Appendix Three: Philosophy United to Rhetoric: The ‘Master Argument’ in “Letters to a German Friend”

“There is, after all, some justice in the claim [of Thomas Lanston Thorston] that whatever its merit as a rallying cry in the midst of moral crisis, Letters to a German Friend is a work written ‘more from the heart than from the mind.’” 1785 Here again this thought of Orme’s arguably stands as representative of an opposition, heart and mind, that can be shown to not simply apply. It is true that LGF, a series of fictive open letters to a clearly fictional “German friend” published in Revue Libre, Cahiers de la Libération, Liberté, then Combat after liberation, are indeed a piece of political advocacy: “a document of the struggle against violence.”1786 We are meant to sympathise and side with the author, not the addressee—although some critics like Susan Neiman have argued, for characteristic Camusian reasons we will see, that Camus concedes far too much to his fascist interlocutor. (She accuses Camus of an “astonishingly mild” view of Nazism).1787 Nevertheless, this rhetorical purpose does not speak against the way that almost all of the letters’ contents, in Tarrow’s words, “assume a knowledge of Camus’ philosophical thought.”1788

Here, we want to illustratively show that Camus’ “Letters to a German Friend” indeed reflect, in condensed form, what we called in the “Introduction” the key premises of Camus’ ‘master argument’: running from epistemic scepticism, via ethical life-affirmation towards political solidarity as a post-metaphysical primary value; the conception of mesure in a form of philosophical thinking which “excludes nothing”; and a conception of evil as hailing from partiality, excess and error, not total inhumanity, innate wickedness or inherited falleness. As in Appendix One, we will proceed here using note form to maximise analytic clarity.

1. each letter either (1 and 2) responds to a specific, imagined charge that Camus assigns to his ‘German friend’, or defends a positive ideal (3 and 4):

- Letter 1: response to the charge that “you [Camus, the French] do not love your country”:

1785 Orme, Development of Camus’ Concerns, 125; he is quoting Thomas Lanston Thorson, “Albert Camus and the Rights of Man”, Ethics 74 (1964): 288.
1786 Camus, at Tarrow, Exile from the Kingdom, 95.
1787 Neiman, Evil in Modern Thought, 297.
1788 Tarrow, Exile from the Kingdom, 99.
You said to me: ‘The greatness of my country is beyond price. Anything is good that contributes to its greatness. And in a world where everything has lost its meaning, those who, like us young Germans, are lucky enough to find meaning in the destiny of our nation must sacrifice everything else . . . you just don’t love your country.’ (LGF 5)

- Letter I: response to charge that “in all her intelligence, France repudiates herself”

Some of your intellectuals prefer despair to their country—others, the pursuit of an improbable truth. We put Germany before truth, and beyond despair.” (LGF 13)

- Letter III: a defence of idea of “Europe” poisoned by Nazi ideal of German lebensraum.
- Letter IV: final defence against National Socialism on the positive basis of affirming human solidarity.

2. Camus’ recognition of the humanity of the other.

- In the Introduction, we commented that a corollary of Camus’ position is the classical sense that evil hails from partiality, excess, or error: as against assigning a wholly fallen, sinful or malign nature to others. LGF shows how this philosophical position extends even to the Nazis, in ways that have attracted Neiman’s ire.
- Camus thus begins by affirming how much he had shared, in the beginning, with the German friend: both were products of the modern breakdown of inherited traditions. Nazism in such a cultural setting represented a temptation.
- In fact, such forms of extolling strength and efficacy alone are a permanent temptation to human beings, given the complexity of the human condition, and the difficulty of attaining virtue, intelligence or happiness.
- We italicise the relevant phrases in the citations that follow. Note again that Camus, far from exhausting himself in triumphantly declaiming the other, constantly ‘returns to his beginnings’, and questions “our” responses and attitudes:

- Letter I: “We had much to overcome, first of all, the constant temptation to emulate you. For there is always something in us that yields to instinct, to contempt for intelligence, to the cult of efficiency. Our great virtues eventually become tiresome to us. We become ashamed of our intelligence, and sometimes we imagine some barbarous state where truth would be effortless . . .” (LGF 7)