

The Meaning Of Absurd Protest:

The Book Of Job, Albert Camus, And C. Fred Alford's *After The Holocaust*

MATTHEW H. BOWKER

Introduction

Job, or a person like Job, is a central figure of ancient wisdom literature, appearing in the Jewish Tanakh, the Christian Old Testament, and the poems and myths of several earlier traditions (See Alford, 2009, p.13). In the Book of Job, God destroys the family, body, and property of an honorable person, a “perfect and upright” man (Job 1:1), apparently to win a wager with Satan. God and Satan seem interested in testing Job’s faith because Job has been rewarded for his propriety with good fortune, children, health, and esteem. The witnesses to Job’s insufferable torture, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, along with Job’s “superbly laconic” wife (Bloom, 2004, p.3), who encourages Job to “curse God, and die” (2:9), find themselves in the same position as the reader of the Book: questioning the meaning of Job’s affliction.

Although Job begins by reminding himself that he may receive evil as well as good at the hand of God (Job 2:10), he soon asks if God does not reward good with good, and evil with evil. Indeed, Job thrusts this Deuteronomic ideal of justice at God in his increasingly bitter lament, demanding a satisfactory explanation. Of course, neither Job, nor his three friends, nor the youthful latecomer Elihu can prepare themselves for God’s ultimate reply “out of the whirlwind” (38:1), wherein God effectively overpowers Job with a recitation of the wonders of creation. In what is almost surely a later addition to the Book, Job then “abhor[s]” himself (42:6), and is restored with even greater possessions and an even more beautiful family than he had before. Yet

whether one approaches Job as a believer or a non-believer, and whether one reads Job's restoration in the Book's epilogue as a triumph or not, the problems of evil, divine justice, and innocent suffering remain.

The Book of Job has become a touchstone for philosophers, litterateurs, and critics of the absurd because Job protests (his own) innocent suffering, daring to demand an accounting from God (see e.g., Fox, 1989; Friedman, 1967). However, in his illuminating recent book, *After the Holocaust: The Book of Job, Primo Levi, and the Path to Affliction*, C. Fred Alford (2009, p. 35) argues convincingly that Job "does not experience God's world as absurd, even as neither God nor His world ever answer [Job's protest] in human terms." Rather, Alford claims, Job's suffering is comforted and contained by God's revelation of His infinite power, making it possible for Job to go on living.

It is true that Job does not live in what we typically think of as an "absurd world," a modern, disenchanted world in which God is absent or where we are otherwise "deprived of transcendence," in André Malraux's words (quoted in Cruickshank, 1960, p. 6). For Albert Camus, the most famous exponent of absurdity, life is painfully yet exultantly absurd because our "wild longing" (Camus, 1955, p. 21) for intellectual clarity is met only with the "irrationality, the opacity, of the world" (Cruickshank, p. xiii). Dramatists of the absurd like Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco depict a similar condition, one in which language, communication, reason, social bonds, and identities break down.

Both during and presumably after his affliction, Job inhabits a “God-drenched world,” to borrow Alford’s memorable phrase, one where Job speaks to God and, much more importantly, where God speaks directly to Job. But in spite of God’s presence, it is worth exploring the possibility that, when faced with his affliction, Job *does* experience the world as absurd, at least until God reveals Himself in the whirlwind, and perhaps afterwards as well. What exactly it means for Job (and for us) to experience the world as absurd, therefore, becomes a pivotal question.

Absurd Waiting

In her treatment of the role of faith in the practice of attention in *Waiting for God*, the extraordinary mystical French thinker Simone Weil maintains that if we ask “our Father for bread, he does not give us stone” (1951, p. 107). She tells “an Eskimo story” in which a crow searches in darkness for light until, by force of the crow’s desire and attention, the Earth is illumined (p. 107). For Weil, like the crow we are powerless to reach God ourselves, but in careful waiting our “desire alone draws God down” to us (p. 111). We would not be entirely mistaken to define absurdity as the disruption of such a relationship. In Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (the famous absurd play whose title is but one of many resemblances to Weil’s work), attention and desire for Godot lead only to infernal waiting and despair. In fact, Vladimir’s absurd song in Act II tells of a dog that is given a (tomb) stone when it begs for bread, the cook having beaten it to death with a ladle (Beckett, 1956, p. 37; Friedman, 1967, p. 311). Thus, here, the bond of desire that Weil imagines to unite the desirer with the desired is frustrated, broken, and ultimately exposed as absurd.

