T. S. Eliot: The Cocktail Party

T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) wrote *The Cocktail Party* in 1948. The play begins with people making foolish conversation at a cocktail party but soon proceeds to a discussion of what it means to be married to another person, and what is required to become a saint. It was initially performed at the Edinburgh Festival in 1949 with Alec Guiness as the Unidentified Guest and Irene Worth as Celia, the prospective saint, and then moved to Broadway in 1950, where it received a Tony Award for Best Play. Critical reviews were mixed, but audiences were more enthusiastic. The play was revived briefly in 1968 with Guinness as both director and actor.

Synopsis

The play opens on the remnants of a cocktail party. The hostess Lavinia Chamberlayne had been called away, and her husband Edward had tried to cancel the party, but had been unable to contact some of the invitees: two elderly guests Julia and Alex, two youngsters, Celia and Peter, and one unidentified guest not known to the others, who enjoys his gin and water and listens bemused to the cocktail chatter. The party soon breaks up, but Edward asks the unidentified guest to stay behind because he needs someone to talk to. He confesses that Lavinia has left him. After some discussion he realizes that, although he has toyed with the idea of freedom, he wants her to return. The unidentified guest promises to bring Lavinia back the next day and leaves, singing a verse from the Irish song *One-Eyed Riley*:

> Unidentified Guest: *As I was drinkin' gin and water,*
> *And me bein' the One-Eyed Riley,*

Who came in but the landlord's daughter
And she took my heart entirely.

You will keep our appointment?

Edward: I shall keep it.

Unidentified Guest: *Tooryooly toory-iley,*
What's the matter with One-Eyed Riley

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This and subsequent audio clips are from the Decca recording of the play. Some sections of the play were omitted for the recording which was limited to the length of two LPs.

Other guests return with various excuses, but mainly because they wish to talk to Edward. Peter wants his advice about Celia, with whom he has become enamoured though she does not return his feelings. Edward suggests that Peter accept the fact that that romance is not going anywhere, and that Peter should go to California to pursue his dreams of working in film. After Peter leaves, Celia returns to talk to Edward, and we realize that she and Edward have been having an affair. However, now that Lavinia has apparently left Edward and made him available, Celia realizes that she does not wish to continue their relationship.

The next afternoon everyone returns to the Chamberlayne's. Lavinia in brought back to Edward as promised by the unidentified guest. The other guests have been summoned by telegram. Peter has decided to leave to work in films in California. Celia says goodbye to Peter and to the Chamberlaynes, Lavinia and Edward are left alone to discuss their relationship. Lavinia suggests that her husband should see a psychiatrist.

The play then skips to several weeks later at the consulting

offices of the unidentified guest, who it turns out is the psychiatrist Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly. We find out the Julia and Alex have worked with Sir Henry to get Edward, Lavinia, and Celia to come to his office. Initially Sir Henry talks with Edward alone and then Lavinia is brought in. Lavinia and Edward discuss their relationship. Lavina knew about Edward's affair, but Edward had not realized that Lavinia had at the same time been infatuated with young Peter. Both now have no one to love but themselves, and they decide to return home together.

Celia then comes in to consult with Sir Henry. She explains that she has begun to feel "an awareness of solitude," a separation from a world with which she has become disillusioned. Furthermore, she has experienced a "sense of sin" that does not seem to have much to do with morality. Rather it appears to be a feeling that he is not doing what she was meant to do. She needs something to devote herself to. Sir Henry agrees to help her find her calling. After Celia leaves, Julia and Alex return and the three toast together, first to Lavinia and Edward with the "words for the building of the hearth," and then to Celia with the "words for those who go upon a journey."

The Guardians mention Peter as also needing their help. Perhaps he might represent a separate road to salvation – that of the artist.

The final act of the play occurs two years later just before another cocktail party at the Chamberlaynes. The same people are there as in the first act. We learn that Lavinia and Edward remain together, and that Peter has become successful in films. Alex reports that Celia had joined an austere Christian nursing order and had gone to Kinkanja to care for patients dying from a pestilence. Agitators had convinced the natives that they could only stop the pestilence by slaughtering the Christians. During the subsequent insurrection, Celia had been crucified on an anthill. Lavinia

asks Sir Henry why he appears unconcerned about this, and he confesses that when he first met Celia he had a premonition of her violent death, He had not known exactly how this would occur, but he had acquiesced to Celia’s decision and prepared her for her destiny.

Julia, Alex and Sir Henry leave to attend another party. The other guests remain as the Chamberlayne’s cocktail party begins.

The following illustration shows a 1948 photograph of Eliot by Walter Stoneman on the left and photographs of Alec Guiness and Irene Worth from the original New York production on the right.

Sources for the Play

In his 1951 essay on *Poetry and Drama*, Eliot noted that he had used Euripides' *Alcestis* (438 BCE) "as a point of departure" for *The Cocktail Party*. In Euripides, in gratitude for the hospitality shown to him, Apollo had granted king Admetus the privilege of living past the time the Fates had decreed for his death. The only problem was that someone else had to die in his place. Admetus' devoted wife Alcestis agrees to take his place. Apollo tries to get Thanatos, the God of Death, not to take Alcestis, but Death is implacable. Apollo then asks Heracles to wrestle with Death and brings Alcestis back to Admetus. Eliot clearly takes from Euripides the story of Edward and Lavinia's relationship. And we must presume that the unidentified guest in the first act is Heracles, a hero who liked to drink and to sing.

