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"The Rock is His Thing": The Absurd and Primo Levi's *If This is a Man*

"Is it really necessary to elaborate a system and put it into practice? Or would it not be better to acknowledge one's lack of a system?" (Levi, 47). In his memoir *If This is a Man,* Primo Levi details his experience in Auschwitz during the Second World War while meditating on the existentialist questions bound to arise in a place of such intense human suffering. These questions echo those asked by Albert Camus in his philosophical essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus.* In his article, *The Fellowship of Men that Die: The Legacy of Albert Camus,* Daniel Stern writes, "Camus' experience as a member of the French underground in World War II played an important part in the formulation of his thought: the essential notion of the absurd" (184). Camus' past bolsters the already strong connection between his philosophy and the suffering undergone by those who lived through the Second World War, such as Primo Levi. *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *If This is a Man* both assert that the role of routine in the absurd world depends on whether or not it is self-imposed. This can be explored through the view of Auschwitz as a microcosm of the absurd world, the role of imposed routine in Auschwitz, and the contrasting coping strategies of the musselmans and Steinlauf.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus,* Camus describes the absurd as, "the confrontation of the irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart" (21). This confrontation can be seen repeatedly in *If This is a Man,* in which Auschwitz serves as a precursor microcosm of Camus' absurd world. Levi frequently describes, "the absurd law of the

Lager" (103), made up of the same arbitrary rules and meaningless suffering that Camus attributes to the absurd world. Throughout *If This is a Man,* prisoners ask questions about their fate and purpose, only to receive dismissive, uninterpretable answers (if they receive any answers at all). Auschwitz's absurdity is encapsulated by the following quote: "'*Warum?*' [Levi] asked him in my poor German. '*Hier ist kein warum*' (there is no why here), [the camp guard] replied" (35). Levi's longing for answers and the German guard's refusal to provide them casts them in the roles of the conflicting forces that create Camus' absurd: Levi as a man searching for answers, and the guard as the indifferent universe. The power dynamic between indifferent guards and desperate prisoners creates a dynamic that mirrors Camus' absurd. On page 22, Levi marvels at the guards' seemingly unmotivated callousness, asking, "how can one hit a man without anger?" This further exemplifies the traits of Camus' absurd world, in which meaningless suffering creates a "primitive hostility" (14) that the absurd man must suffer through. The guards' unexplained violence is just one manifestation of absurdity at work in Auschwitz, forcing each prisoner to cope with life's lack of meaning in his own way. The power dynamic and culture of Auschwitz create an atmosphere of horror and suffering without logic, mirroring Camus' illogical absurd world from *The Myth of Sisyphus.*

The prisoners in Auschwitz were subject to a myriad of meaningless imposed routines. Levi recalls, "the rites to be carried out were infinite and senseless" (40). Life in Auschwitz was composed of following orders thoughtlessly, abandoning free will and desire in favour of obedience for the sake of survival. The camp is described as, "a great machine to reduce [the prisoners] to beasts" (47). In Auschwitz, the Nazis used imposed routine to foster a culture of obedience, encouraging the abandonment of prisoners' free will, and by extension, their humanity. In *The Myth of Sisyphus,* Camus writes, "there is no more dreadful punishment than

futile and hopeless labour" (119). This is the exact punishment that the prisoners in Auschwitz are subject to, working through what Primo Levi calls, "a Gordian knot of laws, taboos and problems" (41). By forcing the prisoners to adopt a meaningless routine, similar to Sisyphus, who was forced to repeatedly roll his boulder up a hill, the Nazis stripped Auschwitz's prisoners of meaning in their lives, thrusting them into a version of the absurd world where suffering is heightened and logic is all but eliminated. The prisoners' lives were Sisyphean, fraught with pointless tasks and intense physical labour without any reward. "Every day, according to the established rhythm," Levi recounts. "Go out and come in; work, sleep and eat; fall ill, get better or die" (42). Routine strategically used by the Nazis to wear the prisoners down rendered their lives cyclical and pointless, much like life in the absurd world. In many respects, the Nazis succeeded in their strategy. Levi describes prisoners as, "marching like automatons" (57), using simile and chremamorphism to emphasize the lack of free will and humanity remaining in the prisoners. They march without purpose, trapped by the routine they are forced to follow and the lack of meaning in their labour. Imposed routine, such as the work within the Lager or Sisyphus' fruitless task of pushing a boulder up a hill, was a tool used by Auschwitz and the absurd world at large to push man towards philosophical suicide, stripping men of their free will and condemning them to despair. These conditions force the men in the camp to adapt to their conditions, which they attempt to do with varying degrees of success.

When describing the 'musselmans' (prisoners in Auschwitz who lost their free will and were overcome by apathy)~~:~~, Levi writes, "they do not begin to learn German, to disentangle the infernal knot of laws and prohibitions until their body is already in decay, and nothing can save them" (96). They were consumed by the hopeless nature of life in the camp, relinquishing any hope of finding purpose in their own lives. In *The Myth of Sisyphus,* Camus writes, "the absurd