In French, the word “attendre” suggests both “to wait” and “to attend to.” Thus, both *Waiting for God (Attente de Dieu)* and *Waiting for Godot (En Attendant Godot)* express what is meant by waiting in a rich sense: a state of suspension and readiness in which one attends to the arrival of an awaited object.¹ Like “nostalgia,” one of Albert Camus’ favorite words, such waiting is a fundamentally conservative activity that seeks the restoration of someone or something whose absence is profoundly felt, even (or perhaps especially) if the lost object has never truly been present (see Alford, 2009, p. 114). Waiting, then, is both a species of worship and an expression of bereavement, as C.S. Lewis’ reflections on the death of his beloved wife illustrate well enough: “And grief still feels like fear. Perhaps, more strictly, like suspense. Or like waiting; just hanging about waiting for something to happen. It gives life a permanently provisional feeling” (quoted in Marris, 1986, p. 36). Of course, what is awaited in this “permanently provisional” position is not only the return of the lost object for its own sake, but all of the purposes, attachments, and feelings of meaningful existence connected to the object-relationship. As in melancholia, where a bereaved person may know “*whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him,” (Freud, 1957, p. 245, *emphases in original*) absurdity involves the disruption of a relationship that one waits to resolve or repair, in part because one is not clear about exactly what has been lost in the disruption.

Weil recommends waiting (in patience / *έν ύπομένη*) for spiritual bread as the mythical crow waits for light. But as Vladimir and Estragon wait for Godot, their lives become meaningless, helpless, absurd: Godot will never come, perhaps his coming is not even important, and yet they will continue to wait. Job, who waits for God to justify Himself and His actions, is therefore an invaluable case for reflection upon absurdity because in Job we see most clearly how these

extremes of faith and hopelessness are united. Job waits, although perhaps not expectantly, for God to reply to his fiery accusations because the absurd implications of Job's innocent suffering have left him confused, broken, and utterly lost.

Although Job is immersed in a God-drenched world, his suffering takes more than his family, property, and health; it deprives Job of the god whom Job mistook God to be. Even after God's reply, we must imagine that Job struggles to adjust to a different, somewhat depleted God, "a God of awe and wonder but... not a God of pity; not a God who cares on a human scale" (Alford, 2009, p. 87). In losing a God who watches, judges, rewards, and punishes on a human scale, Job loses the ability to live before God's attention and so loses his most significant "structure of meaning" (Marris, 1986, p. 4). Without a God who attends to Job, without a meaningful connection between his actions and his fate, Job barely exists. For this reason, it is plausible to think of Job's suffering not as abjection, where symbolic categories and containers are shattered, but as absurdity, which resists the experience of abjection by desperately holding on to those categories even as they lead one into strange contradictions and impossibilities. These strange contradictions and impossibilities are precisely what we most often refer to as "absurdities," for they seek to hold onto that which is lost, often by importing elements of fantasy into reality. Here, we may think of Cervantes' Don Quixote, the quintessential absurd character, who revives in fantasy the lost era of chivalry although the modern world has already forsaken it.

Without minimizing Job's immediate and painful losses, it is fair to say that what Job protests is not precisely his tortured body, nor the destruction of his family and possessions, nor even the

Matthew Bowker *The Meaning of Absurd Protest*

injustice of it all, but how his suffering has disrupted his most meaningful relationship and how this disruption has undermined Job. Job's "patience" is really his absurd persistence in waiting for an impossible return. In brazenly putting God on trial, Job insists that his faith, a faith which has already been shattered, somehow be magically restored.

L'appel Humain

Alford characterizes absurdity in Camus' most widely recognized terms, as the incommensurability "between the human need and the silence of the world." Tellingly, Camus refers to absurdity most often as a "divorce" between humanity and the world (1955, p. 30, 50), but here Camus writes, "*L'absurde naît de la confrontation de l'appel humain avec le silence déraisonnable du monde*" (1942, p. 45) ["The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world."] (Camus 1955, 28). However, Justin O'Brian's translation of the French word "*appel*" (in *l'appel humain*) as "need" obscures something important: What is absurd, for Camus, is that the human appeal, the human call, the human cry is met with silence. Absurdity is born (*naît*) in the chasm between expectant cry and unexpected silence, much as the subjective, creative world of the child is both made possible and made vulnerable when cries for the parent are unheeded.