As the play progresses, the ideas of Heraclitus (c 500 BCE) come to the fore (Jones, 1960, p 132; Lesher, 2013). Just before he returns Lavinia to Edward, the unidentified guest points out that everything and everyone changes – you cannot step twice into the same river.

> Ah, but we die to each other daily.
> What we know of other people
> Is only our memory of the moments
> During which we knew them. And they have changed since then.
> To pretend that they and we are the same
> Is a useful and convenient social convention
> Which must sometimes be broken. We must also remember
> That at every meeting we are meeting a stranger.

In his play Eliot grafts onto these Classical ideas the Christian narrative of Celia's martyrdom. In this, Sir Henry takes the role of a Priest, who stands in place of God, rather

than that of a Hero, who acts for the Gods. Celia confesses to him that she has felt a "sense of sin" – something that is completely Christan, and incompatible with Classical ideas. Sir Henry informs Celia of her options and the dangers she might face, before allowing her to choose her vocation. His

> ability to foresee Celia's death is similar to the doctrine of free will, in which God can see what will happen, but where the choice is still up to the individual (Rexine, 1965, p 25)

Eliot may have also used several modern sources for the ideas he considered in *The Cocktail Party*. Two recent productions had used a supernatural being to alter the course of human events. In Frank Capra's 1946 film *It's a Wonderful Life*, George Bailey's guardian angel Clarence Odbody talks him out of suicide and convinces him to return to his family (Llorens-Cubedo, 2022). In Eliot's play the supernatural intervention is more austere, and the outcome ultimately tragic, despite the play being called a comedy. In J. B. Priestley's 1947 play *The Inspector Calls*, a police inspector interrupts a family dinner party and points out to those present how their actions had led to the death of a young woman. As the play ends, the inspector vanishes: he was simply a voice asking for justice. Priestley calls out the entitled; Eliot reconciles them to their fate. Alec Guinness had acted as one of the family in the first production of Priestley's play. In J.-P. Sartre's play *Huis Clos* ("No Exit," performed in 1944, published in 1947) one of the main characters exclaims *L'enfer, c'est les autres* ("Hell is other people"). In *The Cocktail Party* Eliot has Edward rebut this claim:

> There was a door
> And I could not open it. I could not touch the handle.
> Why could I not walk out of my prison?
> What is hell? Hell is oneself,
> Hell is alone, the other figures in it
> Merely projections. There is nothing to escape from

> And nothing to escape to. One is always alone.

Edward's description of his state of mind fits more easily with the existentialist idea that we alone are responsible for our actions. As Sartre said in *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* ("Existentialism is a Humanism," 1946), we are "condemned to be free"

The Path to Sainthood

In the second act of the play, Sir Henry, with the assistance of Julia and Alex, reconciles Lavinia and Edward to their life together, and sets Celia on her path to sainthood. Carol Smith (1967, pp 157-158) points out that there are two ways to salvation in Christianity:

> In the history of Christian mysticism from the time of the writings attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite, there have traditionally been two paths by which the soul could come to God—the Negative Way and the Affirmative Way. Followers of the Negative Way believe that God may be reached by detaching the soul from the love of all things that are not God, or, in the terms Eliot most frequently chose to use, by following the council of St. John of the Cross to divest oneself of the love of created beings. The Way of Affirmation, on the other hand, consists of the recognition that because the Christian God is immanent as well as transcendent, everything in the created world is an imperfect image of Him. Thus, all created things are to be accepted in love as images of the Divine. The Way of Affirmation, while less rigorous, has its own implicit difficulties, for the price of loving created beings ultimately involves suffering and loss.

Sir Henry brings Lavinia and Edward together and points out to themthat they both had felt a lack of love in their marriage, both had sought out relationships with others, and both had

realized that these relationships had no hope of success. They must become reconciled to their own limitations; they must relearn how to live lovingly with each other. Theirs is the Affirmative Way.

Celia presents a completely different problem for Sir Henry. She has two symptoms. The first is “an awareness of solitude:”

> I don’t mean simply
> That there’s been a crash: though indeed there has been.
> It isn’t simply the end of an illusion
> In the ordinary way, or being ditched.
> Of course that’s something that’s always happening
> To all sorts of people, and they get over it
> More or less, or at least they carry on.
> No. I mean that what has happened has made me aware
> That I’ve always been alone. That one always is alone.
> Not simply the ending of one relationship,
> Not even simply finding that it never existed—
> But a revelation about my relationship
> With *everybody*. Do you know —
> It no longer seems worth while to *speak* to anyone!

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The second is “a sense of sin”

> It’s not the feeling of anything I’ve ever *done*,
> Which I might get away from, or of anything in me
> I could get rid of—but of emptiness, of failure
> Towards someone, or something, outside of myself;
> And I feel I must . . . *atone*—is that the word?

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Sir Henry informs her that she can return to normal life

The condition is curable.
But the form of treatment must be your own choice:
I cannot choose for you. If that is what you wish,
I can reconcile you to the human condition,
The condition to which some who have gone as far as you
Have succeeded in returning. They may remember
The vision they have had, but they cease to regret it,
Maintain themselves by the common routine,
Learn to avoid excessive expectation,
Become tolerant of themselves and others,
Giving and taking, in the usual actions
What there is to give and take. They do not repine;
Are contented with the morning that separates
And with the evening that brings together
For casual talk before the fire
Two people who know they do not understand each other,
Breeding children whom they do not understand
And who will never understand them.

