

# Caligula-Christ: Preliminary Study of a Parallel

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On ne comprend pas le destin  
et c'est pourquoi je me suis fait destin.

No one understands destiny  
and that is why I have made myself destiny.<sup>1</sup>

Camus, *Caligula* 96; act 3 sc. 2

## I. Introduction

“Caïus, César et dieu, surnommé Caligula” ‘Caius, Caesar and god, called Caligula’ (*Cal* 87; 3.1), at the very beginning of the Albert Camus play, conceives a very ambitious project: to surpass the gods and take their place in his empire, in order to decree impossibility.<sup>2</sup> His wish to become destiny equates to a longing to be god.

In spite of the fact that Camus was not trying to write a period piece—i.e. a play concerned with a historical time such as that of the Roman Empire—one can see that he drew on the concept of the deification of emperors which was common to the pagan world; the Greek and Macedonian kings, including Alexander the Great, ordered their priests to proclaim them gods, as did the Caesars starting with Augustus. Camus creates a parallel of this tendency not only in Caligula’s plan, but also in the creation of the worship of Venus-Caligula that appears in act 3, and by Caligula’s desire for the moon, an important pagan symbol.

Camus has, however, gone a step further in developing the god-image of his main character through the incorporation of much Christian imagery into the scenes. This aspect of the play seems not to have been noticed by Camus scholars; there is no in-depth study

of the use of this imagery. Brother François Chavanes, a Dominican monk living in Algeria, has examined Camus's general philosophy in the light of Christian doctrine and made some comments that apply to this analysis, but more specific, close parallels have not heretofore been explored. However, Camus scholar Patricia Johnson and the members of the *Société des études camusiennes* have noted the usefulness of the analysis presented here and the absence of it in previous research. This study, designated as "preliminary," has been made in an attempt to prompt further analyses of the question on the part of Camus scholars. Nevertheless, different approaches to the question are suggested at the end of the study.

## II. The Play and its Author

Camus (1913-1960) was a French author, philosopher, Nobel Prize winner, and journalist born in Algeria. His life was very much influenced by his family's poverty, the loss of his father in 1914, his mother's difficulty with speaking, and the bouts of tuberculosis which began when he was seventeen. This tuberculosis made him ineligible for military service during World War II, so Camus participated instead in the Resistance (*Nouveau dictionnaire* 546, Brunel and Jouanny 89). He was very active in theater, founding troupes of his own, directing, and acting, as well as writing plays (*Nouveau dictionnaire* 545, Brunel and Jouanny 89). He is often identified as an existentialist, because of the association of Existentialism with Absurdism, but Camus refused this label (Forest and Conio 8). He is known for his philosophical novels such as *L'Etranger* 'The Stranger,' *La Peste*, 'The Plague,' and *La Chute* 'The Fall.' It is useful for this study to note that Camus often shows a complex attitude toward faith; he says in his *Carnets* "I do not believe in God and I am not an atheist" (Vol III 128). Such conflict can be seen as informing *Caligula*.

*Caligula* was begun in 1938 and existed as a first "poetic, romantic" text before revision and publication by Gallimard in 1944 (*Nouveau dictionnaire* 546). It was first staged in Paris in 1945, with Gérard Philipe as Caligula (Brunel and Jouanny 89). It is one of the works in which Camus develops his Theory of the Absurd, the notion that there is no meaning in the universe and that human

consciousness is limited and therefore incapable of fathoming the world's mysteries. It is interesting to note, for the purposes of this study, that the notion is considered to have begun in the religious philosophy of Saint Augustine (Forest and Conio 8). The play develops the themes of solitude and guilt and innocence which were constants in Camus's works (*Nouveau dictionnaire* 546).

Camus himself explains the theme of this play in this way:

Caligula ... discovers on the death of his sister and lover Drusilla that "people die and they are not happy." From this point on, obsessed by his search for the absolute, poisoned with contempt and horror, he tries to exercise, through murders and systematic perversion of all values, a freedom that he discovers at the end is not the right one. He rejects friendship, love, simple human solidarity, and the concepts of good and evil. He takes literally all those around him, forces them to see things logically, and levels everything around him through the force of his rejection and through the urge to destroy that his passion for life leads him into.

But if his truth involves revolting against destiny, his mistake is to deny humanity. One cannot destroy everything without destroying one's self. This is why Caligula depopulates the world around him and, faithful to his own logic, does what he needs to do to give those who will kill him the means to do so. *Caligula* is the story of a superior suicide. It is the most human of stories and the most tragic of errors. Faithless to humanity out of faith in himself, Caligula accepts to die for having understood that no one can save himself by himself, and that one cannot be free while opposing humanity. (Pref. vi-vii Trans. O'Brien)

This complex play functions on the basis of different themes. This study demonstrates that, among those themes, a comparison with Christ's life and lessons can constitute a major thread.