The word "appel" is encountered again in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, when Camus argues that the project of the absurd person is to find out if it is possible to live "*sans appel*," without appeal (1955, p. 53). In this case, *appel* plays on the juridical meaning of appealing to a higher court or authority, and Camus seems to say: If the absurd person cries out expectantly but finds that the object of his attention is gone, or even radically diminished, then declaring this silence "absurd"

and refusing to make further appeals is necessary to maintain our dignity. This project would seem more or less in line with the “normal” work of mourning Freud set out in “Mourning and Melancholia” (1957, p. 244), in which reality-testing helps the individual to see “that the loved object no longer exists, and [to proceed] to demand that all libido should be withdrawn from its attachments to that object.”

But what Camus really means by living “without appeal” is quite distinct from gradual detachment from a lost object. On the contrary, living without appeal, for Camus, signifies “defiance” and conscious “revolt” (1955, pp. 54-55), not unlike the “mental constellation of revolt” against loss Freud describes in the same essay (1957, p. 248). By derogating an absent or deficient person, God, condition, or event as “absurd,” one vengefully depletes the object whose loss or depletion has wounded the self. Seemingly severing ties with the object, this absurd posture actually fortifies a profound connection between self and lost object, “bind[ing] them one to the other as only hatred can weld two creatures together” (Camus, 1955, p. 21).

While the absurd project seems to be motivated by the threat to the self occasioned by the loss or disruption of an object-relationship, a conscious refusal to “appeal” the loss protects the self against experiencing its most devastating effects. Instead, a specious freedom and innocence are asserted as the absurd person attempts to “establish my lucidity in the midst of what negates it... [and] exalt man before what crushes him” (Camus, 1955, pp. 87-88). Now the lost object may be scrutinized for its inadequacies, put on trial for its departure, “repudiat[ed]” (Camus, 1956, p. 23), and “scorn[ed]” for its injustice and inhumanity (Camus, 1955, p. 121). Kierkegaard’s

(quoted in Cruickshank 1960, 69) description of demoniac despair offers an apt comparison to the absurd stance, for in revolt against loss, it declares itself and everything around it absurd:

Revolting against the whole of existence, it thinks it has hold of a proof against it, against its goodness... as if an author were to make a slip of the pen, and that this clerical error became conscious of being such... it is then as if this clerical error would revolt against the author, out of hatred for him were to forbid him to correct it, and were to say, 'No I will not be erased, I will stand as a witness against thee, that thou art a very poor writer'.

In absurd protest, the self sacrifices part of its own meaningfulness in its outrage over a painful loss or depletion. But even such self-destructive absurd revolt must be understood as a form of waiting for the lost object to return. Absurd outrage continually re-focuses attention upon the lost object, as if one were ready to receive it, but perhaps only if the object that returns is different, offering explanations for its departure and conciliatory to the outraged self. In absurd literature and philosophy, this rage against the object for its departure, along with rage against the self for its yearning to recover it, become a hostile and desperate waiting in which the initial loss is experienced over and over again. For Camus (1955, p. 52), "through constant awareness, ever revived, ever alert," the absurdity of the object is kept forever "alive" before consciousness (1955, p. 54), leaving the absurd person on the "dizzying crest" (1955, p. 50) of absurd revolt in a "perpetual state of tension" (Camus, 1956, p. 22). Indeed, for Camus (1955, p. 55):

The absurd man can only drain everything to the bitter end, and deplete himself. The absurd is his extreme tension, which he maintains constantly by solitary effort, for he knows that in that consciousness and in that day-to-day revolt he gives proof of his only truth, which is defiance.

Absurd protest, then, has a curious aim: to attend to one's loss until some semblance of what was lost has been returned, as if by refusing to comprehend the loss, one could resurrect the lost object, provoke it back into presence, or "draw God down" with our desire for explanation and restitution. Job's absurd protest is surprisingly successful in this regard, for his provocations *do* seem to entice God to speak to him, which is far more than he could have reasonably hoped for. And yet, the God whom Job uncovers is a different God, just as Job's new family is a different family, made up of different people. Thus, even in what is perhaps the nearest fulfillment of the absurd fantasy (restoring all that was lost by refusing to accept the loss), Job is not truly restored.