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Or

There is another way, if you have the courage.
The first I could describe in familiar terms
Because you have seen it, as we all have seen it,
Illustrated, more or less, in lives of those about us.
The second is unknown, and so requires faith—
The kind of faith that issues from despair.
The destination cannot be described;
You will know very little until you get there;
You will journey blind. But the way leads towards possession
Of what you have sought for in the wrong place.

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er-way.mp3

Celia chooses the second option – the negative way to salvation – and Sir Henry makes the necessary arrangements.

The Guardians

In *The Cocktail Party* the characters of Julia, Alex, and Sir Henry bring about the most important elements of the plot. The word "guardian" comes up initially when Edward is describing to Celia how some force within him – his "tougher self" – prevents him from changing the course of his life. Later in their conversation Celia wonders whether Julia might be serving as her guardian. At the end of the play's second scene, Edward and Celia make a toast to the "Guardians." We are never sure of their roles. They might be angels or magi: spiritual advisers who intervene in a person's life to make sure that some transcendent goal is attained (Hammerschmidt, 1981). Though the appear to serve some greater good, we are not completely sure that they are not demonic. For want of any clear name, they have come to be known as the "Guardians."

The fact that Sir Henry sings a song about "One-Eyed Riley" raises the idea the "In the land of the blind the one-eyed man is king" (Jones, 1960, p 151). This old proverb was collected by Erasmus in his *Adagia* (1500) – *in regione caecorum rex est luscus* – but its origins go back at least as far as the *Genesis Rabbah* (~500 CE). The following illustration (I believe from the 1968 revival at the Chichester Festival) emphasizes this aspect of the guardians: Sir Henry has a monocle, and one of Julia's eyes is patched. The Guardians are offering a libation to the success of their charges:

> Alex: The words for the building of the hearth.
>
> Sir Henry: Let them build the hearth
> Under the protection of the stars.

Alex: Let them place a chair each side of it.

Julia: May the holy ones watch over the roof,
May the Moon herself influence the bed.

Alex: The words for those who go upon a journey.

Sir Henry: Protector of travellers
Bless the road.

Alex: Watch over her in the desert.
Watch over her in the mountain.
Watch over her in the labyrinth.
Watch over her by the quicksand.

Julia: Protect her from the Voices
Protect her from the Visions
Protect her in the tumult
Protect her in the silence.

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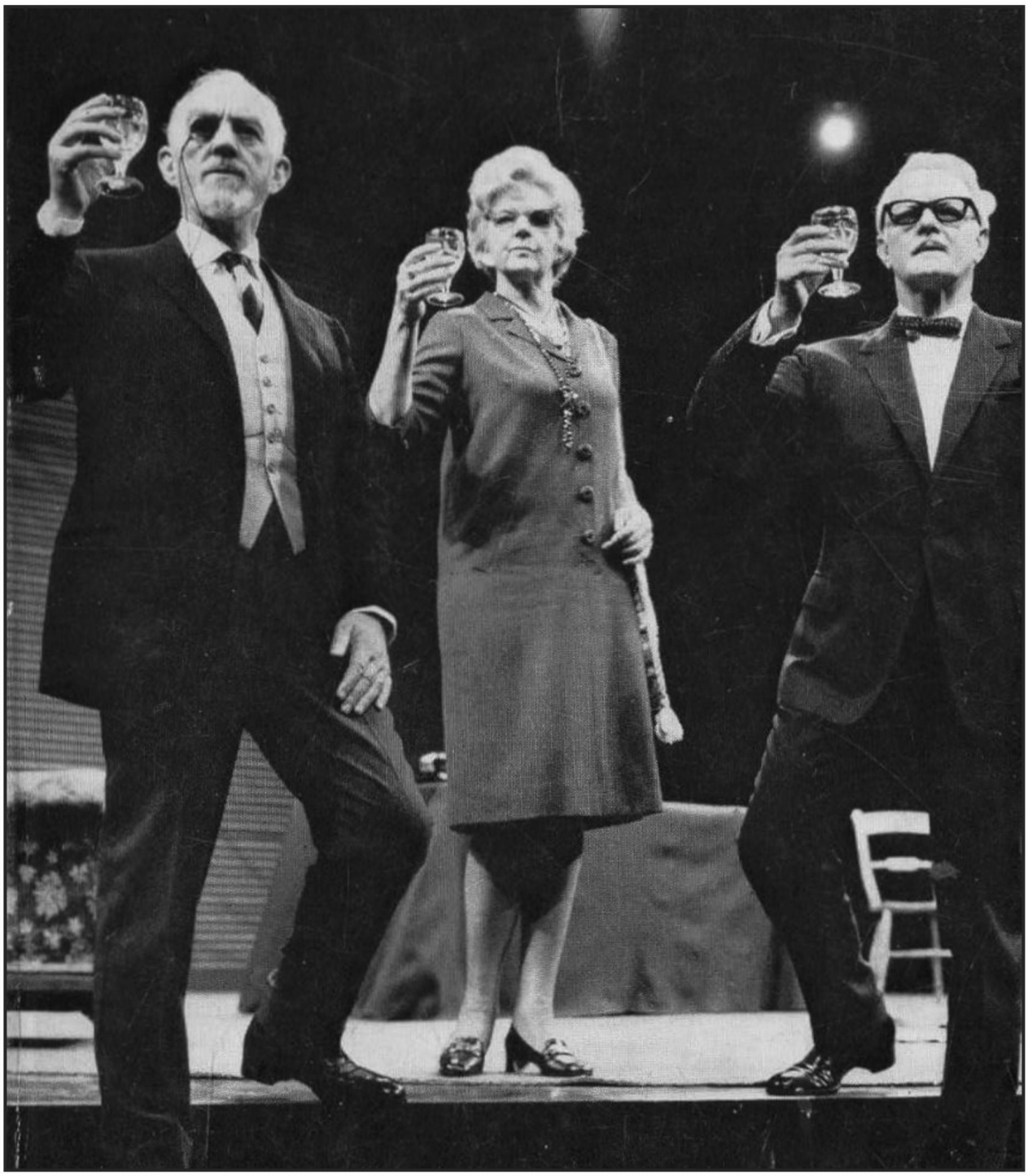