### III. The Basics of the Parallel

The close parallel studied here is quite startling. The character of Caligula can be interpreted as a perverse or perverted Christ, a dark Jesus from the other side of the mirror that Caligula constantly

looks in to confirm that he is alive and that he shatters at the end of the play. This intertextual study of *Caligula* and the gospels (here referred to in Revised Standard Version) adds a dimension to the sinister qualities of the main character and brings out ambiguities in the emperor's intentions that render them paradoxically and almost disturbingly pure and Christlike. Analyzed this way, the play presents a combination of perversion and similarity that constitutes a commentary on deity and leadership for the Age of the Absurd. This study follows the structure of the narrative *Caligula* through its parallels with the New Testament, and pursues the implications of such a comparison. It shows how Caligula becomes, ironically, the god of the Christians.

The sources of this parallel and the reasons for creating it can be many, and may have been drawn on unconsciously on the part of Camus, as a writer's best work usually is. His writings show no trace of an intention to juxtapose these two personages. The goal of this study is neither to determine whether Camus consciously incorporated elements of the gospels in his play nor to discern whether he would have recognized such a parallel after writing it. It is oriented towards an exposition of the facts of this juxtaposition in order to provoke analysis of the phenomenon.

The origin of such an influence is easy to find. The studies that Camus did for his 1936 dissertation on Christian metaphysics, "Métaphysique chrétienne et néoplatonisme" 'Christian Metaphysics and neo-Platonism,' gave him ample occasion to analyze and assimilate the acts, thoughts, and characteristics of the gospels' "main character." Camus himself indicated in an interview that he admired Jesus for the way he had lived and died, and therefore for his principles (Chavanes *Il faut vivre* 45). This appreciation could not but lead to some form of application; it is entirely possible to make of Christ one of the "impossible characters" that Camus tried to create in order to "bring to life the unresolvable conflicts" of the human condition (Camus *Theatre* 1742). Jesus can figure among these characters because of his "superhuman," mythical side.

Once we accept the idea of Jesus as an "impossible character," it becomes clearer what procedure would incorporate him in the play. Raymond Gay-Crosier highlights the dualism that is present in all Camus's works, expressed in the theme of the double, in the ambi-

guity of situations, or in irony (20). The dualist structure explains the tragically ironic parallel between he who wishes to save humanity from its sins and he who wishes to save his patricians from their blind rejection of the reality of death (Gay-Crosier 23, Toura 33). Among the multiple roles that Caligula plays during the action, that of savior is thus brought into relief (Gay-Crosier 21). At the same time, the irony of this juxtaposition fills out the “game of meanings and double meanings” that Gay-Crosier considers the “mainspring” of the play (27). The parallel is further reinforced by the fact that Caligula is tormented by his duality and aims at union with the divine, whereas his double achieves this unity (Toura 30).

On the whole, the concept of duality provides the reasoning which justifies (or which inspired) the juxtaposition of the play’s character, Caligula, and the Bible’s “character,” Jesus. The two characters express the “striving for more justice and liberty”—although not more happiness—that Camus was looking for to construct his “modest political thought” (Lévi-Valensi “Camus journaliste” 100, *Essais* 335). The juxtaposition of the just Jesus and the oppressive Caligula expresses everything that Camus wished to denounce in the human condition (Guérin *Portrait* 29).

According to Chavanes, Camus “had retained, after his first studies of philosophy, a painful skepticism and the feeling that man could not arrive at knowledge of the truth through reason” and felt strongly that Henri Bergson’s notion of intuition did not offer a more stable philosophical basis (*Il faut vivre* 24). This double failure finds an illustration in the double example of Caligula-Christ. Camus wrote in his second volume of *Carnets* “Let dialogue taken to its absurd extreme leave *one* chance for purity”; the Absurd is Camus’s suggestion of the path to take between reason and intuition (161). The dialogue between the two purities of Christ (pure Goodness) and Caligula (pure Evil) participates in the exposure of the absurd. To explore this exposure it is necessary to see how, like Jesus, Caligula “brings something new to the act of believing” which creates an image whose irony is sometimes difficult to endure (Chavanes *Un message* 73).

Chavanes clearly expresses the problematics of the Caligula-Christ opposition: “two people relying on the same universal moral values and desiring equally to promote human dignity can be led

to make different choices because of the difference in their positions within a complex human reality" (*Un message* 28). Caligula's position in the complex reality of life and death brings him to make choices that are different from Christ's. Nonetheless, his words and deeds mirror those of the Savior, and are placed in a framework of characters and events which imitates that of the Bible. This imitation is in two forms: that of reversal, opposition, perversion of the original model, and that of disquieting and ironic similitude between Good and Evil.

