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Ronald Aronson, *Camus and Sartre: The Story of a Friendship and the Quarrel that Ended It*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004. X + 291 pp. Notes and index. \$32.50 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-226-02796-1.

Review by Michael Scott Christofferson, Penn State Erie, The Behrend College.

Ronald Aronson, Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies at Wayne State University and expert on Jean-Paul Sartre, offers in his latest book a thoughtful reevaluation of the relationship between Albert Camus and Sartre. Aronson argues “that their relationship was an important and powerful one”—key to the intellectual and political development of both of them from their first meeting in 1943 through to the Algerian War—and “that the Cold War deformed it” (p. 7). Their relationship, Aronson claims, has been misrepresented and its importance underplayed largely as a result of Cold War partisanship and retrospective distortions of the memory of it by all parties after their friendship ended in 1952. Aronson’s case largely rests on his contention that “a dialogue between Sartre and Camus can be discerned in their writings, neither mentioning the other by name but each formulating his thoughts in relation to the other” (p. 3).

From their first encounters with each other, Sartre and Camus had, they both realized, much in common as “natural egalitarians” (p. 45) and as philosophers and novelists of the absurd, but they were not afraid to criticize each other’s work. Camus found *Nausea* a bit flat as literature, and Sartre found Camus to be unsophisticated as a philosopher. Yet, they both had something to offer the other. Sartre, the Parisian middle-class intellectual and *École normale supérieure* alumnus, helped Camus, the *pied noir* intellectual from a working-class background, enter Parisian intellectual life; and Camus, to whom political activism came naturally, helped Sartre discover *engagement*. Although to some extent rivals and opposites (in terms of their looks, for example), they quickly became friends. In fact, Camus was Sartre’s only male friend among his peers after the death of Paul Nizan.

Aronson traces the parallel biographies of Sartre and Camus during the Occupation and Liberation periods. He carefully establishes their convergences, notably in their desire to create an independent Left outside of the Parti Communiste Français (PCF), as well as their differences over, for example, violence—which Sartre took too much more readily than Camus—and Sartre’s formulation of *engagement*—which subordinated the individual to history in Camus’s evaluation. Most interesting is Aronson’s argument that Camus, who had taken considerable risks as editor of the Resistance newspaper *Combat*, was the model used by Sartre to conceptualize his notion of *engagement*. Further, Camus “was already the person Sartre was trying to become: the engaged but not starry-eyed or ideological writer” (p. 55). Indeed, so important was Camus to Sartre’s political development that Sartre’s first concrete political intervention was a redraft of a text that Camus had written.

Sartre and Camus increasingly addressed each other in their writings as they took opposite sides in the Cold War. In *Neither Victims nor Executioners* of 1946 and then *L’Homme révolté* [1] of 1951, Camus, while taking his stand against Communism and Marxism, also criticized Sartrean *engagement* without mentioning Sartre by name. At the same time that Camus sharpened his critique of communism, Sartre moved toward fellow traveling, arriving there with *The Communists and Peace* in 1952. Although the importance of the dialogue between the two is less evident in Sartre’s work, Aronson argues that in this period “at least semiconsciously they [Sartre and Camus] seemed to be shaping themselves *against* each other” (p. 127). Their divergent evolutions would bring about the end of their friendship in 1952, as a result of the unpleasant exchange, recounted by Aronson in revealing detail, between Sartre, Francis Jeanson, and Camus over *L’Homme révolté*.

Aronson’s discussion of the relationship between Sartre and Camus after their rupture is the most original and problematic part of this book. Aronson argues that the rupture between Sartre and Camus largely explains why the years after it were their least productive as writers. Camus suffered from writer’s block because the dispute with Sartre intensified “his sense of isolation, making him feel betrayed, and deepening his self-doubt,” and Sartre “failed