A Meaningless Martyrdom

In the short final act of the play, we learn that Celia had joined an austere nursing order and had travelled to Kinkanja to care for dying patients. The natives had somehow come to believe that she was the cause rather than the cure for the pestilence. Celia had then been crucified on an anthill. Her death appears as meaningless as it was horrible:

> And just for a handful of plague-stricken natives
> Who would have died anyway

Sir Henry appears undisturbed by her death. When challenged by Lavinia he remarks

> When I first met Miss Coplestone, in this room,
> I saw the image, standing behind her chair,
> Of a Celia Coplestone whose face showed the astonishment
> Of the first five minutes after a violent death.
> If this strains your credulity, Mrs. Chamberlayne,
> I ask you only to entertain the suggestion
> That a sudden intuition, in certain minds,
> May tend to express itself at once in a picture.
> That happens to me, sometimes. So it was obvious
> That here was a woman under sentence of death.
> That was her destiny. The only question
> Then was, what sort of death? *I* could not know;
> Because it was for her to choose the way of life
> To lead to death, and, without knowing the end
> Yet choose the form of death. We know the death she chose.
> I did not know that she would die in this way;
> *She* did not know. So all that I could do
> Was to direct her in the way of preparation.
> That way, which she accepted, led to this death.
> And if that is not a happy death, what death is happy?

The story of Celia's death borders on the absurd. The idea that human life is essentially absurd had just been introduced by Albert Camus in his 1942 book *Le mythe de Sisyphe* ("The Myth of Sisyphus"). The main idea is that human life is much like that of Sisyphus, who tried to stop death and make man immortal. His punishment was to roll an immense boulder up to the top of a hill. Just before it reaches the summit, the boulder rolls back down into the valley and Sisyphus must begin his task again. This he must do for all eternity. At the

end of his essay Camus remarks that

> Je laisse Sisyphe au bas de, la montagne! On retrouve toujours son fardeau. Mais Sisyphe enseigne la fidélité supérieure qui nie les dieux et soulève les rochers. Lui aussi juge que toutest bien. Cet univers désormais sans maître ne lui paraît ni stérile ni futile. Chacun des grains de cette pierre, chaque éclat minéral de cette montagne pleine de nuit, à lui seul, forme un monde. La lutte elle-même vers les sommets suffit à remplir un cœur d'homme. Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux.
>
> [I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy].

The following illustration shows a 1920 painting of Sisyphus by the German painter Franz von Stuck:

In the late 1940s and the 1950s plays like Genet's *The Maids* (1947), Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* (1950) and Becket's *Waiting for Godot* (1950) ushered in the theatre of the absurd, wherein human beings learned to survive in a world without meaning. Eliot's play is a harbinger of this type of drama: Celia's fate is absurd – her death served no useful purpose.

The Magus Zoroaster

Sir Henry tries to explain his lack of concern about Celia's death by quoting from Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* (1820). The lines are spoken by Mother Earth who encourages Prometheus to tell his story but to be aware that there are two worlds – one in which we live, and one which contains our unfulfilled dreams and ideas

> *Ere Babylon was dust*
> *The magus Zoroaster, my dead child,*
> *Met his own image walking in the garden.*
> *That apparition, sole of men, he saw.*
> *For know there are two worlds of life and death:*
> *One that which thou beholdest; but the other*
> *Is underneath the grave, where do inhabit*
> *The shadows of all forms that think and live*
> *Till death unite them and they part no more!*

The next lines (unquoted by Sir Henry) are

> Dreams and the light imaginings of men,
> And all that faith creates or love desires,
> Terrible, strange, sublime and beauteous shapes.

Zoroaaster was a mythical Persian religious leader (magus) who may have lived around 1000 BCE. The story of the meeting with his double marks a time when he realized that he had to live up to what he was meant to be (Ranald & Ranald, 1961).

The story of Zoroaster and his image of what he was meant to be was depicted by the Mexican surrealist painter Leonora Carrington in 1960: The following illustration shows her painting. The two enlargements on the right show the supernatural powers (bull and lion), and the mirror writing on the ground that quotes from Shelley. The latter has been lightened and mirror-inverted to make the text legible. The

conflict between goodness and evil appear to be represented by the bird and snake at the feet of Zoroaster.