#### IV. The Perversions

The perverse side of this Roman Christ is revealed through events and actions that reverse those of Jesus's life; words and gestures are deformed and thus intensely in opposition to their Biblical counterparts. The event that opens the play is the absence of its principal character; Caligula has been missing for three days. At his return he begins to explain to his faithful followers, Hélicon and Caesonia, his new plan to become a new type of god, without however openly stating this as his aim. His three days in the wilderness have been spent thinking through this scheme. Thus, we have at first glance a pattern of intense and solitary contemplation followed by the undertaking of a mission which would form the exact parallel of the forty days in the desert that followed Christ's baptism by John and preceded his three years of ministry, as recounted in Matthew 4.1-11. However, the devil that tempts Caligula is human verity, misery, and death, and he spends only three days in his desert because he gives in to this temptation instead of resisting it. By succumbing, he shortens his stay in the desert and brings his followers the black sermons of his devils. In addition, instead of a message of calm and heavenly love at the end of his ordeal, he offers them the cruel totem of a destroyer-god.

The play passes from this event to the acts of this new savior of pagans. After ruling for three years (the same length of time as Christ's ministry), Caligula presides at his Last Supper, a feast as dismal as the god it celebrates, in act 2 scenes 5-10. The actions are all inverted; instead of washing the feet of his disciples, as does Jesus in John 13.1-11, Caligula obliges his patrician subjects to serve

him. The character of those present is also an inversion, as these are not willing disciples but terrorized victims, too afraid to refuse the invitation. Instead of prophesying his own suffering and offering wisdom to his company, the god-ogre torments them by reminding them of the family members that he has killed and threatening them with their own death. His offenses run the gamut from bad table manners to the rape of a guest's wife. In a negative parallel to another Biblical passage woven into this scene, Caligula decrees famine in his kingdom, rather than creating the means to feed all his followers, as in Matthew 14.13-21. He also instructs the guests in his doctrine, not a message of universal mercy, but one of universal guilt. Finally, the blood he offers for all to drink is not his own, but that of Mereia, his would-be Judas who, instead of being sent off to accomplish his deed, is killed, sacrificed by his god using a eucharist of poison.

Caligula launches this plan to become god in order to shake his patricians out of their complacency towards death, as Caligula himself expresses it in his metaphor of the professor (27). The liberation which he wishes to accord them consists in "philosophical detachment based ... on a demystifying awareness of death," whereas Christ tries to take the sting from death (Favre 81).<sup>3</sup> Caligula leads his people to death, while the Savior carries them beyond death. In addition, Caligula uses force in order to bring home his lessons; his spiritual opposite uses example, parables, and mildness in Matthew 19.11 (Favre 81). Jesus gives a "spectacle" of moderation and tolerance, whereas Caligula presents the "spectacle of his excesses" in an attempt to awaken his subjects (Favre 77). As a further element in this reversed imitation of gestures, Camus shows that such a terrible god could only inspire terrible prayers. The subjects of Caligula offer up the bitterest of prayers in act 3 scene 1, dictated by Caesonia, apostle to the Emperor-Christ (88-91). This prayer is not a simple and gentle *Pater*, as in Matthew 6.9-13, but a desperate and wrenching "Mater."

The mirror-reversal of Christic events continues in act 4. Caligula shams a severe illness in scene 9, which inspires prayers for his recovery (129-31). That of Cassius proves to be the most tragic, as it is answered by Caligula himself, in a gesture which reverses the roles of savior and disciple; by wishing that his life might be taken

in exchange for Caesar's, Cassius "heals" and thus "saves" Caligula. Then, instead of a Christ dying for his disciples, the disciple Cassius dies for the god Caligula, and by his orders. This deity does not spare or cleanse his followers; he devours them. By coming to Cassius in answer to his prayer, Caligula also performs his own resurrection, although as false a one as his illness. Caligula thus anticipates the events of the parallel narrative, as he places his resurrection before his Gethsemane. In this way the narrative structure itself inverts the events of the older tale.

As with the events, several actions of the play are the perverse acts of an evil Christ. Besides the decree of famine already discussed, the Emperor-God opens a house of prostitution, instead of cleansing a temple as in Matthew 21.12-13 (48, 67). He gives his blood, as does Jesus, but the blood he gives is no eucharist or execution, rather a feigning of the ignoble, far from sacred act of vomiting during his pretended illness.

Finally, the attitude and doctrine of Caligula diametrically oppose those of the Christian savior. He is not moved by universal love, but by pervasive contempt (83). He goes so far as to say, "vivre, c'est le contraire d'aimer" 'living is the opposite of loving,' whereas, for his twin and opposite, life is precisely love (42). The god-emperor emphasizes the cruelty inherent in deity, while the god-servant speaks of the mercy and compassion which are essential to the Christian message and very much part of Camus's own sentiments (Chavanes *Un message* 54). According to Caligula, "il est permis à tout homme ... de devenir dieu" 'any man may...become a god,' whereas in Christian doctrine only one human could ever rise to that level, and Jesus himself asks his most faithful disciples, "are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?" in Matthew 20.22 (97).

