



From the Absurd and Eros: Albert Camus.

Del absurdo y el Eros: Albert Camus.

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ABSTRACT

This article is a study about the relation between the philosophy of the absurd and the Eros in the literary work of the french writer Albert Camus, with the aim to show how these two conceptions are incompatible. To do this, the different settings of the absurd that are present in the books of Camus and their implications with the Eros were analyzed. This relation was approached with the visions of the characters that act with the presence or ausence of Eros

Keywords: Absurd, Eros, Camus, Thanatos.

RESUMEN

Este artículo se trata de un estudio sobre la relación entre la filosofía del absurdo y el Eros en la obra literaria del escritor francés Albert Camus, con la finalidad de demostrar que ambas concepciones resultan incompatibles. Para ello, los distintos escenarios del absurdo que se presentan en las obras de Camus y sus implicaciones en el Eros fueron analizados. Esta relación fue abordada a partir de las visiones de los personajes que actúan con presencia o ausencia de Eros

Palabras clave: Absurdo, Eros, Camus, Thanatos



The Stranger (1942), Albert Camus' first novel, has been studied from perspectives such as existentialism, the philosophy of the absurd or the critique of the inhumanity of modern capitalist society, but it can also be approached from his absence from Eros. In the book, Meursault is a man who is indifferent to everything and who appears insensitivity to his closest acquaintances, because he is aware that "everyone knows that life is not worth living" (Camus, 2016, p. 111). Repudiated by his society, Meursault is a foreigner who does not comply with any moral rules and who appears inhumane, as evidenced by the fact that he did not mourn the death of his mother and that he committed a homicide just because it had been very hot the day he walked along the beach with a revolver in his hands. Moreover, to the greater rejection of his contemporaries, Meursault was most hated for not showing any human gesture in pleading guilty in his trial, because he showed himself to be a man incapable of feeling repentance or fear, one who lives to live, who does not believe in God and who only lives to wait for death: Meursault is a man without Eros.

Paradoxically, Meursault's indifferent lifestyle cannot be understood as an existentialist denial of life either, but rather a living in the absurd, which arises between the individual and the world: "The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human call and the unreasonable silence of the world" (Camus, 2016, p. 313). In this sense, Meursault is a passive being who is indifferent, because life is not worth living, but not because he denies it, but because he is aware of how absurd it is to live it: "From the moment it is recognized, the absurd becomes a passion, the most heartbreaking of all" (Camus, 2016, p. 309). For all this, Meursault's role in the world is that of a man who perhaps lives under the "passion" of the absurdity of life and the world, but who shows himself as a foreigner with his society, because that "not worth it" becomes an absence of Eros.

Eroticism, commonly related to infatuation and sexual desire, also involves a character of vitality and empathy, which are allowed from otherness. For Eros to exist, in any of its meanings, the existence of the other is necessary, that other that snatches, motivates and inspires: "The Eros tears the subject from himself and leads him out, towards the other" (Han, 2018, p. 10). Therefore, Meursault is a man who has no life drive, who does not like the vitality of living with Eros. Nor is he a man with a death drive, because he does not take pleasure in destruction, but in indifference to the



absurd. In this way, without caring about life and death, Meursault is a middle ground that, if he does not care about living, also cares about the lives of others.

Meursault's affective relationships, beyond the social rejection provoked by his crime, exhibit his lack of empathy and desire towards others around him. Maria Cardona, the woman who falls in love with him, is forced to accept all of Meursault's indifferences as a couple, because she loves him. On the other hand, Meursault, although he reciprocates and pleases her sexually, does not love her. For Meursault, being accompanied by Mary meant fulfilling the affective customs of absurd life. Thus, the possible Eros that Meursault might feel towards Mary never goes beyond mere sexual desire, because she never cares or interests her as otherness, but as a body that can meet her physiological needs.

Despite his indifference, of being a total foreigner from whom nothing can be expected, Meursault is a passive man who, in his not caring about anything, accepts everything. When his neighbor Raimundo Sintés asks him to write a letter to his ex-partner and testify against him, Meursault sees no problem in reciprocating with him. Nor did it cost him anything to tell Maria that he would marry her when they talked about it, because the fact of starting a family seemed to him one of the usual conditions of absurd life. He couldn't even refuse when his head of the office asked him to move to Paris to work on one of his new projects, because he didn't care about making his life wherever he went and with whatever conditions they were. Sheltered in his passivity to accept everything because nothing is worth it, Meursault is a man who lives and relates without Eros, because others do not exist, because denial is not worth it in a world where an individual lives only because he has to.