The Problems of Sainthood

As the 20th Century came to an end, the idea of the saint devoting himself or herself to the poor and dying became a little tarnished. Probably the most famous of the modern saints was Mother Teresa (1910-1997), who devoted her life to the poor of Calcutta.

The journalist Christopher Hitchens criticized her contributions in a TV program entitled *Mother Teresa: Hell's Angel* (1994). The following are two excerpts:

> Mother Teresa's cult of death and suffering depends for its effect on the most vulnerable and helpless: abandoned babies, say, or the terminally ill, who supply the occasion for charity and the raw material for compassion. (near minute 6).
>
> The Teresa cult is now a missionary multinational with an annual turnover over tens of millions. If concentrated in Calcutta, that would certainly support a large hospital and perhaps even make a noticeable difference. But Mother Teresa has chosen instead to spread her franchise very thinly. To her the convent and the catechism matter more than the clinics. (near minute 28)

This was followed by a book and articles (Hitchens, 1995; 2003). Hitchens was also dismayed that Teresa and the Catholic Church continued to reject birth control – something that would have been fare more effective in reducing the number of abandoned babies that Teresa cared for. Despite Hitchens' comments, the Catholic Church rapidly advanced Mother Teresa to sainthood: she was beatified in 2003 and canonized in 2016.

Hitchens' critiques have been supported by others (Larivée et al, 2013; Bandyopadhyay, 2018). Perhaps the most significant defect in her mission in Calcutta was that she did not provide even the rudiments of modern medical care. Compassion is essential to medicine, but dying patients should not be denied the benefit of pharmacological pain relief. Mother Teresa also seemed to represent an obsolete approach to rectifying the ills of poverty. Some adjustment of the world's inequalities would be of far more benefit than simply treating the poor with compassion. Giving charity to those whom we exploit does not remove the stain of the exploitation.

The following illustration shows saint and critic:

Personal Epilogue

Jones (1960, p 123) quoted from a 1945 interview of T. S. Eliot by J. P. Hogan

> When, in an interview, Eliot was asked, ‘How would you, out of the bitter experience of the present time, wish mankind to develop?’ he answered:
> ‘I should speak of a greater spiritual consciousness, which is not asking that everybody should rise to the same conscious level, but that everybody should have some awareness of the depths of spiritual development and some appreciation and respect for those more exceptional people who can proceed further in spiritual knowledge than most of us can.’

I remember being quite taken by Celia when I first read the play as a young man. I had developed some modicum of spiritual consciousness and feelings similar to those reported by Celia

– an awareness of solitude and a sense of sin. I wondered whether I might meet someone like Sir Henry Harcout-Reilly who would show me what I should do with my life. I never saw a production of the play, and I never met anyone that might have been my Guardian. And although when I first read of Celia's death it seemed noble and right, I now feel it was foolish and mistaken.

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Condemned to be Free

When Paris was liberated in August, 1944, everything was possible. A new world needed to be created to protect their regained freedom. The philosophy that epitomized this desire for freedom was “existentialism.” The term, originally used in a derogatory sense to characterize those who followed the philosophical concept of the primacy of “being,” was grudgingly accepted by Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir as a description of their thinking. Existentialism fitted easily with the idea of the absurd proposed by Albert Camus. These concepts became the main focus of both art and philosophy in the decade that followed the end of World War II.

Existentialism

Although there were precursors, existentialism was largely the work of Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) and Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986). They met in 1929 and became lifelong companions, although they were never married and never monogamous (Bakewell, 2016; Seymour-Jones, 2008). Women should be just as free as men (de Beauvoir, 1949). In the a*grégation en philosophie* of 1930, a national exam organized by the French civil service, Sartre and de Beauvoir placed first and second. Sartre was short – about 5 feet – and the exotropia of his right eye (caused by a childhood infection) gave him a disconcerting appearance; de Beauvoir was tall – about 5 feet 10 inches – and elegant.

Sartre and de Beauvoir were the leading intellectuals of France during the war. In a break with tradition, they were as much creative artists as philosophers. The theory of Sartre's *L'Être et le Néant (Being and Nothingness)* was illustrated in the novel *La Nausée* (1938), and in the plays and *Les Mouches* (1943) and *Huis Clos* (1944). Since art is far more convincing than theory y, existentialism became more popular than any previous philosophy.

The main tenets of existentialism were summarized by Sartre in a lecture in October 1945, subsequently published as *Existentialisme est un humanism* (1946). The key to the philosophy is the idea that "existence precedes essence:"

> What do we mean here by "existence precedes essence"? We mean that man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and onlv afterward defines himself. If man as existentialists conceive of him cannot be defined, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature since there is no God to conceive of it. Man is not only that which he conceives himself to be, but that which he wills himself to be, and since he conceives of himself only after he exists, iust as he wills himself to be after being thrown into existence, man is nothing other than what he makes of himself. This is the first principle of existentialism. (Sartre, 1946)

We could therefore not look to God for guidance as to what was right. Instead, we must create our own morality. In her essay *Existentialisme et la sagesse des nations* (1945), de Beauvoir wrote:

> I throw myself without help and without guidance into a world where I am not installed ahead of time waiting for myself. I am free, and my projects are not defined by pre-existing interests; they posit their own ends. … Man may not be naturally good, but he is not naturally bad either; he is nothing at first. It is up to him to make himself good or bad depending on whether he assumes his freedom or renounces it. (de Beauvoir, 1945).