These opposing points of view underline the element that Camus finds at the basis of our human tragedy: man's desire for power (Toura 29). Caligula demands power in act 1 scene 9 and act 4 scene 12; Jesus refuses power, leaving judgment itself to his Father in John 8.11. Caligula also announces to his subjects, "c'est moi qui remplace la peste" 'I am taking the place of the plague,' thus proclaiming that he is death, whereas his counterpart announces in John 6.35, "I am the bread of life" (132). Lastly, for Caligula (and for Camus) the most shameful thing in life is the failure of the gods to respond

to despair and misfortune (*Caligula* 27, Chavanes *Il faut vivre* 26). Thus he recognizes the silence of the gods. Jesus recognizes this as well, but he accepts the silence and the firmness that his Father shows him in Gethsemane by not responding to his son's prayer in Matthew 26.11 and 42.

Caligula's very mentality and his specific words form a grim opposite to the gospel's parallel. To defend her god, Caesonia speaks of "les ulcères dont son âme est couverte" 'the ulcers his soul is covered with' (133). This comment is the reverse, not of an act or word of the gospels, but of the Christian interpretation of Christ's acts of healing. According to the doctrine, founded on an interpretation of Matthew 8.17, Christ absorbed the illness or the sin of others within himself, and was all the more pure for having done so. This is an interpretation which Camus was familiar with and accepted (Camus *L'Homme* 50, Chavanes *Un message* 206). But while Jesus took up the ills of the world, Caligula inflicts them, and in doing so his own being becomes more and more tainted.

As for his words, Caligula makes three declarations that show a spiritual state contrary to Christ's: "je suis heureux" 'I am happy'; "je m'exerce à vivre librement" 'I work hard at living free'; "je sais que rien ne dure" 'I know that nothing lasts' (146, 142, 147). This deity has no father to submit himself to, and is far from considering any possibility of eternity. In addition, his happiness comes precisely from his capacity to destroy; there is no creative or healing urge in him. Thus he forms an opposite to a being eternally unhappy because of human destructive tendencies, thoroughly subject at all moments to the will of his Father, and whose whole life is devoted to the attaining of eternal life.

All of these inverted gospel events are witnessed by characters who are as well beyond-the-mirror opposites of their scriptural counterparts, as was already illustrated in connection with the banquet scene. Mary Magdalene is incarnated in Caesonia, who beds with her idol and follows him to the depths of his corruptions. The simple and devoted Simon Peter is represented by Hélicon, simple also in his cynicism and his hatred of the patricians. The new Paul, converted by powerful evidence to a new understanding of his master, is young Scipion who, instead of finding in his revelation the force to defend it, is rendered helpless by it; he withdraws in passive

despair in act 4 scene 2. The crowd that greets Christ out of recognition of his peaceful message as he enters Jerusalem in Matthew 21.8-9 gathers around Caligula through fear of punishment in act 2 scene 5 and act 3 scene 1; this same crowd calls for its god's death in act 2 scene 1. On the other hand Cherea, who insists on basing the need for Caligula's death on reason, forms a parallel to the Hebrew high priests, who in John 18.31 explain that they need Pilate and Roman law to be able to execute Jesus, as Hebrew law has no death penalty. Both entities search some form of objective, exterior justification for their acts.

## V. The Similitudes

This last example, a parallel rather than an opposition, illustrates the other element that must be considered in this study. All of the preceding perversions, by warping an image originally conceived as good, amply paint the dark side of the "black Christ" Caligula. However, the direct parallels in word and deed, such as that of Cherea, complicate the characterization by giving genuine Christlike qualities to this sinister doppelgänger and his entourage, thus underscoring the profound irony of this juxtaposition. Most striking is the awareness of the death that awaits them at the end of their respective paths of salvation and logic, and the fear they express before taking that final step in their separate Gethsemanes of Mark 14.32-41 and act 4 scene 14. Both characters stand before a self-destruction that they have themselves prepared from the beginning of their missions and both recoil with fear before this last step, knowing that the road, whether it be that of logic or of salvation, leads to death. Caligula expresses hate for his "double," the inexorable persona he has created in order to pursue his absurd logic (Gay-Crosier 24). Jesus hesitates and suffers faced with the will of his celestial double, asking him to spare him in Matthew 26.39. In both cases the protagonist makes a gesture towards deity in order to obtain a response; Caligula does it by provocation, Jesus through human weakness (Toura 33).

