concept of „revolt” and how it was distinct from „nihilism”. Additionally, it will examine the ways in which it came to expression on the stage, specifically in his 1959 adaptation of Dostoevsky's Demons. The structure of the article will be as follows: 1) Introduction, 2) the connection between Camus's concept of revolt on the one hand and his distaste for surrealism and the theatre of the absurd on the other hand, 3) Dostoevsky's and Camus's ideas of nihilism will be compared, its nature, root causes and antidote, as well as 4) why Camus thought Dostoevsky's vision of nihilism was still relevant nearly a century later.*

**Keywords:** Camus, Dostoevsky, revolt, nihilism, theatre of the absurd

### 1. Introduction

Although the Algerian-French writer Albert Camus is not remembered primarily as a playwright, his last great complete work was a stage adaptation of Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel Demons, previously translated as The Possessed, or Les Possédés in French. Not only did Camus adapt the novel for the stage, he also directed it and partially funded the production with money from his 1957 Nobel Prize in literature. It was clearly a work of great importance to him. He also placed The Possessed among the 'four or five supreme works' in all of literature (Illing, 2015, 218). In the years preceding the production of the play, Camus had taken great pains to distinguish the nature of his atheism from that of nihilism, which he repudiated. In 1951 his views crystallized in his essay The Rebel (L'homme révolté). Bernard Dieterle, in his article „Die Kultur der Revolte im Frankreich der 40er und 50er Jahre” (The culture of revolt in France during the 1940's and 50's), points out the main reason behind Camus's eagerness to separate revolt from revolution (Dieterle, 2010, 200). Not only was the concept of revolution associated with the Communists, from whose midst Camus had been ousted in Algeria in 1937 for refusing to fall in line, it was also the main idea behind surrealism, a kind of anti-aestheticism being promoted by, among others, André Breton. If not exactly repulsed by this movement, Camus was certainly not an adherent. Alarmed by Breton's comment in his Manifestes du surréalisme that the simplest surrealist act consisted in „shooting randomly at the crowd”, he aimed to distance his understanding of revolt from any legitimisation of violence, whether it be that of suicide or murder (Dieterle, 2010, 203). This paper proposes to explore 1) the connection between Camus's concept of revolt on the one hand and his distaste for surrealism and the theatre of the absurd on the other hand, demonstrating a clear aesthetic manifestation of Camus's convictions in his stage production. Furthermore, 2) Dostoevsky's and Camus's ideas of nihilism will be compared, its nature, root causes and antidote, as well as 3) why Camus thought Dostoevsky's vision of nihilism was still relevant nearly a century later.

In *The Rebel*, while on the one hand Camus acknowledges that it is philosophy which serves as the evil sorcerer capable of „turning murderers into judges” (11), on the other hand he concludes that the reasoning of the absurd leads to the rejection of suicide and murder (14). This is because the essence of the absurd as defined by Camus amounts to a core belief in life as the ultimate good, thus resulting in the „desperate confrontation between human interrogation and the silence of the world” in the face of suffering (14). It is this confrontation which he calls revolt. Without life, there would be no confrontation, which equals the ultimate heresy of the absurd. Later Camus goes on to present Ivan Karamazov as the paragon of the absurd hero for rejecting „the dependence” created by Christianity between „suffering and truth” (64). In this same passage he writes that „revolt wants everything or nothing” (Ibid.). Camus had also stated in an interview before the premier of his stage adaptation of *Demons*, or as it was translated into French *The Possessed*, that his main goal had been to communicate that „greatness” (*grandeur*) which is expressed in the novels of Dostoevsky (*Les Possédés*, pièce d'Albert Camus (retransmission radiophonique, 1959), 24.01.1959, 3:24).