In addition to being responsible for his own actions, a person must by his or her example be responsible for the actions of others. The recognition of others is part and parcel of the

existential being:

> Therefore, the man who becomes aware of himself directly in the *cogito* also perceives all others, and he does so as the condition of his own existence. He realizes that he cannot be anything (in the sense in which we say someone is spiritual, or cruel, or jealous) unless others acknowledge him as such. I cannot discover any truth whatsoever about myself except through the mediation of another. The other is essential to my existence, as well as to the knowledge I have of myself. (Sartre, 1946).

And so, we are "condemned to be free:"

> If, however, God does not exist, we will encounter no values or orders that can legitimize our conduct. Thus, we have neither behind us, nor before us, in the luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse. We are left alone and without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free: condemned, because he did not create himself, yet nonetheless free, because once cast into the world, he is responsible for everything he does. (Sartre, 1946).

The existentialism of Sartre was atheistic. If there is no Creator, there is no design that defines the essence of man and that determines how he should act. Man defines his own essence. However, although most existentialists tended to atheism, several religious thinkers promulgated a Christian variant of existentialism (Marcel, 1949,1951; Macquarrie, 1965). In this philosophy existence is a gift – we are allowed rather than condemned to be free. Faith is an act of freedom.

Being

Sartre had studied the philosophy of Husserl and Heidegger in the period when he was appointed to the *Institut français*

d'Allemagne in Berlin (1933-34). The title of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943) clearly alluded to Martin Heidegger's, *Being and Time* (1927). The concept of existence preceding essence was likely derived from Heidegger's philosophy, which distinguished man from other beings in terms of his freedom. Heidegger (§10) did claim that *existentia* preceded *essentia,* but for him the latter was simply the properties of a being, without Sartre's connotation of a design used in the creation of particular examples (Flynn, 2014, p 237; Webber, 2018, p 8). For Heidegger, human beings were distinct from other beings since their consciousness granted them a particular point of view within the world – a *Da-Sein* or "being-there." One of Heidegger's numerous neologisms described this as *Jemeinigkeit* – always being my own being. *Da-Sein* was characterized by embodiment, location in space and time, and an awareness of mortality. Heidegger denied that he was an existentialist, though many have so described him (e.g., Kaufmann, 1963; Macquarie, 1965; Flynn, 2006).

Heidegger (1889-1976) had become Professor of Philosophy at the University of Freiburg in 1928, and was elected Rector in 1933, the year that Hitler came to power. Heidegger was entranced by the idea of the German *Volk* and became an enthusiastic member of the Nazi Party. He claimed to have been blind to the racism and warmongering of the party, but his reputation was forever tainted by his support of Hitler. Heidegger was a philosopher who recognized the importance of being, and realized the freedom it entailed. Yet he failed to exercise that freedom with responsibility. One of the main ideas of the existentialism proposed by Sartre and de Beauvoir was the necessity that actions freely chosen must be held accountable.

The Absurd

At the opening night of *Les Mouches* in 1943, Albert Camus (1913-1960) introduced himself to Sartre. Camus had just published a novel *L'Étranger* and a book of philosophical

essays entitled *Le mythe de Sisyphe*. Sartre had been impressed by these works, and he was charmed by the young author. Sartre and Camus became fast friends (Aronson, 2004; Zaretsky, 2013).

Camus was an Algerian of French origin (derogatively known as a "pied noir," though no one is completely sure of the origin of the term). After graduating from university, he joined the Algerian Communist Party and wrote for a leftist newspaper in Algiers. When this was banned by the new government of occupied France in 1940, Camus moved to Paris. There he worked for *Combat*, the clandestine newspaper of the French Resistance, becoming its editor in 1944. Throughout his life he suffered from chronic tuberculosis. The 1954 portrait below is by Karsh.

Camus' *Le Mythe of Sisyphe* has the most striking opening of any work of philosophy:

> There 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 of twelve categories – comes afterwards. These are games; one must first answer.

Camus points out the paradox of the question. What makes life worth living – whether it be freedom, truth, love, beauty –is also that for which one is willing to die. The absurd rests at the heart of the human condition (Carroll, 2007). The word derives from the Latin *ab* (from, out of) and *surdus* which means deaf (and by association, silent) and generally means lacking in reason or meaning. Nagel (1971) describes our sense of the absurd as the discrepancy between how seriously we attempt to understand the universe and how arbitrarily the universe actually proceeds. Camus describes it:

> What, then, is that incalculable feeling that deprives the mind of the sleep necessary to life? A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity. (Camus, 1942).