In act 3 scene 6, Caligula reproduces Christ's gesture in pardoning the adulterous woman, found in John 8.1-11; he "erases" Cherea's "sin," the wax tablet containing the details of a plot to kill

the emperor. Through this gesture Cherea, who in another scene participates in relationships that parallel those of the high priests to Jesus, performs gestures that create parallels to Jesus's relationship to the adulterous woman, allowed to go with the injunction to "sin no more." Caligula's gesture also produces a parallel between his relationship to Cherea and that of Jesus and Judas; both are set free to act by the men who know that they will be killed by them, as in Matthew 26.20-25 and act 3 scene 3. Like the Savior, Caligula hates the sin and loves the sinner (Luke 6.27-28, Chavanes *Un message* 62). This act also shows that both figures treat their followers equitably. There is no revenge, or even disappointment, shown in either gesture.

Words follow gestures in repeating the Biblical texts. Like Jesus in Mark 8.31 and Mark 14.18, Caligula has already announced "je sais d'avance qui me tuera" 'I already know who will kill me' (100). In the same way both of these mythical figures reveal their awareness of the irreversibility of their destinies (Favre 79, Chavanes *Un message* 48). In addition, in an echo of Matthew 5.33-37, Caligula tells the old patrician "ne jure pas, surtout" 'above all, do not swear' (103). The same sense of purpose and determination that leads both to see their activities through to the end takes on a more eerie quality in the emperor-god because of these parallels with the healer-god.

The most striking and basic of ironic parallels in this comparison is found in what can be called the pedagogical goal of the two protagonists. What disturbs Caligula most is the sense of resignation and of habit he finds in his patricians (Sjursen 84). This condemnation closely reflects that pronounced by Jesus against the Pharisees in Mark 2.27-28: that of reducing the honoring of God to a minute adherence to the Law (Chavanes *Un message* 74). Both men try to create a movement which will lead their disciples to life and liberation (74). Jesus replaces the Law with humanity and humaneness; Caligula replaces both the laws and the absence of the gods with the very present Caligula-Venus and her doctrine in order to convince his subjects to search for the truth, that of there being no truth (88-91).

By supplanting the gods, Caligula participates in what Chavanes calls Camus's "Christian" demand: the rejection of the false idols of

money and worldly success (*Un message* 61). Lies and deal-making must be pushed aside in a gesture of high aspiration, that of surmounting the narrowness of self-love and of achieving a clear vision of oneself (95). Through this dynamic of aspiration, Caligula and Christ come together via Camus's humanist message. Thus Caligula's "game" and his evil deeds remind us that our very existence is at stake in the same way that Jesus's "game"—the parable—does (Gay-Crosier 22).

Such concordances unite to present an image of the god-Caesar as a perverse Christ ruling over hell on earth. The eeriest of the direct parallels between the scripture and the play, however, lie in three comments made by Caligula. Ironically, they describe exactly the situation of both the dark and the luminous Christ. At several moments in the play, Caligula describes the spiritual state he has been in since his return from the wilderness, the feeling that there are other people in him. He senses the weight of death in that of the souls of the dead who press on his. In this same way, Jesus is represented as having to carry the weight of all the sinful souls of the world.

In one such passage, Caligula says, "je ne suis bien que parmi mes morts" 'I am only comfortable among my dead' (143). Caesar is expressing here his inability to face human life while haunted by the ghosts of those he has killed. If one leaves aside the question of murder, this statement can be considered to express, although in a sinister fashion, the situation of Christ in heaven. There he is represented in Christian doctrine as surrounded by "the dead," by the souls of those who have died for or "in" him, although not by his hand. Jesus also feels at home among the souls of his believers (John 17.12-13, 23).

"Je suis toujours vivant!" 'I am still alive!' are the last words that Caligula cries out (150). Like Jesus, the Christian symbol of eternal life, Caligula lives on as the symbol of eternal evil (or of eternal absurdity). The emperor-god of pain, bitterness, and death still presides; Caligula knows that men will always die and be unhappy. As long as the eternal good of the Christ figure endures, so will the eternal evil of the dark Christ.

There are other details in the two narratives which form secondary parallels and which highlight and support the main parallels.

Jesus associates with prostitutes and tax collectors; Caligula counts among his most faithful followers a courtesan and a cynic (Chavanes *Un message* 75). Both figures experience symbolical deaths before their real deaths (Gay-Crosier 23, Camus *Caligula* 130-33, Luke 22.44). Both cry out a “lama sabaqthani” (usually translated as “why have you forsaken me”) to gods who do not answer (Chavanes *Un message* 130, Toura 33-34, Mark 15.34, Camus *Caligula* 27). Caligula tries to create a link in men’s minds between himself and the gods; Jesus talks about his Father (Toura 30, Chavanes *Un message* 74, Matt. 7.21). These lesser facts weave together more closely the main elements of the juxtaposition.

