

2015

Robert Zaretsky. *A Life Worth Living: Albert Camus and the Quest for Meaning*. Cambridge, Mass., and London: The Belknap P of Harvard UP, 2013. 240 pp.

Melissa M. Ptacek
St. Thomas University, meptacek@stu.ca

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>



Part of the [French and Francophone Literature Commons](#), [Intellectual History Commons](#), and the [Modern Literature Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Ptacek, Melissa M. (2015) "Robert Zaretsky. *A Life Worth Living: Albert Camus and the Quest for Meaning*. Cambridge, Mass., and London: The Belknap P of Harvard UP, 2013. 240 pp.," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 39: Iss. 1, Article 16. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1824>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Robert Zaretsky. *A Life Worth Living: Albert Camus and the Quest for Meaning*. Cambridge, Mass., and London: The Belknap P of Harvard UP, 2013. 240 pp.

Abstract

Review of Robert Zaretsky. *A Life Worth Living: Albert Camus and the Quest for Meaning*. Cambridge, Mass., and London: The Belknap P of Harvard UP, 2013. 240 pp.

Keywords

Albert Camus

Robert Zaretsky. *A Life Worth Living: Albert Camus and the Quest for Meaning*. Cambridge, Mass., and London: The Belknap P of Harvard UP, 2013. 240 pp.

A Life Worth Living is Robert Zaretsky's second book on Albert Camus. The first, *Albert Camus: Elements of a Life*, was published in 1986, but left its author, a historian, feeling somewhat unhappy with the limits of its historical method: "bound to the historical context, I felt I had slighted certain intellectual or moral themes we have long associated with Camus' work" (10). Many years later the new book is thus designed to explore more fully such themes as absurdity, silence, measure, fidelity, and revolt.

The theme of absurdity is the one that many readers most immediately associate with Camus and the one that Zaretsky highlights by his subtitle's reference to the human quest for meaning. Central works for discussion of this theme are *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Stranger*, completed in the early part of World War II. Absurdity, Zaretsky explains, emerges for Camus when meaning is sought in the face of a silent universe. Yet while the world, existence, and life itself are absurd, Camus insists that we must act—that we are responsible for particular conditions of life. Camus himself did just this in, for instance, exposing the realities of life for the Berbers and Pieds-Noirs of Algeria, in his Resistance work, and in his efforts against the death penalty.

Camus, Zaretsky explains, would modify his early understanding of absurdity as inadequate to the demands of life under Nazi occupation. *The Rebel* thus sought to address the new conditions of reality for Camus. Yet here, perhaps especially, *A Life Worth Living*'s lack of detailed background information about this text and its reception could make for frustrating reading for some. Like its predecessor, this is a short book. Whereas the first brims with historical and biographical contextualization, however, the second makes important but fairly minimal reference to contexts. Readers unfamiliar with the dispute with Jean-Paul Sartre—the "slugfest over *The Rebel*" (186)—may, therefore, not altogether appreciate the fuller stakes that were (and are) at issue. It is, however, not the case that *A Life Worth Living* lacks all contextualization. There are references to the Nazi occupation of France and, more particularly, the Resistance, as well as to the French-Algerian War. We hear, as well, about Camus's mother (especially the importance of her silence) and his father (especially in regard to his reaction to having witnessed an execution and his death in the First World War). We learn about Camus's brief association with the Algerian communist party, his work for *Alger républicain*, *L'Express*, and *Combat*, his opposition to communism and rejection of extremes in general, and his position(s) on Algeria and on the death penalty. Nevertheless, context is sparse.

The sparseness of context, and the resulting claim on readers' knowledge of twentieth-century French history and of Camus's works, are likely related to

Zaretsky's more fundamental purpose of defending Camus against various charges—that his analysis of absurdity, for example, lacks philosophical rigor; that his emphasis on beauty is frivolous; that his political stance on the use of violence is foolish, naïve, or reactionary. One wonders at times, though, whether the sparseness of context detracts from the success of the defense, as the sparseness of context extends to a generally undeveloped discussion of the positions of those who opposed Camus.

Zaretsky's Camus—and not his alone—is a moralist in the French tradition of Michel de Montaigne. “Camus,” Zaretsky writes, “was a peculiar kind of revolutionary, less a Proudhonian, or a Marxist, than a moralist” (161). As Zaretsky describes, for Camus we must distinguish rebellion from revolution, with respect to which there is only “the one absolute: never to allow our rebellion to turn into a revolution” (180). Rebellion is then characterized by moderation, limit, and creative tension. It rejects both the absurdity of the world by acting in the interests of justice and the political absurdity that falsely justifies suffering as meaningful. The rebel, in turn, seeks not domination of others but integrity of self.

Zaretsky nicely conveys Camus the person, who in his way sought public stature and who was prickly about his working-class background and his perceived authority of experience. Yet while Zaretsky is not wholly uncritical of Camus, the main framework of defense tends to mute criticism. Despite acknowledgement of Camus's failures at points, for Zaretsky “Camus remains the man whose life stands as witness to a kind of desperate heroism” (6). For this reason, Zaretsky sees in his subject an important model for today, a model he links to Mohamed Bouazizi and the act of self-immolation that set off the Arab Spring. Camus's “twin engagements”—in his own words, “the refusal to lie about what one knows and the resistance against oppression” (187)—are posed as explanations of the themes Zaretsky explores. Beyond this, it is suggested, together they support an ethical position truly committed to ending violence and oppression universally, valuing means as much as, if not more than, ends.

The book functions well as a concise thematic discussion of various intertwined aspects of Camus's thought. The chapters are essentially stand-alone, with some overlap, unfolding their discussion through impressive and wide-ranging literary and philosophical references. Zaretsky does not provide close readings. However, a defense of Camus's ethical position requires not only showing that those of Camus's opponents advocating violence to achieve their ends supported persons, groups, and means that failed to bring the desired results; it must also show that Camus's attention to “the doubts and desperation filling any effort at true rebellion,” the necessary acceptance of “provisional outcomes and relative claims” (179-80), is itself adequate to a just outcome, regardless of the shortcomings of other positions. Still, Camus's legacy was and is, as Zaretsky states, “contested.” Even the proper site of his physical remains has been a source

of some controversy. *A Life Worth Living* is a timely and welcome return to Camus that, beyond the interest of its choice of themes and interpretations of particular works, should also stir the pot of these still very relevant debates.

Melissa M. Ptacek
St. Thomas University