How we imagine Job after his partial restoration likely says more about us than about Job, but there are reasons for reading Job's famous words of self-abhorrence and repentance "in dust and ashes" as something closer to expressions of pity and sorrow (Alford, 2009, p. 87).² For some, Job's final words are a "masochistic response" (Crenshaw, 1983, p. 129), one of "faith-blinded servility weirdly delighted in sacred self-debasement" (Caesar, 1999, p. 443). For others, Job's final words signify not regret or self-hatred but rebellious insolence: that Job "is sorry for a humanity that has to tolerate such a god" (Curtis, 1979, p. 501). Whether Job is repentant, masochistic, or insolent, it is not unreasonable to imagine that Job continues to suffer from his unredeemable losses even after God's revelation and the hauntingly incomplete restitution of Job's family, health, and possessions.

Understanding Job in this way suggests a reading of the Book distinct from, but not entirely opposed to, the usual cautionary ones of humility and submission to God. Job's protest expresses an ambivalent and impossible demand, for Job wishes that God would return and account for

Himself, but Job knows that such an accounting is not appropriate to God. Job wishes that the God-object Job thought he knew would return, but at the same time Job insists that this God *not* return, because Job's unshakable "integrity" proves that a Deuteronomically-just God does not exist. Job's angry and absurd protest, then, is both an appeal and a refusal to appeal, both a demand that the lost object return and a repudiation of the object for having departed.

On this reading, Job appears as a cousin to Orpheus, who seeks to restore the loss of his beloved wife, Eurydice. Orpheus attends to Eurydice too soon, while she is still within the darkness of Hades, and thus he loses her forever.³ Although Orpheus' music is sufficient to call her back from death, the consequences of his act of "looking back" express the impossibility of bringing what has been lost back to life without attending to the reality of loss. Perhaps this is the absurd lesson of Job: that our choice is either to accept loss and make it meaningful or to protest it in absurdity, which costs us our ability to mean. If we choose the former, it need not be because we are satisfied that there is a universal order or great *warum* that justifies our losses, but because our meaning-making power is all we have to trade, and to give it up is to sacrifice our ability to act meaningfully in the world. On the other hand, if we are to follow the example of Camus' (1958) vaunted "fastidious assassins" who demanded self-sacrifice as the only just compensation for performing acts of terrorism, then when confronted with extraordinary inhumanity or injustice, perhaps only the sacrifice of our ability to mean is meaningful.

The Politics Of Absurd Protest

What I have argued is that, for all of absurdists' well-known condemnations of 'leaps of faith' and appeals to absolutes, the act of declaring something or someone absurd is, itself, a kind of

appeal. The attraction of the absurd appeal is that decrying loss as “absurd” is a way of hanging on to the lost object and all the meanings, purposes, and attachments that this object bestows. Absurdity, then, is not unlike painful vicissitudes of complicated grieving wherein the lost object is resuscitated in fantasy, repudiated for departing, destroyed by scorn, revived, and revolted against again and again. Absurd protest implies an exchange or, as Camus, called it, a “wager” (1955, p. 52), which need not be conscious, wherein the absurd person sacrifices his ability to make meaning for the sake of the memory of the lost object and the ability to ignore or deny “what has been lost in him” in connection with it. When applied as a way of life or philosophy of living, the price for this ambivalent and tempestuous relationship is to live in an absurd world amidst the specters of lost objects, a world in which one is unable to make the reality of losses meaningful because one remains devoted to Sisyphean attempts to wait for, re-call, and repudiate all that has been lost.

This process of refusing and rebelling against loss is visible not only throughout absurd literature and philosophy, but in contemporary responses to traumatic political events and social conditions. When President Bush and other national leaders described the events of September 11, 2001 as an “attack on freedom” for which the United States was called to declare a “war on terror,” it was difficult if not impossible to see these events as anything but absurd. As Judith Butler has pointed out, attempts to apply more sophisticated political or historical explanations to the September 11th attacks were frequently condemned as the work of “excuseniks” (Butler, 2004, p. xiii), suggesting, of course, that explanation and understanding were tantamount to moral vacillation.