Dieterle notes how the physical manifestation synonymous with the concept of revolt as described by Camus in *The Rebel* is a cry (Dieterle, 2010, 204). Interestingly, the cry also appears in *Demons*. Following the murder of Shatov by the circle of revolutionaries, Dostoevsky writes that one of their company, Virginsky, „suddenly started quivering all over, clasped his hands, and cried ruefully at the top of his voice” (Dostoevsky, 1995, 604). A moment later, another of the accomplices, Lyamshin, „suddenly, and with all his might...let out some sort of incredible shriek” (Ibid., 605). Conscience-stricken by their participation in the murder of an innocent man, they cry out both in protest and despair, at once aware that they are the very violators of the justice their hearts cry out for. Camus praises Ivan Karamazov for „inaugurating the essential enterprise of revolt, which is to substitute the kingdom of grace for the kingdom of justice” (Camus, 1951, 64). In Camus's stage adaptation of *Demons* this can be seen in his choice to have the monk Tikhon also cry out after hearing the confession of Stavrogin, idol of the revolutionaries. Whereas in the novel Dostoevsky describes Tikhon as standing before Stavrogin, „his hands pressed together in front of him, and a painful spasm, as if from the greatest fear” passing „momentarily over his face” (Dostoevsky, 1995, 713), in the stage directions Camus writes that Tikhon „lets out a great cry” (Camus, 1959, 232). The scene also concludes with Stavrogin „breaking the crucifix” and „throwing the pieces on the table”, actions which are also unique to the stage adaptation. Every visible and audible means is employed to communicate revolt against the injustice of life, against the annihilation of the aesthetic principle as represented by Shatov. As a Slavophile, Shatov had previously explained to Stavrogin that he believed that „Nations are formed and moved by...the aesthetic principle, as philosophers say, the moral principle, as they also identify it. 'Seeking for God'— as I call it in the simplest way” (Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 1995, 250). He describes this principle in much the same language as Camus describes revolt, as „the force of a ceaseless and tireless confirmation of its own being and a denial of death” (Ibid.). While Camus obviously never defined revolt as a „seeking for God”, in his notebooks from March 1951-December 1959 he recorded his thoughts after reading Italian historian Guglielmo Ferrero's work *The Two French Revolutions: 1789-1796*: „Without tradition the artist has the illusion of creating their own standard, and thus of becoming God” (Camus, 1989, 81). So although Camus, as Ivan Karamazov, rejected the Christian God, he refused to accept the logical checkmate of Kirillov in *Demons*, namely that if there is no God, then humans are become God, yet to prove God's non-existence they must commit suicide. For Camus, revolt was in no way a wholesale rejection of inherited culture and tradition.

## 2. Connection between Camus's concept of revolt and his distaste for surrealism and the theatre of the absurd

In his article „Le théâtre de Camus, hier et aujourd'hui”, Jeanyves Guérin remarks how Camus distanced himself from the theatre of the absurd (Guérin, 2013, 819). This was in line with his core belief that as humans „we can but act in the moment which is ours, among the people who surround us” (Camus, 1951, 12). Dieterle also notes that Camus's revolt was „historically dependent”, and that he stood for the „assertion of beauty and unity” (Dieterle, 2010, 206). This was no doubt the main reason why Camus insisted on personally directing his own adaptations (Guérin, 821). The one inviolable law of theatre which he held to was that „all should be magnified and incarnated in the flesh” (quoted in Guérin, 822), making the most of every available means—technical, plastic, choreographic, musical, etc.—to accomplish this goal and appeal to the senses of the spectator (Guérin, 823). Although Camus had jotted in his notebook in the years preceding his adaptation of Dostoevsky's novel that „talent, in France, always affirms itself against something” (Camus, 1989, 80), and that „deregulation” was at the root of real courage (104), it was not against systems of government or cultural traditions that his revolt was directed. Art, in Camus's conception, and specifically the realm of the theatre, was a „movement that negated and exalted” at the same time (Camus, 1951, 264), a „total spectacle” (Guérin, 822) which involved all of the senses and inspired the audience to cry out in rapture at the gift of life and to resist any force attempting to destroy it. It was in fact André Malraux, who, having been appointed to the post of minister of culture in 1959, wanted to make Camus the director of a Parisian theatre and specifically requested that he produce pieces by, among others, Dostoevsky (Guérin, 819). Despite the daunting length of Dostoevsky's novel and the resulting adaptation of three and a quarter hours in duration, Camus called Dostoevsky „truly a man of the theatre” in an interview he gave before the premier of the piece at Théâtre Antoine in Paris in January 1959 (Albert Camus présente *Les Possédés* au Théâtre Antoine, 4:21). This was due, he said, to the fact that the plot of his novels develops mainly through dialogue and by means of „extremely precise staging of the scene” (Ibid., 4:35). This added up to a „kind of explosive time”, consequently „the dramatic time par excellence” (Ibid., 4:39). It is not hard to see the correlation between Camus's existential cry of revolt and his aesthetic principle of explosive dramatic time. Above all, Camus emphasised in another interview in April 1959 concerning his whole theatrical career, that the theatre was a „place of happiness” for him (Albert Camus présente *Les Possédés* au Théâtre Antoine, 2:35).