On the other hand, the protagonist of Caligula acts in such an opposite way to Meursault that, however, he ends up also being a man without Eros. Written by Camus years before its premiere in 1945, Caligula is a play about the Roman emperor and his acts of madness, which managed to unleash the rebellion of his patricians. Unlike Meursault, Caligula is a man with desires of his own who, in his eccentric action, also lives off the absurd. This is how one of his advisors thinks of him: "Cayo is an idealist, everyone knows it. Follow his idea, that's all. And no one can foresee where it will take him"



(Camus, 2016, p. 16). A man of power, Caligula becomes a tyrant by losing his sister Drusila, with whom he had incestuous relations. Lost love, that Eros of going out of his way for his sister, Caligula went on to rule with cruelty, since in three years he ordered the execution of the father of the poet Scipio and the son of Lepidus, the prostitution of Octavian's wife and the confiscation of the patricians' property. Without respecting the social position of his relatives in the Empire, Caligula ended up becoming a foreigner who is described as crazy for acting against the privileges of the privileged. But this action against the patricians was not for the benefit of the Roman people, who suffered worse violations, but of Caligula himself.

While Meursault was a man who lived in seclusion in his indifference without intending to harm his society (except for the murder committed in an unfortunate circumstance), Caligula, being the emperor, dedicated himself to affecting the Empire in order to please his individualistic vision of the world. However, Caligula, like Meursault, was aware that life is not worth living, only that Caligula did act in affectation of others, whom he wanted to force to think like him through fear, so that they were aware that life is absurd. For the latter, Caligula is a man without Eros because he takes advantage of his position in power to fulfill his own whims of the absurd at the expense of others, who have no participation in his individualistic vision of the world, in which denial has no place.

Upon discovering the plan that Quereas had drawn up to assassinate him, Caligula asks his counselor for an explanation, who confesses: "I want to live and be happy. I believe that neither is possible to take the absurd to its ultimate consequences. I am like everyone else" (Camus, 2016, p. 42). But Caligula was not like everyone else, but a narcissistic foreigner who took his ideas of the absurd to the extreme. This is why the patricians, being affected, decide to betray the emperor and assassinate him. However, this betrayal was provoked by Caligula himself who, under a drive for death, wants to stop living and allows his relatives to take revenge. In this way, Caligula bets on Thanatos, which is the opposite of Eros, because he knows that "men die and are not happy" (Camus, 2016, p. 15) and that "men cry because things are not what they should be" (Camus, 2016, p. 19). For all this, for Caligula death was preferable, because only with it could he be truly free from a life in which nothing mattered, not even love, because the death of his sister Drusila had shown him that



love was not enough to escape the absurd, because love and sorrow are nothing when life is irrational. This is how he confesses to Cesonia, his lover, while strangling her in the last scene of the play:

That is to be happy, that is happiness: this unbearable liberation, this universal contempt, the blood, the hatred around me, this unparalleled isolation of the man who has his whole life under his gaze, the excessive joy of the murderer with impunity, this implacable logic that crushes human lives (Laughs), that crushes, Cesonia, to finally achieve the eternal solitude I desire (Camus, 2016, p. 54).

This happiness that Caligula speaks of is also Meursault's happiness at knowing that he will be executed in front of his society and Sisyphus' happiness when he comes down to pick up the rock that has fallen from the top: "All the silent joy of Sisyphus consists of that. His fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing. In the same way, the absurd man, when he contemplates his torment, silences all idols" (Camus, 2016, p. 361). For Camus, happiness is inseparable from the absurd, because happiness is becoming aware of the absurd, it is facing the confrontation between the individual and the irrationality of the world. That is why, with death, Meursault and Caligula free themselves from the denial of the absurdity of their societies. In solitude, these foreigners of the world, who have decided to get rid of Eros, surrender to the passion of the absurd from which they manage to free themselves with death.

On the other hand, none of these types of characters can be shown in *The Plague* (1947). Unlike *The Stranger* and *Caligula*, *The Plague* is a novel with diverse characters who face a forced confinement, confinement that becomes an inverted exile in which the population of Oran is separated from the rest of the world. In this way, the subjects who cohabited in the city had to confront the epidemic with a community organization and struggle, that is, they were forced to collaborate together to fight for the impulse of life: "There were no longer individual destinies, but a collective history that was the plague and feelings shared by the whole world" (Camus, 2016, p. 220). But this struggle was not without pain, fear and selfishness. The confinement, while provoking the union of the inhabitants of Oran, also managed to transform them.



The main protagonist of *The Plague* is Dr. Bernard Rieux, leader of the health commission that is in charge of coping with the epidemic. In it, we can observe the most radical change between the characters. While at first he worries about his relatives and gets involved in requesting the closure of the city for the safety of the world, his sense of empathy towards others is lost as time goes by. Naturally, his role as a doctor makes him live daily with patients who end up dying. Witness to the pain of others, death ends up becoming a habit for the doctor who, unable to save people from an incurable virus, can only prepare his patients for death:

One gets tired of piety when piety is useless. And in this watching his heart close in on himself, the doctor found the only relief from those overwhelming days. He knew that this way his mission would be easier, so he rejoiced. (Camus, 2016, p. 177).