All of these details together, whether major or minor, form a whole which can be seen as a representation of Camus’s basic thoughts about the notions of purity, despair and absurdity. It has already been pointed out that Caligula is “pure”; he is pure in the sense in which he is fundamentally naive and literal in his thinking (Camus Preface v). He is childlike in this literal attitude, and in that he has all the cruelty of a child (Gay-Crosier 24). Ironically, this form of purity reflects that of the Christian Savior, who also shows a childlike simplicity in his intelligent responses to the Pharisees’ questions and who asks his disciples to possess the purity of children (Matt. 15.1-9, Matt. 21.23-27, Matt. 18.3, Matt. 21.10). The difference is that Caligula shows a fact of children’s behavior that Jesus seems either not to know or not to recognize.

Camus says in his *Carnets* that he thinks of Jesus as God made man: “Le christianisme à cet égard l’a compris. Et s’il nous a touchés si avant c’est pour son Dieu fait homme ... Et ce dieu, s’il vous touche, c’est par son visage d’homme.” ‘If [Christianity] has touched us so before now it is through its God made man ... it is for his human face’ (Vol I 206); if this is the case, he should also be considered a man made God again by the resurrection. Caligula embodies this second phase of being through his insistence on equaling the gods. In this way, the text plays on the question of the divine in the human. It can be suggested that, by including Caligula in this phenomenon, Camus underlines the despair of the emperor: “for god to be man, he must despair” (*L’Homme révolté* 51). Caligula shows clearly that despair is also an integral part of the way that leads from man to god.

Finally, Caligula presents a sort of negation or reduction of the importance of daily life which mirrors Jesus's preachings (Matt. 6.25-34). For Chavanes, Camus's absurdity is kin to Ecclesiastes's "vanity, all is vanity" (*Un message* 50, Eccles. 2.11). These two concepts prompt a relativization of daily activity; this attitude appears in the logic games of Caligula, which are similar to the disputes that arise between Jesus and the Pharisees (Camus *Caligula* 33-35, 130-31, Luke 5.33-34, 6.1-5, 16.16-18, 20.1-8).

Caligula is excessively cruel in his logic of the impossible, and pointedly determined in his pursuit of it. This is perhaps the most striking common point between the two figures: both of them are in quest of the impossible. Jesus preaches total and passive love in response to all of life's blows, an impossible achievement as long as there is pride or anger in any single person. As much as does Caligula, Jesus wants to cut a path through this unsatisfying world toward one where his version of the impossible would reign. From this point of view, the close resemblance of the scriptural and dramatic realities, of the tender Christ and the cruel Caligula, is disquieting.

## VI. Interpretation

Thus we can find throughout *Caligula* suggestions of the parallel between two deified figures who gaze at each other through the mirror. All the implications of such a juxtaposition can only be revealed through more close and ample research which would in its turn situate this aspect of the play in relation to the thought and the work of Camus. However, some immediate conclusions can be suggested; they consider the play as a response to the events around it and its rewriting.

It has already been mentioned that Camus expressed preoccupation with questions of the relativization of daily gestures. In a world governed by relativity, the designation of an entity as a deity depends on the interpretation of divinity of each individual. What a god can be depends on who is looking for a god and what he is looking for in that god. The present example of Caligula and the implied one of Jesus give us two out of these infinite possibilities.

Caligula presents to us several of the interpretations which

could contribute to the elaboration of these multiple possibilities. It is in particular this character that shows us the meaning that deity has for it. If one accepts Chavanes's comments as insightful interpretation, Camus holds God responsible for having "put in man's heart vehement desires that are impossible to satisfy," but that man tries nevertheless to satisfy through violence and murder; Caligula's feeling that the world is intolerable can be seen to represent an illustration of these desires and their hideous consequences (*Un message* 169).

Such consequences are also the result of the fact that Caligula finds it necessary to reject this intolerable world completely. According to Nina Sjursen, Caligula does not propose to "correct" creation, but to create everything "right from nothing" (85). The combination of vehement desire and absolute logic thus results in a negation of the human condition that is implicit in this rejection of existing creation (Sjursen 86). In Caligula's tragedy Camus condemns this negation, and he shows this condemnation in the amalgam of reality and illusion that Caligula experiences in his efforts to satisfy his desires (Gay-Crosier 27). This amalgam is reflected in turn in the mix of lucidity and frenzy with which Caligula pursues his goal (Valette-Fondo 100). A parallel to this condition can be found in Jesus's efforts to combat the illusions created by the Pharisees. This act constitutes a gesture against the officials and in favor of the human condition, and is made calmly, aiming at the positive aspects of human emotion.