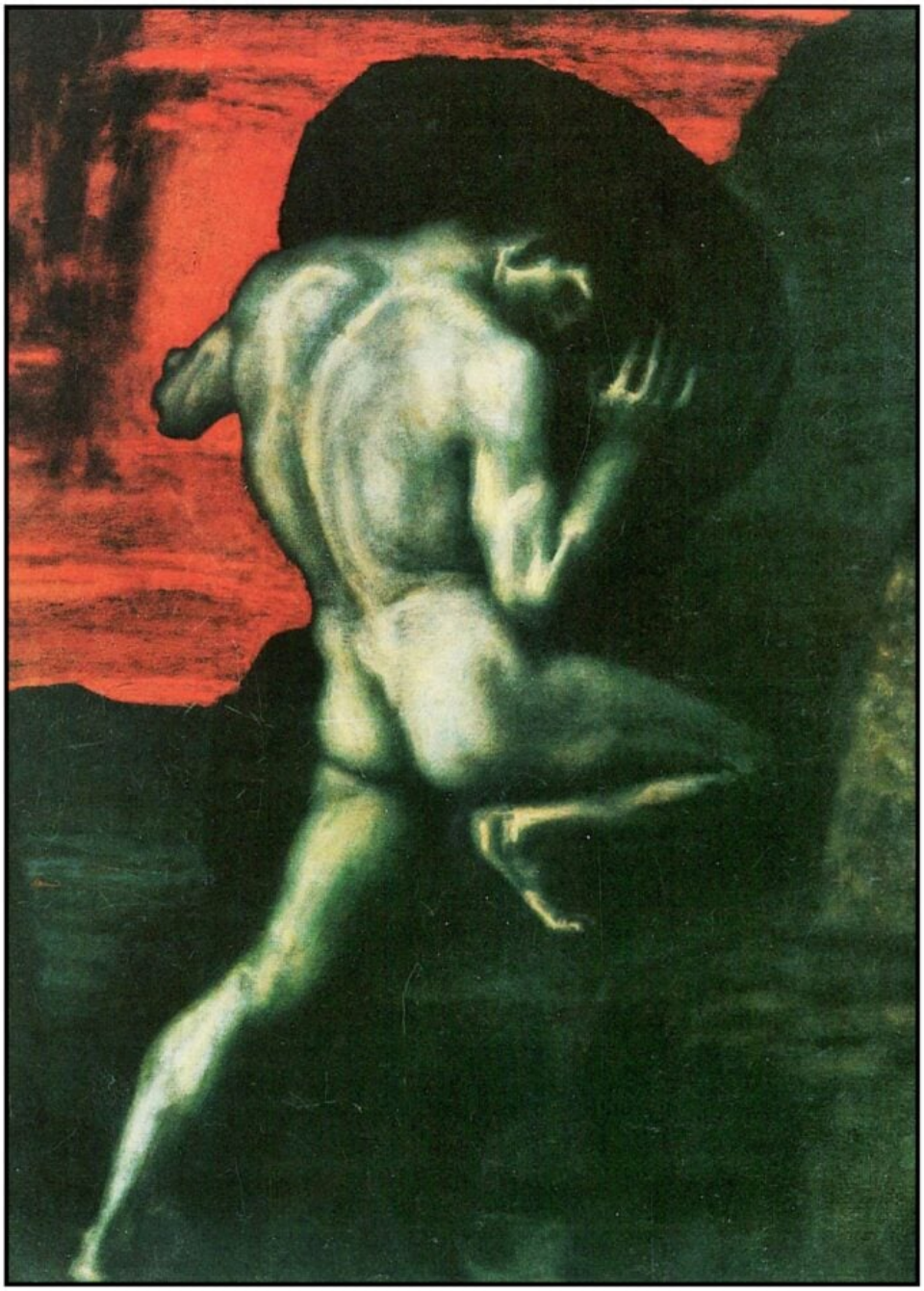
Camus traces the idea of absurdity in Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche and Kafka. (The chapter on Kafka was removed from the initial edition of the book by the censors since Kafka was Jewish). Camus finds that the absurdity of the human condition is what makes artistic creation necessary. He quotes Nietzsche (from the *Nachlass*)

> We have art in order not to die of the truth.

And proceeds to describe the process of art in an absurd world:

> The problem for the absurd artist is to acquire this savoir-vivre which transcends savoir-faire. And in the end, the great artist under this climate is, above all, a great living being, it being understood that living in this case is just as much experiencing as reflecting. The work then embodies an intellectual drama. The absurd work illustrates thought’s renouncing of its prestige and its resignation to being no more than the intelligence that works up appearances and covers with images what has no reason. If the world were clear, art would not exist.

Camus concludes his book with an essay on Sisyphus. The illustration below shows a 1920 painting by Franz von Stuck. Sisyphus refused to accept death and insisted on living. For this love of life, the gods condemned him forever to roll an immense boulder up a hill only to have it roll back as soon as it reached the top, so that he must continuously begin again. Camus sees in Sisyphus the artist in an absurd world:



I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one’s burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.

Darkness at Noon

Between the liberation and the elections leading to the Fourth Republic in 1946, France was governed by the Gouvernement Provisoire de la République Française, consisting of representatives from the communist party, the socialists, and the Christian democrats. Given the economic debacle of the 1930s and the war against the fascists, politics tended toward the left and many considered the possibility of joining the international communist revolution. However, the institution of the Marshall Plan in 1947 led the French government to exclude the communists from the governing coalition. The Cold war was beginning.

Everyone remembered Stalin's Great Purge of 1937 and 1938, wherein countless members of the military and the government were put on trial for being traitors to the revolution, and either executed or sent to forced-labor camps in the Gulag. The most striking of these trials was that of Nikolai Bukharin, who had written *The ABC of Communism* (the "communist bible"), and who had served on the Politburo and the Comintern. The illustration below shows Bukharin with Stalin in 1929 on the tribune of the Lenin Mausoleum on Red Square in Moscow.

At his trial Bukharin confessed to his crimes against the Revolution, but did not acknowledge any specific acts of treason. His confession is often interpreted as the last act of a true believer – one who willingly sacrificed himself so that the revolution might prosper.