The peak of the doctor's "indifference" occurs at the end of the novel, when he learns of the death of his wife, to whom he is unable to mourn: "... in his suffering there was no surprise. For months and two days it was the same pain that continued" (Camus, 2016, p. 287).

However, Dr. Rieux's transformation is different from Meursault's, because his indifference or, rather, his "immunity" to the death of others arose as a result of his custom, of a pandemic life that stopped time for a year in the city of Oran to turn everything into desolation, fear and pain. In this sense, the death of his wife, whom he stopped seeing since before the epidemic began, is one more death, to the thousands of losses that Dr. Rieux dismissed in a full year of coexistence with death. But his lack of expression of sadness did not mean that Dr. Rieux had become an inhuman man, because he loved his mother and had suffered the loss of children who had died from the plague, but that he had simply lost the ability to cry and to grieve, because this last feeling had become the natural state of his daily life.

Therefore, the lifting of the pandemic and the reopening of Oran caused the population, between pessimism and hope, to seek happiness by returning to the previously known world. Survivors who shared a year of struggle against death, the characters of *The Plague* end up showing us that "there are more things worthy of admiration in men than of contempt" (Camus, 2016, p. 296).



For these survivors, reopening meant the opportunity to "start over," to end the state of absurdity in which they had been immersed in the plague to reconnect with the ordinary world that was moderated by God and social values. Obstinate in living, the characters of *The Plague* are inclined to the "happy" life for which Quereas advocated, that illusory happiness that opposes every being aware of the absurd, such as Muersault and Caligula. Instead of loneliness and indifference to Eros, oran survivors learned to defend their lives, act with empathy, and seek human tenderness.

This inverted exercise of Eros can also be seen in *The Righteous* (1949), Camus' last play, in which a group of terrorists carry out an attack on Duke Sergius to provoke the rebellion of the Russian people. Paradoxically, this group of revolutionaries needs the death of the people in power in order to allow life among the oppressed. Twinned by their association with the Communist Party, these comrades fight in a shared way to end the despotism of the Russian Empire. Under a drive for life that allows the liberation of the Russian people, these terrorists choose to sacrifice themselves to allow the salvation of others. In this way, their sacrifice is oriented towards the possibility of life of the rest of the men and women repressed by the injustices of the Empire. Thus, the love felt by Yanek Kaliayev, the one responsible for throwing the bomb at the duke's carriage, refers to a collective one: "But that is love; give everything, sacrifice everything without hope of reciprocity" (Camus, 2016, p. 392).

As for the main act falls into his hands, Kaliayev is the most important character in the play, because it is a man who sacrifices his personal love for Dora, his partner in the attack, and his own life. Once the murder is committed, for Kaliayev there is no fate other than the death sentence, a sentence necessary to prove to himself that he has not killed to end the life of another man, but to end despotism. It is an act of "justice" that has prepared him to die happily, aware that he has sacrificed his life for a greater good for his society. Thus, from the following of an ideology, Kaliayev and the rest of the members of his group seek to sacrifice themselves to change the living conditions that their society has suffered with the Empire: it is that impulse of life for liberation that led the patricians to kill Caligula and the inhabitants of Oran to combat the epidemic.

Camus's work, so short and complex, contains a lot of different meanings that revolve around the absurd, that awareness of useless life that can also be found in the laughter of Hermann Hesse's



The Steppe Wolf or in the bureaucratic development of Kafka's *The Process*. Of different approach, all the novels and dramatic works of Camus, which place his characters in a situation of the absurd, have allowed us to observe the different levels of Eros and its absence. On the one hand, there are lonely foreigners, beings like Meursault, Caligula and Jean Baptiste Clamence, that harassing, sympathetic and narcissistic protagonist of *The Fall* (1956) who has made his life an absurdity in which he has gone crazy. In turn, these characters, who are aware of the absurdity, manifest differences in their way of living it, to finally end up dying. On the contrary, there are the characters who, commonly shown within a collectivity, fight the state of the absurd to restore common life. To this class belong the assassins of Caligula, the inhabitants of Oran and the Russian communists. As we have seen, of these sets, Quereas, Dr. Rieux and Kaliayev stand out, who also have particular situations that have made them live with the absurd.

In conclusion, the handling of the absurd and its manifestations in Camus's work can also be approached as a management of Eros. However, both conceptions are not opposite, although they are incompatible. Indifference to life certainly cannot correspond to Eros, but to its absence, but neither is it a fall into Thanatos. Arising from the contradiction between the situation of the individual in the face of the irrational world, the absurd is a conception in which neither Eros nor Thanatos is enough. Death, to which many of Camus's characters end up surrendering, is more a liberation from the absurd than a death drive, because with it the uselessness of human life can be overcome: "Yes, man is his own end. And it is its only purpose. If it wants to be something, it has to be something in this life. Now I know all too well" (Camus, 2016, p. 343).

References

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