Likewise, Job's absurd rebellion against God may be understood as his refusal to understand or explain his affliction as the result of injustice, either on his part or God's. Like Job, our conscious and unconscious refusals to explain the causes, correlates, and contexts of terrorism seem to express a fear of understanding that which must not be understood. And this fear lies at the heart of all absurd protest. In Camus' famous allegorical novel *The Plague* (1948), the absurd heroes fear neither disease nor oppression as much as they fear the temptation to rationalize or legitimize them, the temptation to make them meaningful. What truly terrifies Rieux and Tarrou is not the spread of the plague so much as the possibility that the plague's diabolical logic will invade their moral centers, causing them to 'collaborate' with its capricious yet relentless work. In a famous speech, Tarrou explains that he has "resolved to have no truck with anything which, directly or indirectly, for good reasons or for bad, brings death to anyone or justifies others' putting him to death" (Camus, 1948, p. 252-253). His abhorrence of becoming a "rational murderer" is based upon his assertion that

each of us has the plague within him; no one, no one on earth is free from it. And I know, too, that we must keep endless watch on ourselves lest in a careless moment we breathe in somebody's face and fasten the infection on him... The good man, the man who infects hardly anyone, is the man who has the fewest lapses of attention. And it needs tremendous will-power, a never ending tension of the mind, to avoid such lapses. (Camus, 1948, p. 253)

What is feared here is a psychic rather than a physical infection, one in which an identification with the alien, antagonistic other may be forged. In *The Plague*, examples of such identifications abound, from Cottard's philosophy, in which the plague legitimizes criminality and nihilism, to the religion of Father Paneloux who, initially at least, justifies the plague as God's work.

In the years immediately following September 11, 2001, Americans' ambivalence about the torture of informants, detention at Guantanamo Bay, and the propriety of affording terrorism suspects legal trials in the United States evinced a similar desire to refuse understanding, empathy, and identification with an unpalatable other. The moral jeopardy inspired by the possibility of psychic collaboration with the terrorist enemy, what Butler refers to as a "terrorizing" or "uninhabitable" identification (2004, p. xix), is the very heart of absurd protest, wherein assertions of the absurdity of the other and the incomprehensibility of the losses caused by the other make the undesired identification impossible. Thus, a corollary of identification, in which an other's identity is inhabited in phantasy, may be described as absurdity, in which "uninhabitable" objects of identification are (often unconsciously) rejected through experiences of mystification and meaninglessness.

When Pat Robertson linked Hurricane Katrina and the September 11th attacks with legalized abortion, homosexuality, and other practices he regarded as sinful, much of the nation felt an appropriate sense of horror at the brazenness by which someone could transform agony into ideology. And yet, our certainty that such statements are indefensible derives, at least in part, from our conviction that natural disasters and national tragedies *must be* senseless, absurd. The insistence upon their absurdity reflects not only secularism, liberalism, or other specific religious or political perspectives, but a form of absurd protest in which any potentially meaningful connections between ourselves and the causes of suffering must be denied.

In the case of September 11th, American displays of patriotism, memorials, lengthy media coverage, even the two international wars undertaken against "terror" may be understood as

attempts to both refuse and recover a lost national innocence and security. Of course, such actions operated in tandem with an absurd and mystified posture regarding the causes of terrorism (i.e., “Why do they hate us?”), regular and persistent confusion about the nationalities of the terrorists, and repeated condemnations of anti-war protestors and liberals who incomprehensibly refused to “support the troops.”

If Alford is correct that “absurd suffering is on the rise, especially since Auschwitz” (2009, p. 8), then the pressing political question posed by absurdity is whether anything at all can be gained by the forfeiture of understanding and meaning in protest of loss. And while we may be tempted to dismiss absurd protest as petulant, inconsequential, or regressive, such answers may be overly hasty. Might not the absurd stance, in certain extraordinary cases, empower those faced with overwhelming suffering? For his part, Camus remained deeply engaged in political activism until his untimely death. That is, when faced with the terrors of poverty, illness, violence, warfare, and occupation, Camus was not paralyzed but energized by his apparent conviction of life’s absurdity.