The French critic and stage director Jacques Copeau had introduced his principle of “trêteau nu” (bare trestle) in his Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier in Paris in the early years of the twentieth century, and Camus became a great admirer of Copeau and worked with him on several occasions (Barut, 2010, 158). The main idea was to rid the stage of anything which could potentially hinder the development of a character. Benoît Barut describes Camus's stage directions as attesting not only to a desire to achieve „readability” but also to „a taste for the theatre as ritual” (Barut, 172). Camus was not interested in the shocking, the obscure or obtuse when it came to his stage adaptations. Ritual meant a kind of predictable order, a firm foundation upon which to launch his attack on the injustice and irrationality of suffering. Barut notes how he „respected practically all of the thresholds of stage directing” (Ibid.), including those relating to genre, props, characters, the spatio-temporal, and structure (division into acts and scenes). In the third volume of his notebooks, dated between March 1951 and July 1954, Camus wrote the following line: „A 'modern' title: The Hatred of Art” (Camus, 1989, 88), presumably an ironic reference to the tendency of modern art to make a mockery of classical artistic standards. The line occurs within a few pages of Camus's notes on Tocqueville's *Ancien Régime et Révolution Française* where he had jotted

down the phrase, „One appears to love freedom; but it turns out that one in fact only hates the master” (Ibid., 84). Copeau’s „bare trestle”, in contrast to the theatre of the absurd, did not seek to cast aside everything which had preceded it as an unwelcome encumbrance, it did not hate its master under the guise of freedom, rather it sought to set the true master free. In the second part of the adaptation at the beginning of the eleventh scene, or „picture”, Camus has the narrator question the idea of freedom being ushered in by the band of nihilist revolutionaries: „We were in effect free, but free of what?” (Camus, *Les Possédés*, 1959, 183)