to see that silencing his friend was linked with silencing this [the moral] side of himself" (p. 183). Camus's *The Fall* of 1956, which marked the return of his literary creativity in an effort to transcend the terms of the 1952 conflict with Sartre, may, Aronson suggests, have influenced Sartre, leading him to rediscover morality in *The Ghost of Stalin* and "return to himself" (p. 200). While Aronson's argument that Camus was responding to Sartre in *The Fall* and other writings after 1952 is well supported by the evidence, the influence of Camus on Sartre is less easily demonstrated. To make his case, Aronson relies on Sartre's 1960 eulogy of Camus in which he says he always had Camus in mind when he read a book or reflected on the news of the day. The problem with this is that Sartre later said that his eulogy was insincere on this point. Aronson believes that the 1960 eulogy was basically correct. My sense is that the truth lies somewhere between the eulogy and Sartre's later recantation. Further, it is possible to account for Sartre's rediscovery of morality without reference to Camus. Rather, it can be explained as a reaction to Khrushchev's "secret speech" and the Soviet Union's repression of the Hungarian Revolution. Aronson is, of course, aware of this and hedges his claim that Camus influenced Sartre in this period. "It would be pleasing to think that *The Condemned of Altona*--the richest product of Sartre's liberation from the grim realism on behalf of which he attacked Camus--was in its own way a response to *The Fall*, the novel in which Camus liberated himself from the effects of Sartre's attack" (p. 206).

Aronson ends his investigation of the Camus-Sartre relationship with an examination of their positions on the Algerian War. The evidence that their pronouncements addressed each other is better in this case. Aronson criticizes Camus for remaining silent on the oppressiveness of French colonialism and upbraids Sartre for making a fetish out of violence. He concludes that both displayed "bad faith" in their approaches to violence: "Each was half-right and half-wrong, locked into two separate but mutually supporting systems of bad faith" (p. 225). Aronson, who begins his book asserting "the fundamental legitimacy of *both sides*" (author's italics, p. 5) of the Sartre-Camus conflict, ends with the conclusion that the "*both went very wrong*" (author's italics, p. 232). Now that the Cold War is over, "the time is ripe," he believes, "for a new type of political intellectual who might bring together each man's strengths and avoid each man's weaknesses" (p.234).

Aronson's book is an impressive achievement in many regards. He has mapped out, as no one before him, the parallels, convergences, divergences, and, most importantly, the dialogue between Sartre and Camus. Aronson has shown how they learned from each other in the early years of their relationship and suffered from their rupture. Although he has somewhat exaggerated the extent to which their writings speak to each other, Aronson has made a strong case that neither Sartre nor Camus can be understood without examining their relationship.

Still, Aronson's explanation of their rupture, and of the shortcomings of their political thought and engagement, is not entirely convincing. For Aronson, both were largely the product of a "distorted choice" imposed by the dualism of the Cold War. Yet throughout Aronson's rich narrative of the Camus-Sartre relationship, the role of personality is huge. Regardless of the Cold War, given Camus's pride, self-doubt, unwillingness to argue, touchiness, and belief in the importance of personal loyalty, it seems that a rupture would have been nearly inevitable once he and Sartre--who, unlike Camus, liked to argue--disagreed on a matter of importance. Further, Aronson's assumption that the Cold War introduced "distortions" that "deformed" their relationship and caused Sartre to no longer be himself overestimates the importance of the Cold War and misplaces its significance. After all, both displayed bad faith in their reaction to the Algerian War, which had nothing to do with the Cold War. Perhaps the Cold War was less the unnatural beast that Aronson presents it as and only an example of a more general political phenomenon: the polarizing event that forces a choice between two unattractive options. (We have the current war in Iraq to remind us that these events are not that uncommon.) If this is true, then one might conclude that Sartre was no less himself during the Cold War than he was during the Algerian War and the Camus-Sartre relationship no more deformed by the Cold War than it was deformed by the Occupation. And, perhaps Aronson is a bit too optimistic to think that a new intellectual will emerge if we can escape the antinomies of the Cold War. The solution--if there is one--to the problems raised by the Camus-Sartre relationship is more difficult than Aronson suggests.

NOTES

[1] Aronson finds the English translation of the title as *The Rebel* to be misleading and prefers *Man in Revolt*.
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