dies only when we turn away from it" (54). Levi depicts the musselmans as those who have rejected the absurd, no longer engaging in the conflict between man's curiosity and the unreasonable universe. This lack of curiosity, even in the face of inevitable dissatisfaction, is an example of what Camus calls 'philosophical suicide': these prisoners are conquered by the absurd world created within the Lager, lacking the characteristic curiosity and rebellion of the absurd man. Levi believes that the musselmans' fate encapsulates the horrors of the camp, writing the following: "If I could enclose all the evil of our time in one image, I would choose this image which is familiar to me: an emaciated man, with head dropped and shoulders curved, on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of a thought is to be seen" (96). The musselmans were understandably consumed by the absurd world that Auschwitz created. Camus writes, "when the images of Earth cling too tightly to memory, when the call of happiness becomes too insistent, it happens that melancholy rises in man's heart: this is the rock's victory" (122). This description matches that of the musselmans: their refusal to accept the atrocities they were forced to undergo and create their own meaning within their circumstances was their downfall. The 'rock,' or the labour imposed upon the musselmans in Auschwitz, triumphed over them, the routine destroying them from the inside as well as the outside. Levi supports this idea, recounting, "with the musselmans, the men in decay, it is not even worth speaking, because one knows already that they will complain and will speak about what they used to eat at home," further writing, "in a few weeks nothing will remain of [the musselmans] but a handful of ashes in some near-by field and a crossed-out number on a register" (Levi 95). The musselmans' downfall was their inability to embrace the absurd as Camus suggests. They ruminated on memories of the past and completed tasks of the present without thought or resistance, leading to a breakdown of the absurd and ultimately their philosophical suicide. The musselmans' inability

to accept the futility of life in the Lager or find meaning in life for themselves (or their rejection of the absurd) is what ultimately leads to their demise.

For the absurd man, the indifferent universe also allows routine to function as a tool for survival. In Auschwitz, where the terms of one's existence were controlled by strict and uncaring powers, establishing personal routines could even be considered an act of rebellion. According to Camus, "the struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill man's heart" (123). Sisyphus' futile labour, formerly described as a "dreadful punishment" (119), can also be capable of bringing personal fulfillment, depending on agency. In *If This is a Man,* Levi writes, "meaning is enclosed even in the smallest of our daily habits" (33). Routine and habit, if self-imposed, have the power to bring happiness and some semblance of meaning to human life. Steinlauf, a man that Levi befriends in the concentration camp, exemplifies how routine can function as both a source of purpose and an act of rebellion. Steinlauf routinely washes himself, even though the camp is so unsanitary that the action is ultimately pointless. "Does not Steinlauf know," Levi muses, "that after half an hour with the coal sacks every difference between him and me will have disappeared?" (46). Despite this, Steinlauf continues to wash, creating a routine for himself outside of the strict rules of the camp. When Levi asks him why he repeats such a meaningless task, Steinlauf replies, "to survive, we must force ourselves to save at least the skeleton, the scaffolding, the form of civilization" (47). Though treated as subhuman by the guards in the camp, Steinlauf continues to self-impose a routine that renders him human in his own eyes. Steinlauf is Camus' Sisyphus, taking ownership of the boulder he must push, though push it he must. Camus writes, "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" (123). In order to live within the absurd, one must take ownership of life and find

meaning within its meaninglessness. Steinlauf does this by establishing his own hygienic routine despite its futility, creating a world for himself within his 'rock' rather than yielding to it as the musselmans do. Though Steinlauf will never be truly clean in Auschwitz, his discipline separates him from the musselmans within the camp: through routine, he reminds himself that he is human. This is not only a device for maintaining his personal sanity but an act of rebellion against the Nazi regime. In his essay *The Rebel,* Camus writes, "in every act of rebellion, the man concerned experiences not only a feeling of revulsion at the infringement of his rights, but also a complete and spontaneous loyalty to certain aspects of himself" (19). Steinlauf expresses the aforementioned loyalty by maintaining his hygiene, holding on to pride in his appearance and thus the value of his body. He says to Levi, "we are slaves, deprived of every right, exposed to every insult, condemned to certain death, but we still possess one power, and we must defend it with all our strength for it is the last - the power to refuse our consent" (Levi 47). Through this statement, Steinlauf expresses two key traits that are necessary for a man to live within the absurd: acceptance and rebellion. Unlike the musselmans, he knows that life in Auschwitz is futile, and there is no point in the repetitive and draining labour they are forced to perform at the camp. However, he takes power into his own hands by washing himself, refusing to view himself as subhuman, as Auschwitz would have him do. As the absurd man, Steinlauf knows that establishing a routine is, "necessary as an instrument of moral survival" (Levi 46). His understanding of the absurd allows him to function in it.

Albert Camus is quoted as saying, "the only way to deal with an unfree world is to become so absolutely free that your very existence is an act of rebellion." Primo Levi's *If This is a Man* describes life in the Auschwitz concentration camp, the epitome of an unfree world. It is also a microcosm of the absurd world described in Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus,* the Nazis

creating an indifferent universe in which prisoners had to live grueling, cyclical, demoralizing lives. In both Auschwitz and the larger absurd world, routine holds a key role that, depending on one's agency, can either be the salvation or the downfall of man. *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *If This is a Man* explore the negative impact of forced routine and the positive impact of self-imposed routine. This exploration can be examined through the allegory of Auschwitz as the absurd world, the role of routine inside Auschwitz, the musselmans' inability to cope with the absurd, and Steinlauf's routine as a mechanism for salvation and rebellion. In their respective texts, Camus and Levi explore the human condition and the extraordinary ability of individuals to cope with horrifying circumstances.

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Jaya,

Wow! This is a powerful and perceptive essay!

You elucidate both Primo's and Camus' texts with skill and sensitivity, drawing out key passages and analyzing them with judiciousness and sensitivity.

Raymond Radiguet, in *Le Diable au corps* (The Devil in the body) says "Le bonheur est dans les habitudes" (happiness is in routines). I have gone to this comment a lot in my life, and it took me years to understand it. But you show that Primo and Camus go much deeper into the relationship between our (chosen) routines and our humanity. Radiguet's formulation is pithy, but it stops short, as the reading of your text makes clear.

You *must* publish this essay in the SASAH end-of-year magazine! It is one of the finest essays I have read in a long time. Kudos to you!

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