### **3. Dostoevsky’s and Camus’s ideas of nihilism: its nature, root causes and antidote**

Camus makes a distinction between atheism and what he calls „absolute nihilism”. This is the nihilism portrayed by Dostoevsky and represented by the „demons”, which „appear to be parasitic mindsets that evoke evil”, an evil that „performs through a confusion of signs, which eventually blur the distinction of good and evil, cold and warm” (Mejrup, 2012, 7). This is the nihilism which legitimises suicide and leads to the justification of murder. Of course, Dostoevsky believed the source of this nihilism lay in a „world without transcendence” or „the aid of eternal values” (Illing, 2015, 224), while Camus labeled an „indifference to life” the mark of absolute nihilism (Camus, 1951, 15). Interestingly, Dostoevsky had proclaimed an interdependence between the love of life and a belief in eternal values. When Ivan Karamazov finished his „senseless poem of a senseless student”, Alyosha asked him, „But the little sticky leaves, and the precious tombs, and the blue sky, and the woman you love! How will you live, how will you love them? With such a hell in your heart and your head, how can you?” (Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 1995, 242) While aesthetically Camus was able to reach back to classicist principles to ground his theatrical oeuvre, philosophically, as Sean Illing notes, „the problem of foundations and limits, posed initially by Dostoevsky, remains unresolved” (Illing, 2015, 224). In *The Rebel* Camus calls Ivan Karamazov a „romantic rebel” whose ambition it was to „speak to God on equal terms” (Camus, 1951, 63). Thus, he says, he didn’t absolutely deny the existence of God, rather he refuted him in the name of morality (Ibid.). Camus insisted on the possibility of a third option, neither the nihilism which deified humans and thus led to either suicide or murder (or both), nor the romantic rebellion which stood in a cosmic showdown with God. Rather, he advocated for an affirmation of life devoid of any other gods. For Dostoevsky, such a possibility did not exist. In his *Writer’s Diary* he had written that „his intention in *The Possessed* was to understand ‘how is it possible in our changing and astonishing society of today to have not a Nechaev but Nechaevs?’” (quoted in Illing, 2015, 225) Here he was referring to the real-life mastermind behind the murder of a young student revolutionary and who served as the model for the character of Pyotr Verkhovensky in his novel. Sergey Nechaev represented the „absolute nihilism” which Dostoevsky attributed to atheism, and which both Dostoevsky and Camus agreed led to suicide and/or murder. To Dostoevsky it was unthinkable that not only were there several such young men at large in society, but that they were even praised and admired. In the absence of faith in God and belief in eternal values, they had become the new gods. In the novel Verkhovensky and Stavrogin serve as a kind of two-headed dragon, feeding off one another’s ego, with Verkhovensky playing the role of junior devil fawning at the feet of his master Stavrogin. In Dostoevsky’s opinion, this was the inevitable outcome of any effort to create an alternative value system.

#### 4. Why Camus thought Dostoevsky's vision of nihilism was still relevant nearly a century later

Camus's adaptation of Dostoevsky's novel can be viewed as a kind of acknowledgement of the rightness, or at least of the continuing relevance, of the Russian author's perspective. In a televised interview ahead of the premier, Pierre Vaneck, the actor who played Nikolai Vsevolodovich Stavrogin, the idol of the nihilist Verkhovensky, calls Stavrogin a „personality who remains contemporary”. He adds that at the time of Dostoevsky's writing he was a „prophetic figure”, but that at the time of the premier of the play (1959) the world was „populated by Stavrogins” (Albert Camus présente *Les Possédés* au Théâtre Antoine, 2:35). Considering the fact that Dostoevsky had written in his notes for the novel in 1870 that „Stavrogin is everything” (Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 1995, xii), this was significant indeed. Whereas Dostoevsky wrote his novel because of his alarm at the widespread presence of Nechaev's, or Verkhovensky's, by the time of Camus's adaptation the situation had not only not improved, it had significantly degenerated. According to Pierre Vaneck, while there may have been an abundance of Nechaev's in Dostoevsky's time, Stavrogin was still a rarity. In the ninety years since the publication of *Demons* the dragons had multiplied. Camus also remarks that one of the main reasons he chose to adapt *Demons* is precisely because of its contemporaneity (Albert Camus présente *Les Possédés* au Théâtre Antoine, 3:04).

During the years of Nazi occupation Camus had become the editor-in-chief of the French Resistance newspaper *Combat* which continued to circulate all the way up until 1974. In an editorial written around the same time as *The Rebel* Camus emphasised the importance of wrestling with the implications of nihilism: „We believe that the truth of this century cannot be discovered unless its tragedy is explored to the bitter end. If the age is afflicted with nihilism, it is not by ignoring nihilism that we will discover the morality we need” (quoted in Illing, 2015, 221). Any system of government or moral philosophy which resembled the credo of Nechaev in *Catechism of a Revolutionary*, that the ends justify the means, was to be regarded as highly suspect. It could appear anywhere, in nazism, in communism, in capitalism. In each case it amounted to the same thing: the legitimisation of violence, the turning of murderers into judges. Camus may not have known how to resolve the issue of the foundations and limits of morality apart from transcendence, but he knew that this was not the morality that was needed, and this was what he sought to shine his director's spotlight on through his adaptation of Dostoevsky's novel.