Camus’ articulation of absurdity is also at heart of his worldwide popularity, for in his insistence upon the loss of faith and hope implicit in the horrors of the mid-twentieth century, readers heard his equally powerful insistence that these losses never be accepted. For several years, I have been fascinated by the philosopher Avi Sagi’s claim that youth in Israeli society have rediscovered Camus as a “consoling and demanding” voice that speaks to the daily violence and conflict they and their Palestinian neighbors suffer (Sagi, 2002, p. 3). Perhaps when faced with seemingly intractable political or moral conflict, the absurd fantasy that the loss of hope, of trust, of

common humanity can be revived through protest provides needed support for the definition of shared goals or moral agreement. On the other hand, in a famous denunciation, Jean-Paul Sartre (quoted in Aronson, 2004, p. 153) argued that all the unpleasant facts of loss need to be accepted in order to ground action, both in his defense of Communist revolution and in everyday political and social engineering. Eventually, Sartre would accuse Camus of allowing his absurd complaints to impede progress in rectifying immediate historical injustices, as in the following well-known assault:

You [Camus] rebelled against death, but in the industrial belts which surround cities, other men rebelled against social conditions that raise the mortality rates. When a child died, you blamed the absurdity of the world and the deaf and blind God that you created in order to be able to spit in his face. But the child's father, if he was unemployed or an unskilled laborer, blamed men. He knew very well that the absurdity of our condition is not the same in Passy as in Billancourt.

Of course, the most terrifying link between the philosophy of the absurd as expressed in the Book of Job and contemporary manifestations of absurdity is the true subject of Alford's book: Auschwitz. Most who write of the Holocaust qualify their work by admitting that the experience can never be completely understood. Some even argue that what makes the Holocaust unique is that "what occurred in Nazi death camps was so absolutely evil that, like no other event in human history, *it defies human capacities for understanding*" (Neiman, 2002, p. 2, *emphasis added*). Such claims arise from an absurd protest against the Holocaust's horrors. We are mystified not only out of respect for all those who suffered so immensely, but because our mystification is an integral part of our protest. Declaring the Holocaust absurd or incomprehensible protects against the terrible fear that the losses suffered might somehow be rationalized, assimilated, or identified with.

Conclusion

Does calling Auschwitz “absurd” make the suffering of the victims of the Holocaust more meaningful or less so? Does it prepare us to struggle against future atrocities or does it only offer shallow reassurance that, as long as one remains mystified by loss, all is not lost? While we are tempted to dismiss absurd revolt, it is possible that confrontations with genocide and unthinkable atrocity are precisely where the absurd project ceases to be absurd, where it makes some sense. Perhaps there are sufferings so great, so threatening even to witness or contemplate, that our ability to make them meaningful *should be* revoked in protest. In this spirit we may understand Claude Lanzmann’s (1995, p. 204) declaration that “there is an absolute obscenity in the very project of understanding” the Holocaust. Theodor Adorno’s famous statement that poetry after Auschwitz would be barbaric and Primo Levi’s claim that, after Auschwitz, “no one should speak of Providence” express a sentiment that is not entirely dissimilar (quoted in Alford, 2009, p. 143).

The real question of absurdity is the question of whether people like Lanzmann, Adorno, and Levi are right. Taken together, our projects of understanding, poetry, and Providence compose much of our ability to accept loss, to assimilate loss, to make loss meaningful. Refusing understanding, therefore, protects our outrage as one small thing that can never be lost, but, by doing so, it also requires that our outrage can never be resolved. What can be said for absurd protest, in this respect, is that Job’s refusal to make his loss meaningful may help Job (and readers of the Book of Job) to hold on to the idea of a merciful God that seems absent during Job’s affliction. Unlike the God who torments good people capriciously, the God Job lost was a God who cared on a human scale, who “watched over” us, whose “friendship” was upon our

Matthew Bowker *The Meaning of Absurd Protest*

houses, and by whose light we “walked though darkness” (Job 29:1-3). By protesting the apparent loss of this God as absurd, we seek to revive, restore, and identify with the very God whom we do *not* find in the Book of Job.

Not unlike scholarly fascination with the Holocaust, our enduring fascination with the mystery of Job (in which this essay takes part) is a species of absurd protest against the suffering of Job. For just as Job cries out for explanation while rejecting all explanations given, studies of the Book of Job, the Holocaust, September 11th, and other instances of absurd suffering hardly explain or rationalize the injustices therein. On the contrary, they insist that such horrors be remembered and attended to, even as they assure us that they must never be fully understood.

Matthew Bowker is Visiting Assistant Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies at Medaille College in Buffalo, New York, where he teaches courses in Political Science, Philosophy, and Communication. He holds a Ph.D. and M.A. in Political Philosophy from the University of Maryland and a B.A. in Political Science from Columbia University. His current research explores the psychosocial implications of absurd philosophy and literature. He welcomes correspondence at mhb34@medaille.edu

Email: mhb34@medaille.edu

NOTES

* I am grateful to C. Fred Alford and David P. Levine for several conversations instrumental in shaping this paper’s line of argument.