The idea that the notion of divinity depends on subjective interpretations of phenomena is reinforced in this play on characters by another consideration. Both Caligula and Jesus are truly gods, in that both are the object of an unflinching faith. They have disciples who believe in them unquestioningly. Could one claim to godhead if one had no disciples? The one feeds the other. It is understandable that Caligula has his priests proclaim him a god; all the Caesars did so. It is also understandable that a culture functioning in a more or less tribal fashion finds in the unusual words of one man a trace of divinity; the phenomenon has been reproduced a number of times. Camus reminds us in his *Essais* that "toute interrogation sur l'être met en question le pouvoir des mots" 'every interrogation of being brings into question the power of words,' a power which is evident

in the New Testament (1674). If the definition of deity is subjective in the Age of the Absurd, these two characters have an equal right to claim that status. One can see a final irony in this comparison through the fact that these twin opposites both claim Rome as their holy place.

This aspect of faith—the declaration of it by disciples—suggests another form of belief, that of the committed militant in a cause. The juxtaposition of Jesus and Caligula gives further dimensions to Camus's activity during the Resistance. *Caligula*, like *La Chute*, can thus be presented as a commentary on the Resistance which “donne à voir certains aspects fondamentaux de la condition humaine, tout en préservant, et même en dévoilant l'ambiguïté du réel” ‘makes certain fundamental aspects of the human condition visible all while it preserves and even unveils the ambiguity of the real’ (Lévi-Valensi “Camus journaliste” 98). This matter of unveiling and making visible is a basic part of the evolution of perception in the human. Marshall McLuhan repeatedly illustrates how removal from a certain society or mindset allows a person to have a new perception of it. He reminds us that perception is controlled by dominant forms and that while we are in the midst of a phenomenon we cannot identify it as such; it is only after its mutation by further change that we can recognize it, looking from within the new change (89). Any new stimulations “alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance” (33). He expresses the notion often in the comment that fish do not know that they are breathing water (McLuhan and Zingrone 35).

This matter of the ambiguity of the real can be combined with Pierre Masson's comments on the changes in perspective that the three beings considered so far in this study—Camus, Caligula, and Jesus—undergo. This critic reminds us that Caligula leaves a social structure for three days and then, on returning, perceives more clearly the makeup of this structure (124). In the same way Jesus, after forty days of fasting and temptations, acquires a perception of the world which allows him to begin his ministry. Likewise, Camus enters a situation of war which brings him a new point of view on the questions of pacifism and resistance activity. As a man in revolt, Camus “will therefore affirm himself as an actor in order to undo this closure” of reigning mentalities, just as Caligula undoes reign-

ing mentalities “by playing on them ironically” and Jesus does when responding to the Pharisees or creating his parables (Masson 127). In three different ways, Caligula and Jesus die and Camus risks death for their ideas, opposing their own solutions to the dominant forces of their worlds (Valette-Fondo 100).

One last point can be suggested for consideration in relation to the questions of the subjectivity with which man recognizes deity and of the shifting of perceptions. It is connected with the period of *Caligula's* rewriting. If the concept of deity is subjective, then the deity is relieved of the necessity of being a deity to all people. Thus, a Caligula can be a god for his disciples and a devil to his enemies; thus, a Hitler can be a Caligula for Europe and a Christ for the Nazis. And thus, in the Age of Absurdity, god and devil become more difficult to distinguish one from the other. This possibility allows us to draw parallels between Jesus, Caligula, and Hitler which in their irony highlight the horror that Camus felt while witnessing the excesses of Nazism and of the Vichy regime—the right-wing government that Maréchal Pétain established in that city in order to govern the unoccupied part of France. The problem of the ambiguity of the real described above reappears here as a component of this parallel structure. Chavanes reminds us that “Selon [Camus], un homme vit dans l'abstraction lorsqu'il adhère à une doctrine qui, faisant écran entre lui et la réalité, l'empêche de voir cette réalité telle qu'elle est” ‘according to [Camus], a man lives in abstraction when he adheres to a doctrine which creates a filter between himself and reality and thus prevents him from seeing reality as it is’ (*Un message* 34). In other words, when one is too absorbed in a perception, one cannot stand outside of it and question it. One example of this abstraction is the dehumanization that a criminal projects onto his victims; by reducing them in his mind to objects, the killer feels able to kill. Caligula sees his subjects through the distorting prism of his logic; Hitler saw his victims through that of his psychosis.

The effect of this abstraction on Caligula and on Hitler is evident. It brings about a state in which the person is no longer master of the situation. On the contrary, it is his abstraction which masters him. Gay-Crosier represents Caligula as “the puppet of his own caprices” (22). These caprices, like those of Hitler, are at once the product and the manifestation of the abstractions created in their

minds. We find an ironic parallel to this in the New Testament, in the submission and the passivity of Jesus before his Father in Gethsemane. This parallel also shows that the fact of being mastered by someone or something is not in itself an incitement to criminality.

