The Absurd and Power

Celui qui a conçu ce qui est grand doit aussi le vivre.
(Nietzsche)

In March 1941, a few weeks after completing the manuscript of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, Camus notes in his *Carnets*: ‘L’Absurde et le Pouvoir – à creuser (cf. Hitler). (The Absurd and Power – to be investigated (cf. Hitler)’ (II, p. 921). The Italian anti-fascist intellectual refugee from France, Nicola Chiaromonte, recalls meeting Camus in Oran that year, before fleeing to the United States. It is not difficult to imagine the political tenor of the conversations between these two men, whose friendship back then was sealed by an ecstatic love and admiration of the sea. Hitler had just occupied Greece and Chiaromonte was obsessed with the idea that humanity had reached its lowest point, that history was senseless and the only thing that made sense was the part of the living human being that is irreducible to history. ‘Camus told me then that he was writing a tragedy about Caligula, and I tried to understand what could attract a modern writer to such a subject. Unfettered tyranny? But contemporary tyranny did not seem to me to have much in common with Caligula’s’ (Chiaromonte 1977, p. 52).

*Caligula* was not intended to be an historical investigation of the contemporary forms of government; the text of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* suggests that Camus was primarily concerned with exploring the relationship that exists between the logic of power and the ‘illogical’ perspective that the Absurd embodies.¹ His tragedy tackles the question of how men can be free (I, p. 442) and calls the relationship between free action and power of the Western tradition into question.

According to Georges Bataille, *Caligula* challenges the traditional categories of political philosophy by exploring the inhuman lyricism...
or the murderous power of poetry (Bataille 1947, p. 8). Caligula is the Emperor-Poet, who puts the negation of the servile logic of reason into action; thus, he is the tragic incarnation of what the author of *L’expérience intérieure* calls the ‘sacred’ or the ‘impossible’. In Bataille’s view, Caligula embodies the ‘uselessness’ of art that has been endowed with limitless power, which dissolves the petty politics of security. The emphasis on the criminal excesses of the Emperor’s boundless passion, which transgresses the laws of reason, however, relegates this tragic figure to the traditional concept of tyranny; Bataille seems to confirm Chiaromonte’s perplexities regarding the capacity of Camus’s tragedy to capture the unprecedented character of Nazi politics.

In the 1944 version of the play, Camus openly rejects the moral interpretation of Caligula’s madness, which identifies him with the traditional figure of the tyrant as a ‘blind soul’ (I, p. 362). The use of the metaphor of seeing to express the act of thinking in the philosophical tradition identifies tyranny with the negation of reason, therefore, with a ‘blind’ and boundless passion. But for Camus’s hero, the tyrant is not alien to the nihilistic logic of reason, by sacrificing men to his personal ambition or idea, the action of the tyrant is ‘enslaved’ to teleology, which lies at the core of political realism. On the contrary, Caligula rejects both honour and power as his objectives, he is free from productive logic, in which the metaphoric constellation of vision is rooted.

Camus inserts the reference to the tyrant in act III that, in the 1941 version of the play, is entitled ‘Divinity of Caligula’ – the echoes of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* are apparent, particularly, those pages on the absurd freedom of the contemporary man-god. In act III, Camus identifies the concept of power with the vertical relationship of dominion that is associated with the figure of God/Sovereign/Master. Insofar as the last is an illusory construct of teleological reason, power becomes a matter of drama; every man can exert the gods’ ‘ridiculous profession’ without apprenticeship, ‘il suffit de se durcir le cœur (all he has to do is to harden his heart)’ (I, p. 421). Camus merges the two Nietzschean metaphoric constellations of theatre and craftsmanship together and ascribes power to the teleological or moral interpretation of reason.

Caligula ridicules the concept of power (I, p. 451) by exposing the fiction of teleology and the fetishistic relationship of man to his own creations; in the opening scene of act I, the tragic hero embodies the absurd or ‘aesthetic’ perspective of the Heraclitean Infant-Artist that is depicted in Nietzsche’s *La Naissance de la Philosophie à l’époque de la tragédie grecque* and evades the servile logic of reason. The death of Caligula’s sister and lover, Drusilla, exposes the fictional characteristic