1. I use the term “object” to mean other subjects, persons, and internal representations of persons with whom one may relate. “People react to and interact with not only an actual other but also an internal other, a psychic representation of a person which in itself has the power to influence both the individual’s affective states and his overt behavioral reactions” (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983, p. 10).

2. Camus tells us that “we must imagine Sisyphus happy” (1955, p. 123), but, frankly, he gives few compelling reasons why. We can imagine him happy, but we can also imagine him miserable, tired, frustrated, despairing, or all of these. In the same way, how we imagine Job gives us a clue about what is gained and what is lost in the absurd exchange of meaning for vigilance against loss.

3. Camus, himself, was perhaps not unaware of this connection when he wrote famously: “Unlike Eurydice, the absurd dies only when we turn away from it” (Camus, 1955, p. 54). But, as I have argued, the absurdists’ conscious refusal of hope belies the real aim of the absurd project, which is to redeem what has been lost through protest and defiance.

REFERENCES

References to the Book of Job are from the King James Version (KJV) and the Revised Standard Version (RSV)

Alford, C.F. (2009) *After the Holocaust: The Book of Job, Primo Levi, and the Path to Affliction*. New York: Cambridge.

Aronson, R. (2004) *Camus and Sartre: The story of a friendship and the quarrel that ended it*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Beckett, S. (1956) *Waiting for Godot: a tragicomedy in two acts*. First Evergreen ed. New York: Grove Weidenfeld.

Bloom, H. (2004) *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* New York: Riverhead Books.

Bordo, S. (1987) *The Flight to objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism and culture*. Albany: SUNY Press.

Butler, J. (2004) *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso.

Caesar, L. (1999) Job: Another New Thesis. *Vetus Testamentum* 49(4): 435-447.

Camus, A. (1942) *Le mythe de Sisyphe: essai sur l'absurde. Nouvelle édition augmentée d'une étude sur Franz Kafka*. Les essais XII. Paris: Gallimard.

Camus, A. (1948) *The plague*. Trans. S. Gilbert. First Vintage International ed. New York: Vintage. (Orig. pub. 1947.)

Camus, A. (1955) *The myth of Sisyphus and other essays*. Trans. J. O'Brien. First Vintage International ed. New York: Vintage. (Orig. pub. 1942.)

Camus, A. (1956). *The rebel: An essay on man in revolt*. Trans. A. Bower. First Vintage International ed. New York: Vintage. (Orig. pub. 1951.)

Matthew Bowker *The Meaning of Absurd Protest*

Camus, A. (1958) *Caligula and three other plays*. Trans. S. Gilbert. New York: Vintage. (*Les justes* orig. pub. 1950.)

Crenshaw, J. (1983) The Problem of Theodicy in Sirach: On Human Bondage. In: Crenshaw, J. (ed.) *Theodicy in the Old Testament*. Issues in Religion and Theology no 4. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, pp. 119-140.

Cruikshank, J. (1960) *Albert Camus and the literature of revolt*. New York: Oxford U. Press.

Curtis, J. (1979) On Job's Response to Yahweh. *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98 (4): 497-511.

Fox, M. (1989) *Qohelet and his contradictions*. Bible and Literature Series 18. Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press – Almond Press.

Freud, S. (1957) Mourning and melancholia. In: Strachey, J. (ed.) *On the history of the psychoanalytic movement, papers on metapsychology, and other works*. Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud no. 14. London: Hogarth, pp. 243-258. (Orig pub. 1917.)

Friedman, M. (1967) *To deny our nothingness: Contemporary images of man*. New York: Delacorte.

Greenberg, J. and S. Mitchell. (1983) *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Lanzmann, C. (1995) The obscenity of understanding: An evening with Claude Lanzmann. In Caruth, C. (ed.) *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U. Press, pp. 200-220.

Marris, P. (1986) *Loss and Change*. Revised ed. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Neiman, S. (2002) *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Matthew Bowker *The Meaning of Absurd Protest*

Sagi, A. (2002) *Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd*. Trans. B. Stein. Amsterdam:
Rodopi.

Weil, S. (1957) *Waiting for God*. Capricorn Books ed. Universal Library.

<http://www.archive.org/details/waitingforgod013456mbp>, accessed February 5, 2010.