These attitudes have double consequences. First, Caligula acts “by transgressing the norms of the possible” from the point of view of the patricians (Lévi-Valensi “Camus journaliste” 98). Jesus does the same from the point of view of the Pharisees, and Hitler from that of all but the most fanatical of Nazis. Second, dehumanization leads perforce to a form of contempt; for Caligula, “destiny is a thing to settle between him and the gods, without regard for other men, and even at their expense” (Toura 29). The parallel with Hitler is obvious; Hitler is engaged in his destiny of creating or purifying the Aryan race with the same disregard for other men. The reverse parallel with Christ is equally clear; he shows regard for men to the point of dying for them.

This irony resurfaces in the final position of these beings in relation to faith. Jesus incarnates faith; Camus the agnostic can “find reasons to live in an act of faith in life” (Chavanes *Un message* 97). Caligula does not find faith (his wish to replace the gods shows that he has no trust in them) and shows the danger that awaits a man who tries to live without it. Hitler distorts faith by creating a nationalist doctrine, and shows the dangers of fabricated faiths.

This parallel can also be applied to the Vichy regime whose cowardice disgusted Camus (Todd 257). Gay-Crosier sees Caligula as someone “whose problem is not to accommodate himself to destiny but to inflict [destiny] on others” (27). This gesture of thrusting one’s own dilemmas on another’s shoulders appears in the nationalism of the Vichy French faced with their defeat and in their fanatical behavior toward the Jews. The Vichy government established itself as a distant professor of a stoic subjection similar to that of the patricians in relation to death, against which Caligula fumes and rages and against whom he establishes himself as a “cruel professor of absolute liberty” (Gay-Crosier 23, Camus *Caligula* 27).

These parallels between the play, the Bible and the life of an epoch show clearly that Caligula is not dead. “He is in each of you. If power was given to you, if you had nerve, if you loved life, you would see this monster or this angel that you carry in you roar forth” (*Car-*

nets I 43). The Caligula in all of us would use all power absolutely. On the other hand, Jesus refuses to use his divine power (Matt. 4.1-11, Matt. 27.15-44). This perversion puts in stark contrast the abuse of power of the god-emperor-Führer.

## VII. Conclusion

As can be seen above, this parallel serves the political goals of *Caligula*, a text that became more and more political during the course of its rewriting at the time of World War II (Lévi-Valensi “Camus journalsite” 99). The “Marshalist theology” that was being expressed by the Vichy regime at the time—the idea that the moral failings of France (and particularly the worship of money) had brought the country to a just defeat from which it had to draw harsh lessons—implies a feverish interpretation by that government of the Old Testament (with echoes of the crossing of the desert as represented in Exodus 32) (Todd 319). An equally shifted perception of the reading of the New Testament can be seen in the parallel between Christ and Caligula. In addition, one can see the parallel as a more direct comment on the events at the time of the writing of the play. In the same way that the juxtaposition of the Gospels and *Caligula* underscores the horror of Caligula’s reign, the juxtaposition of *Caligula* and the Vichy regime underscores the baseness of the latter. The manuscript versions of *Caligula* that were circulating in Paris in 1943 and 1944 could easily convey this message (Todd 349).

Finally, is it useful to remember that Camus identifies Caligula as the only tyrant to have derided power (Todd 392). Without being a tyrant, Caligula’s predecessor and double does the same thing, criticizing the Pharisees who “love the best seat in the synagogues” and warning them that “He who is greatest among you shall be your servant” (Luke 11.43, Matt. 23.11). This last parallel allows the playwright who revolted against tyrants to deride in his turn Nazi and Vichy power.

In a play written according to “the canons of Camus tragedy which was then based on the equal justification of the protagonists,” it is this equality between the protagonists on stage and the invisible ones suggested by a series of parallels which creates the final irony

(Gay-Crosier 23). The analysis presented here makes this irony a key element in the work, with Christianity as a vehicle for it. Its goal is not to exaggerate the importance of Christianity in Camus's work. It cannot be claimed that Christian imagery is the only or dominant contributing element in *Caligula*. Many modern forces have entered into the formation of the narrative and the principal character. In addition, this new consideration must function on other levels than those suggested. But Christian symbolism and doctrine add an important dimension to the obsessing figure, and the ironic parallel between Caligula and Christ adds an aspect to the study of this mad god-emperor.

### Notes

1 All translations from the French are my own, except for the quote from the Preface to the Knopf edition of Camus's plays.

2 Albert Camus, *Caligula, Le Malentendu* 25, 28, 36, 41, 149.

3 For the question of demystifying death, see also Chavanes, *Un message* 102.

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