In 1940, Arthur Koestler published *Darkness at Noon*, a novel that is based on the interrogation and trial of Bukharin. The title, derived from Job 5:14 by Koestler's translator and mistress, Daphne Hardy, described the state of moral confusion that surrounded the trial.

> They meet with darkness in the day time, and grope in the noonday as in the night.

The novel's main character, Rubashov, undergoes three interrogations and finally admits to betraying the revolution, and is executed. The issue is whether it is justified to

abrogate present morality for the sake of a future utopia. Should one deny truth and justice in order to bring about a paradise promised, but certainly not guaranteed, by the revolution. As the epitaph for the second interrogation Koestler quoted from Dietrich von Nieheim's 1410 history of the Avignon papacy:

> When the existence of the Church is threatened, she is released from the commandments of morality. With unity as the end, the use of every means is sanctified, even deceit, treachery, violence, usury, prison, and death. Because order serves the good of the community, the individual must be sacrificed for the common good.

When published in France in 1944, Koestler's novel initiated extensive discussion. Could the show trials, the executions and the labor camps of the USSR be justified by the goals of the communist revolution? How far can the ends justify the means? In the years that followed World War II, the USSR continued to restrict the freedom of its artists, and to conduct show trials of those who had supposedly betrayed the revolution. In his 1947 essay on *Humanism and Terror*, Merleau-Ponty attempted to justify the purges and the labor camps. Merleau-Ponty later recanted, but Sartre continued his steadfast support of the communists, despite the Berlin blockade (1948-9) and the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution (1956). Only when the USSR invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968, did he finally renounce the USSR's claim to represent the true course of history

Man in Revolt

In 1951, Camus published *L'homme révolté*. The title is usually translated as *The Rebel*, though Camus is more concerned with revolution than rebellion – with changing society for the future rather than reacting against the past. In this work, Camus considered whether violence can be justified in order to

alter the course of history toward a better future. The book poses a question complementary to that posed in *Le mythe de Sisyphe*:

> In the age of negation, it was to some avail to examine one's position concerning suicide. In the age of ideologies, we must examine our position in relation to murder.

In his book Camus reviews the history of revolution and terror as treated by philosophers and writers. He considers Ivan's story of the "Grand Inquisitor" in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* as representative of how revolutions end with loss of freedom:

> the Grand Inquisitors who imprison Christ and come to tell Him that His method is not correct, that universal happiness cannot be achieved by the immediate freedom of choosing between good and evil, but by the domination and unification of the world. The first step is to conquer and rule. The kingdom of heaven will, in fact, appear on earth, but it will be ruled over by men – a mere handful to begin with, who will be the Caesars, because they were the first to understand – and later, with time, by all men. (Camus, 1951).

Camus castigates the totalitarian movements of the 20th Century – communism and fascism – for promising freedom but, in reality, making the people mindless slaves. The future must not be used to justify violence in the present. In opposition to totalitarianism he proposed, albeit not very forcefully, the need for solidarity and moderation.

Camus, the one-time communist, had come to realize that the cult of history can support crimes against humanity. He had thus distanced himself from many of his intellectual friends who supported the ideals of the communist revolution. His book was lauded by right-wing critics, and led to a complete

rupture with Sartre (Aronson, 2004; Forsdick, 2007)

Sartre, the editor of *Les Temps Modernes* disliked the book's conclusions, but did not wish to review it personally because of his friendship with Camus. Ultimately, he arranged for a very negative review by Francis Jeanson to be published in the journal. Jeanson's critique infuriated Camus, who immediately wrote a rebuttal. He felt it inappropriate to be described as "being separated from reality" given his activity with the Résistance:

> I am beginning to get a little tired of seeing myself – and even more, of seeing former militants who have never refused the struggles of their time – endlessly receive lessons in efficacy from critics who have never done anything more than turn their seats in the direction of history.

Jeanson replied to Camus, and Sartre then published a patronizing public letter to Camus, beginning "My dear Camus," wherein he accuses him of a "dismal self-importance" and claimed:

> If you really hope to prevent any movement of the people from degenerating into tyranny, don't begin by condemning it without appeal, and threatening to retreat to a desert.

Camus and Sartre never talked again.

The Death of Camus

On January 4, 1960, Camus died in a car accident. After celebrating the New Year in Lourmarin, he accepted a ride back to Paris with his publisher Michel Gallimard. Gallimard was driving, Camus was in the front and Gallimard's wife and daughter were in the back. The car suffered a punctured tire at high speed and crashed into a tree. Camus was killed instantly and Michel Gallimard died several days later. Gallimard's wife and daughter survived.

There has been some speculation that the tire was sabotaged by the KGB to silence Camus as a critic of international communism (Catelli, 2020). However, there is little hard evidence. It is easier to accept the crash as another example of the arbitrary absurdity of human life. Camus had intended

to take the train back to Paris, before Michel Gallimard offered him a ride in his luxurious Facel Vega.

In his eulogy for his old friend, Sartre, who had not been in contact with Camus since 1952 wrote:

> He represented in our time the latest example of that long line of *moralistes* whose works constitute perhaps the most original element in French letters. His obstinate humanism, narrow and pure, austere and sensual, waged an uncertain war against the massive and formless events of the time. (Sartre, 1960).

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