Sean Illing notes how, „Although he rejected Dostoevsky's vision of transcendence,” *Demons* and *The Brothers Karamazov* „had a significant impact on Camus's understanding of modern politics” (Illing, 2015, 223). This is particularly due to the way these works demonstrate how the „modern, alienated soul is linked to the decline of traditional sources of order...” (Ibid.). Dostoevsky had written to his friend A. N. Maikov in 1870 that the main idea, or subject, of his new novel *Demons* was that whoever loses their sense of national identity also loses the faith of their ancestors and thus God (quoted in Vincent, 1971, 248). For Camus the heart of the matter lay not so much in the individual's loss of national identity as in their inattentiveness to present experience. Camus agreed with Dostoevsky's thesis that „the same paths that lead the individual to crime lead the society to revolution” (Camus, 1989, 100), yet he had a different idea about what these paths were. In the novel it is a political philosopher named Shigalyov who belongs to Verkhovensky's circle who gives verbal formulation to the ideas of the nihilist revolutionaries, and in *The Rebel* Camus allots an entire section to analyzing the legacy of Shigalyov. The main problem that Camus saw in his theory was that the actions and policies described were too abstract, directed toward the future, „toward the realization of some obscure freedom” (Illing, 2015, 226). This failure to have a tenable link with the real world was, he believed, the key to why

modern revolutions tended to betray in action what they affirmed in theory (Ibid., 227). One exception was the Nazis, whose terrorist government he felt could be explained no other way than by saying that it demonstrated the consequences of divorcing science and politics from an external value system (Ibid., 219). It represented the nadir of the modern age in its failure to „find a ground for human values once metaphysical principles lost their authority” (Ibid.). It was the incarnation supreme of absolute nihilism.

Despite Camus's fundamental disagreement with Dostoevsky concerning the solution to and the connection between the loss of transcendence and the modern relativization of metaphysical principles, he in no way disputed the existence of a real tension at the heart of modern civilisation that needed resolution. He described his personal experience of this tension in his correspondence with his friend Jean Grenier in 1946. In one letter dated February 20th, he wrote that „while it is true that we live in history, I know well that we will die outside of history. One must take both of these truths into account. The Greeks and the Christians understood this well” (Camus, 1981, 116). On the one hand he continued to wrestle with transcendence, yet on the other hand he declared its existence to be moot. Perhaps it was Dostoevsky's sense of the urgency of life that continued to exercise such a strong attraction for Camus. As Illing writes, „Dostoevsky remains central to Camus's effort to recover a moral ground for politics beyond the confines of transcendent religion and positivist science” (Illing, 2015, 219). In another letter to Grenier dated December 21st of the same year, Camus compared the existential pressure he felt to a kind of insanity: „...men like myself...who refuse violence and lies without having to justify their opposite, and who, nevertheless, cannot keep from screaming, are in the grips of insanity” (Camus, 1981, 119). He preferred to live in the continual search for the third way of atheism, neither the way of Kirillov, nor that of Ivan Karamazov, rather than surrender to what he saw as the cop-out of transcendence. He believed in a historically grounded unconditional devotion to life and immediate experience. This was the essence of revolt, the cry both in protest against the irrational and against any attempt to explain it.

Certainly, Dostoevsky also stressed a devotion to life in the present moment and the moral significance of immediate experience, as can be seen in Father Zossima's teaching about active love: „...for love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared with love in dreams...active love is labour and fortitude” (Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 50), and also in his teaching about blessing life: „Life will bring you many misfortunes, but you will find your happiness in them, and will bless life and will make others bless it—which is what matters most” (Ibid., 263). However, at the same time he maintained that human experience of reality was inextricably linked to one's ideas concerning reality (Illing, 2015, 230). Just as Camus's historically determined conception of the theatre guided his stage direction and brought about a different result to that of the adherents of the theatre of the absurd, Dostoevsky held that human beliefs about the experience of reality shaped the individual's perception of the scene in the present. It is not the tools alone which determine experience and the way it is communicated, but rather the ideas behind the „bare trestle”.

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